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TASTE COMMENTARY

Any Which Way They Can

Clint, here is a theme for your next movie.

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Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby" has revived the historic debate over what best to do with severely disabled people: help them or, well, "end their suffering." Clint, once denounced for exterminating punks with a large-caliber handgun, is enjoying a largely warm response to this film, despite the final solution he offers at the end.

Meanwhile, on the South Side of Richmond, Va., Max Larcen wears a million-dollar smile as he leads customers to their seats at Max's Positive Vibe Café. Max's smile may be a mystery to some, including Clint. He works from a wheelchair, the result of the muscular dystrophy with which he was diagnosed at age eight. Max, now 27, has watched every one of his stricken contemporaries at MD camp die. He has outlived his friends but has no hope of outliving his disease.

So why is Max smiling? In fact, why does everyone seem to be beaming in this 65-seat strip-mall restaurant?

Good moods comes easy at the Positive Vibe, which opened Jan. 15, three years after being dreamed up by Max and his dad, Garth Larcen. The Vibe is an oasis of uniqueness: a restaurant staffed by mentally and physically disabled people, volunteers and a few professionals. It is supported by major corporations and small businesses. Its mission is not only to provide jobs but to train about 100 disabled people a year in basic restaurant skills and place them in jobs elsewhere, all without public funding. The food is first-rate, and you can get a decent glass of wine for \$4.25.

Census figures show that just under 20% of Americans have some form of disability; the unemployment rate for those between the ages of 21 and 64 is around 33%. Given the large number of the disabled who find themselves serving as telemarketers or staffing IRS information lines--honorable jobs, to be sure, but done at a distance from physical human interaction--the Vibe could become a beacon of hope for a host of different possibilities. Here's how it all started.

"Max was languishing," Garth Larcen said the other day during the break between lunch and dinner. Max's dream of becoming a recording engineer had vanished as his strength waned. His friends had died. Time after time, he had been frustrated in his attempts to find employment. "It got to the point where he would take three hours just to get showered and dressed in the morning. We had to find something for him to do. We kicked it around and decided to open a restaurant."

Mr. Larcen had left the restaurant business soon after Max's diagnosis so he could spend more time at home. He took up insurance. "The process reversed itself," says Mr. Larcen, 53. "Now I was getting back into the restaurant business to be with my kids."

Garth set up a board and at first tried for grant money. "That was a mistake," he says. "I soon realized that going to the community was the natural way to make this work." He and the board set up a 501c3, and then he put his insurance skills to work. "I started making cold calls."

"I got plenty of no's," he says with his ready grin. The idea was simply too unfamiliar. Yet persistence finally paid off. The first big score was Target, which pledged \$10,000. "Companies loosened up after Target came on board," says Mr. Larcen, including grocery chain Ukrops, Wachovia Securities, the Dominion Foundation, Sheetz Corp. and Verizon.

Local companies came out of the woodwork. Carlisle Food Systems donated \$30,000 of kitchen equipment. A heating and air-conditioning company, which does not want public recognition, donated \$75,000 in equipment and services. The donor list includes a bookstore, auto dealership, construction company, flower shop, hospitals, country clubs, bottlers, architects and a horde of local restaurants. Last August, 20 restaurants gave 10% of their sales on designated Wednesdays. All told, Mr. Larcen raised about \$300,000 in donations, in-kind services and pledges.

Don Morgan, president of Barber Martin Advertising, was an early believer. His firm, whose largest client is the Virginia Lottery, contributed design work and still helps with fund raising and donor development. "I've pushed a lot of women's deodorant and meat snacks," he said after polishing off a banquet-sized slab of buffalo meat loaf at the Positive Vibe. "That pays the mortgage. But all this leaves you feeling a little better at night."

The training program began even before the restaurant opened its doors. "We started out in the kitchen of Epiphany Lutheran Church," says Mr. Larcen. "These people won't become chefs, but they do learn dishwashing, food preparation and table bussing. Maybe a little management." While small potatoes to most of us, these skills profoundly changed lives. The first graduate phoned one day to report that he was at the city courthouse--getting his name changed. "He said his life had been so transformed that he was going for a whole new identity." Iceman3, as the grad is now known, got a job at the Omni Richmond; the second graduate is working at an Embassy Suites.



Positive Vibe restaurant

There have been other magic moments. At the end of the first pay cycle, checks were passed out in the kitchen. For several employees, Mr. Larcen says, it was their first pay day. "They held the checks like they were baby chicks, as if they were scared of injuring them."

The glow extends to volunteers. Tori Smadi, a member of the volunteer wait staff (which, like the chefs, is not disabled), had been the primary caregiver for her teenage sister,

Sarah, who lost a three-year battle with cancer in November. "The minute I walked in I immediately saw Sarah everywhere--making salads, working in the kitchen," says Ms. Smadi. "I could see her feeling good, being part of something bigger than her disease. I never have a day here that is not good."



Blair Larcen, Garth's 23-year-old daughter, tells a similar story. Like many members of the wait staff, she says, she is in recovery. "I thought at first, 'Oh, God. What's going to happen? We're a bunch of self-centered addicts.'" She quickly found herself inspired and humbled by her disabled co-workers, who she says taught her to value her own life and opportunities more deeply. "This is the best thing that ever happened to me." She has also seen a great change in Max. "The night we opened he was very reserved. Now he has a lot more confidence, even though he is losing his strength."

Garth Larcen wants to share his idea with individuals and corporations. "There are a lot of people a lot smarter than me who could no doubt make it work better," he says. But he has already achieved a measure of success that is, as the credit-card company might put it, priceless.

"Max doesn't like to talk about this," Garth said at the end of our interview. "He sometimes asks, 'Why me? Why was I stricken by this disease?'" Mr. Larcen stops a minute. "What I told him is that if this hadn't happened, I would have never started this restaurant, and these people we're going to train would never be trained. And if this idea catches on, then a lot of people who would never have had a chance will get trained. Max would rather be able to run down the street, but at least now he can feel there may have been a reason."

Perhaps that's why Max is smiling.

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