

# MEET THE COLUMBIA BREW CREW



sophomore

JACK WATERS



junior

AMANDA VAHLE



junior

JACK MELVIN

\*NOT PICTURED: JUNIOR BELLA DEBREVI AND SOPHOMORE ROBBIE CROOK

I SEE TREMENDOUS GROWTH IN HIM BY ALLOWING HIM  
TO HAVE WHAT IS RIGHTFULLY HIS: HIS INDEPENDENCE

— SUSAN Waeltermann, Junior Jack Melvin's Job Coach

*The Coffee Shop program gives special education students the opportunity to grow in their work experience, social skills and themselves*

BY JACKIE CAMERON AND NATASHA THOMAS

Staff Writers

The rumbling wheels echoed down the fourth floor hallway. Junior Jack Melvin felt nervous as he pushed the cart weighed down by French vanilla coffee and two percent milk. Melvin, who has Down syndrome, is used to spending his second hour journeying up and down the fourth floor delivering coffee to chemistry and math teachers, but today was different.

Today, Melvin was alone.

A year ago, Melvin walked through this hall with his job coach, Susan Waeltermann, by his side — guiding him. Melvin couldn't stop waving to his classmates in rooms nearby when he was supposed to be pushing the cart. He relied on Waeltermann to refocus him back to moving towards the next classroom.

Now, Melvin delivers coffee without straying from his next customer — he sticks to the schedule on his red clipboard. All Waeltermann has to do is stand back in the coffee shop, occasionally poking her head out of the doorway to check in on him.

"I see tremendous growth in him by allowing him to have what is rightfully his: his independence," Waeltermann said.

Waeltermann works with Melvin and four other special education students in a class called Work Experience. The class periods are spent stocking inventory, delivering drinks and working the cash register at the coffee shop. This is Waeltermann's first year with the coffee shop program, and it's been her goal from her first day to help every student in the class improve themselves in some way. She sees the shop as a way for her students to expand their freedom as they gain employment experience.

According to Laura Jurgensen, Assistant Director of the Kansas DOE Special Education team, getting a job is one of the major obstacles of having a developmental disability. The coffee shop's goal is to build the student's skills for future employment. Waeltermann's goal is to build the students' confidence in themselves.

The program isn't focused on making sure students can make a perfect cappuccino, but rather teaching skills necessary in future employment. Waeltermann wants to see them gain independence — she wants to see a student that started out unable to look someone in the eyes give a teacher a high-five as they pass them in the hall.

And to get to the point where they feel comfortable enough to go for that high-five, Waeltermann needed a process that would get them there.

Waeltermann's process is tailored to each individual. If a student is struggling with communication, Waeltermann would send them in alone to ask a teacher what kind of coffee they wanted that day. If endurance is an issue, Waeltermann accompanies them on the 50-minute-long trek to deliver coffee throughout the school. Every activity Waeltermann comes up with is to help her students do what they couldn't do at the beginning of the year.

Sophomore Jack Waters, who is on the autism spectrum, first stepped into coffee-scented room 417 at the beginning of this year. His eyes stayed glued to the straw-wrapper-ridden floor, and his voice was drowned out by the espresso machine. Waeltermann saw that Waters needed confidence, and she knew that conversations during coffee deliveries was a way for him to gain it.

Waeltermann took Waters on the daily coffee runs, and after he gave a few teachers his lower-than-a-whisper "Hi," she took him aside. Hoping to teach by example, Waeltermann had Waters pretend to ask for her coffee order, and this time she made sure he looked her in the eye and talked loud enough for her to hear.

After months of these hesitant one-word conversations, Waeltermann watched Waters' averted gaze and shy voice turn into a wide smile and loud greeting.

"I think just the feeling that he's comfortable there and he's among friends and he understands the routine is causing him to be able to break out of his shell," Water's mother, Allison Waters, said.

