

Written by Sara Tiradossi

Tuesday, 21 November 2017 09:46 -



The folks behind Phoenix Rescue Mission long dreamed of opening a restaurant. Mission Possible Café, located at 1516 West Van Buren Street in Phoenix, is the organization's newest and most-awaited project. The restaurant's goal lies in its name: providing a new beginning for men, women and children in the community who are struggling with homelessness, addiction and trauma.

The organization purchased the venue of Oaxaca, a former Mexican restaurant, and decided to maintain its original menu of Mexican grilled items. "That's what people had known the restaurant to be," says Nicole Pena, spokesperson for the Phoenix Rescue Mission.

Pena says all Mission Possible Café employers will be part of an eight-month vocational development program that begins with four months of classroom training and concludes with four months of practical application. The program is designed to get people off of the streets, clean and sober, and give them the opportunity to learn about food service and develop leadership and customer service skills.

Pena says many of the workers who come to the organization for help have never worked before, a reason why it was important to create a program that would allow them to serve real customers in a real work setting. "We...provide really strong job skills so that they could not just leave here and get a minimum-wage job, but they would really be able to thrive," Pena says.

The opening of the restaurant did come with some challenges. Pena says the restaurant needed to go through several repairs, and the organizers had to reach out to several people in the restaurant business to help them get started. "We really had to get people on board and work with many volunteers who could point us in the right direction," Pena says. "That took a little longer, but we also know we are opening the best restaurant we could."

Mission Possible Café is currently employing eight men and eight women for four months, and a new class will take their spots after their employment period. Pena says the workers' ages vary, but they are younger than they were in the past. "These 25- to 30-year-olds find themselves without a family support system, a car, a house and a job," Pena says.

Thanks to the program, not only are they assisted in a classroom and restaurant setting, but they also receive help in finding their first job once the program is over. "The ultimate goal is to train folks and get them jobs that pay more than minimum wage so that they can sustain themselves, have stable housing and are able to build a family," Pena says. "They won't have to start at the bottom."

Phoenix Rescue Mission also relies on donations from the community to support their operations. If the cafe becomes successful, Pena says the organization will be able to offset the cost of the program. "Any dollar that we make goes back into getting more people trained and involved in jobs," Pena says.

Pena says it is common belief that homelessness may never end, but she has seen people change their entire life for a better re-entrance into society. To be able to transform lives, the organization believes it is important to have programs that don't focus on one aspect of homelessness only but that address the whole person.

The people who reach out to the organization are homeless, hopeless and afraid, but in a year, Pena says, they leave the organization with a permanent job at a restaurant, and they are completely different people than they were the previous year. "It's awesome to see that change," Pena says. "We have seen the program work, and now we get the opportunity to have more and more people go through it. It's exciting."

AZ Giving: Mission Possible Café

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To Learn More

Mission Possible Café missionpossiblecafe.com.

Phoenix Rescue Mission phoenixrescuemission.org.