

The Dialogue Difference

As I entered Dialogue Coffee House, the fragrant scent of baked goods and espresso felt like a warm hug. The kind and dedicated workers greeted me as I ordered my usual hot white chocolate and caramel latte. Inside the colorful walls, I sat down with Caitlyn Halsey at the handcrafted solid wood table. With her gentle and lighthearted voice, she began telling me her story from the beginning.

Halsey is the founder of Dialogue Coffee House - a shop that hires individuals with special needs, crushes barriers and creates an environment of inclusion. On April 3, 2023, the Capper Foundation bought Dialogue from her, hoping the vision of helping people with special needs would grow. Halsey has already founded and sold a business at only 24 years of age.

It all started when she was invited by a teacher to Circle of Friends, an event that provides community for people with special needs at Washburn Rural. Circle of Friends met biweekly on Wednesdays, where they played games and hung out. She laughed as she explained her initial discomfort at Circle of Friends, but as she kept attending through high school and befriending people with disabilities, she grew to love them.

“After high school what do you do?” Halsey said. “We all either go to college, get a job or have families. There’s not much left after high school for them in the typical world. Just learning that struggle of feeling like they don’t have anything to look forward to beyond school kind of put the initial stir in my heart of ‘why? You’re so capable.’ But the resources weren’t necessarily available for them to feel productive and well received in the workplace.”

After her first interaction with people with disabilities at Circle of Friends, Halsey continued to pursue friendships with them through a Young Life camp in North Carolina. She

served there for a month the summer after her sophomore year of high school. There, her sole responsibility was to teach a job to a young lady with a disability.

“We did laundry and cleaned bathrooms,” Halsey said as she laughed. “It wasn’t very glorious, but it was fun!”

The yellow blouse she was wearing matched her mannerisms as she talked – happy. She explained that this was the first time she truly felt selfless. Her initial desire to help people with disabilities came from watching a video about a company that employed people with special needs.

“When I was a junior, I remember seeing this concept in North Carolina through a company called Bitty & Beaus,” Halsey said. “I just remembered seeing the video and telling the teacher somebody needs to do that in Topeka for our community.”

Although Halsey had many experiences with people who had disabilities, she said it wasn’t until her senior year when she was managing the Washburn Rural coffee shop that she imagined Dialogue Coffee House. During this time, she was also leading Capernaum, a community group for teens and young adults with disabilities that meets twice a month. She also participated in the Special Olympics which allows people with and without disabilities to play sports together.

“At first, I really wanted someone else to do it,” Halsey said. “I kept talking to people about it and bringing it up; and eventually, it just became a heart cry that Topeka needed this. No one else was going to do it, so I was going to do it.”

From there, Dialogue Coffee House was conceived and had its grand opening on April 18, 2019. Halsey said she couldn’t have done it without her family and friends supporting her both mentally and financially. The first challenge she felt in the process of opening was her age

since she was merely 20 years old when Dialogue opened. Furthermore, she feared people wouldn't take her seriously since she didn't have a college degree or the experience in the workplace to do this. However, people eventually were able to see her resilience and took her seriously. She explained that another challenge was simply training her employees.

"The main thing that I focus on to keep myself going are the challenges our employees face on a daily basis," Halsey said. "Their whole lives are learning to adjust and move forward with their disabilities. So, as a company we've had to tweak it a little and keep going as we've hit road bumps."

It's obvious Halsey cares deeply for her employees, and as I spoke with a few of them, it was clear they feel the same way. I asked some employees if I could interview them and they excitedly said yes, as they smiled and glanced at each other.

"I like Caitlyn and all of them," Justin White said.

"Because she's nice and sweet," Brooke Sumner said, going off of White.

"And Bethany's sweet too," White said.

When asked what their favorite part of working at Dialogue was, they both said it was friendships and how they get to talk to people. They also enjoy the actual work they do in their positions such as making coffee and serving drinks.

"It's a good thing to have a job because it gets people out of the house," Sumner said.

As I spent time in Dialogue, I interviewed Bethany Shute, a shift manager at Dialogue.

"It's been really sweet to watch the staff grow from not having a job, to gaining confidence in themselves and their skills." Shute said.

Enthusiasm radiated off of her as she told a story about one of their workers. This worker started out as a café attendant who mostly cleaned. Now, she is one of the friendliest cashiers who works on Dialogue's busiest days.

"That same girl was teaching another girl how to wash dishes," Shute said. "It brought tears to my eyes because it was so sweet to see the café attendant learn a new skill and become successful in this skill because it was something she didn't think she could do."

The impact Dialogue has had on its workers is lifechanging. It seems like the effect will continue beyond Dialogue with the Capper Foundation - its new owner. Dialogue's business model fits Capper's mission to build abilities and empower people of all ages living with disabilities. Capper saw Dialogue as an example of what it wanted to accomplish. Instead of starting from scratch, they had the opportunity to buy Dialogue with the intent of scaling the business and hiring more people.

Through this change, Halsey will be focusing more on the employment side of Dialogue instead of carrying all of the responsibilities that an owner of a business has. She used to bake, run the cash register, and make coffee while she was in the store. She also previously handled finances, marketing, ordering, and dealing with legal necessities. The hope is for her to be relieved of those responsibilities so she can focus on other aspects of Dialogue. Her new position is the Employment Services Director of Dialogue.

"I will be developing a training program that can be replicated that helps employ individuals with disabilities further than just our store, but hopefully to more companies in Topeka," Halsey said. "I'm excited. I don't think the vision was ever for it to just be Dialogue or this one place, but to have so many people catch the vision and want to see it bigger."

The only change that affects the rest of the employees is who provides their checks. All of the staff have been re-hired and even more employees have been added to the team through the Capper Foundation.

"We had so many applications," Shute said when explaining their recent hires. "Which is great because so many people want to work here, but it also shows the need in the community. We need more places like Dialogue who would be willing to employ people with disabilities. There are so many in the community who want to have jobs, who are capable and able to have jobs, but other employment places don't give them the opportunity."

Through the new partnership with the Capper Foundation and creating a training process that other companies can use, the hope is that the Topeka community will continue to change the lives of those with special needs and to employ more people with disabilities.

"I went to high school with several of my employees which has been fun to see," Halsey said. "I've known them for a long time and their story looks different now because of Dialogue. They graduated from high school and now they are able to have jobs."

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