

COFFEE WITH A SIDE OF DIGNITY...

A Saint Petersburg Times Article

There's a line of people out the door at one of the city's newest coffee shops.

The "614 Cafe" opened about a month ago. There has been no advertising. No signs. But word travels fast among its target customers: St. Petersburg's homeless.

Open from 9 to 11:30 a.m. Sunday through Thursday at the Salvation Army, 1400 Fourth St. S, the cafe offers free coffee and snacks.

Just like Starbucks, it goes beyond java. There's atmosphere — soft music, quiet conversation, a dozen small tables and comfy seats.

"It's good people," said Joe Denny, 55, a former pipe fitter who has been homeless after losing his job three months ago. "You don't have all the trouble, the riffraff."

Organizers offer a 10-minute daily biblical message but tell customers they can step outside if they prefer not to hear it.

According to regular Earl Jones, 54, a recovering alcoholic (47 days sober, he says with pride), the coffee's not bad either.

"It's a real good encouragement," he said. "It helps keep me clean. That's my main thing."

So far, the cafe averages 95 customers a day. They savor coffee in glass cups with real spoons.

It's about giving the homeless dignity, something

they struggle to have when sleeping outside, said Sergeant Cory Harrison, 30, The Downtown Corps director.

Already he and his wife, fellow cafe organizer Sergeant Laura Harrison, 31, are trying to find a bigger setting.

The Harrisons try to form informal relationships with the coffee drinkers so they can help them with their struggles, whether it's unemployment, mental illness or drug addiction.

Someday, they hope to transform the coffeehouse into a residential Bible institute where the homeless can train, receive stable housing and run the cafe before launching into full-time ministry.

One recent Thursday at the cafe, Cory Harrison read from 2 Corinthians about suffering.

"You guys don't know anything about that, right?" he said.

"Yeah, right," replied Robert Trowbridge, sitting in the back in a camouflage jacket and jeans, cupping a coffee with cream and sugar.

After the message, Trowbridge turned to a man at the next table.

"What you been up to? Just chillin'? This coffee is good on a cold morning. Is that your paper? Can I have it when you're done?"

Just another day at the cafe.