Waeltermann likes to challenge her students, too. Junior Bella DeBrevi, who has Down syndrome, walked into the class already armed with two years of experience working in the coffee shop. Waeltermann recognized DeBrevi's abilities and knew she would have to raise the bar. While other students were working on lowering or raising voice level and perfecting fitting the lids on coffee cups, DeBrevi was plugging numbers into an algebraic equation to calculate the right number of Pop Tart boxes to stock.

"[Debrivi] could run a little grocery store," Waeltermann said. "She is [an] inventory queen. She takes pride in making everything in order and has attention to detail."

Even though DeBrevi is often independent, mentors like senior Megan Drake and junior Maddie Schultzer are also there to teach and help. Drake and Schultzer work as student mentors during their first hour, accompanying Work Experience students on coffee deliveries or restocking shelves with the next shipment of Goldfish.

If a student is struggling to raise their voice loud enough to be heard over a loud classroom as they ask for an order, the mentors are there to encourage them to speak loudly and clearly. As with all her students, Waeltermann hopes the mentors learn something from their time in the coffee shop as well.

"I am proud of the students when they get things accomplished and do things on their own and I'd say I'm also proud of myself because I help them get there," Schultzer said.

At the beginning of the year, mentors had to remind students to tie their apron on; now the students' aprons are off the hook, hands are washed, and they're ready to go before any prompting.

Waeltermann says having mentors in the coffee shop also lets her Work Experience students experience a social environment. Junior Amanda Vahle, who has cerebral palsy, started the program without the confidence to greet the customers walking in the coffee shop or even raise her eyes

from the floor to look at them.

Waeltermann and the mentors came up with pretend situations to help Vahle come out of her shell. They would act like a customer in the shop, and Vahle would have to greet them. Now Vahle likes to walk in and announce her entrance, or joke about how the Mickey Mouse on her Apple Watch is better than the butterfly on Waeltermann's watch.

Waeltermann says little conversations like these can strengthen a students social skills, which is why delivering coffee to teachers is so beneficial.

Math and Social Skills teacher Andrew Walter sees each employee-customer interaction as an opportunity to challenge the students, which he does often by switching up his order or asking them to go through all of the coffee flavor options.

Sophomore Robbie Crook, who has autism, isn't fazed by Walter's antics — Crook has a knack for memorizing orders. He knows some teachers like two pumps of French vanilla complete with a sprinkle from the sugar jar while others, like Coach Shawn Hair, prefer a single hot chocolate.

Memorization wasn't hard for Crook, but he had a hard time pushing the cart and asking if a cup of hot water was all a tea-lover needed. Waeltermann spent a week focusing on verbal prompts such as "Hello, would you like some coffee?" to help Crook when he froze. And by the end of the week, Crook got upset missing deliveries because that meant he couldn't see his favorite teachers.

"Each student has a different set of skills that they're trying to improve upon in the same way that I have things that I try to improve in my teaching," Walter said.

Past 2015 East graduate Dan Walker, who has Down syndrome, worked in the coffee shop and delivered. Now a student at University of Missouri-Kansas City, Walker applies the skills he learned from the program to maneuvering his college campus.

"He got a lot more confident just walking around places and knocking on doors and doing things that were out of his comfort zone," said his mother, Sharon Walker.

Waters, Melvin and Crook are pouring coffee now, but each has a job they want to obtain one day. Waters envisions himself helping shoppers bag their groceries at Hen House. Melvin wants to recreate his favorite Chipotle meal, the burrito bowl, as a worker for his customers. Crook sees himself finding a career at a movie theater.

But Waeltermann sees them at any job they can set their mind to.

Waeltermann knows Waters might end up somewhere other than Hen House, and maybe Melvin won't assemble burritos at Chipotle. But whatever Waters is doing, Waeltermann knows he will be speaking clearly and looking his customers in the eye. When Melvin is given a task, she knows he can take it on alone. And Crook may even memorize movie showings like he does coffee orders.

"No matter what, they can work. They can get out and do it," Waeltermann said. "There is a job for everybody, no matter what they're up against — there is something for everybody."