



The original section of the Encounter Café, where lines often stretch to the door for the made-fresh food.



The bakery space, where all but one of their pastries are made daily. Manager Ray Yutzy hopes that someday they can make their own bread as well.



This section of the café was added last year. Plenty of open space, coffee, plug ins for tech, and a fireplace make it useful and inviting.

CHERYL ALLEN/THE NEWS

# Encounter Café expands, appreciates community's support

BY CHERYL ALLEN  
The News  
IOWA CITY

When the Encounter Café opened in August 2017, manager Ray Yutzy imagined the new restaurant would gradually ease into its place and purpose. Instead, alert media reporters immediately took note, ran stories, and brought in a flood of customers. The novel concept of a church-run eatery was instantly successful.

The Encounter Café, located at 376 S. Clinton St. in downtown Iowa City, is the project

of Sharon Bethel Amish Mennonite Church in Kalona and New Hope Mennonite Church in Washington. Its purpose is to serve and love people by providing a safe haven and gathering place for college students at the University of Iowa (as well as the greater community), and fresh, house-made, locally grown food that will satisfy appetites.

The café was so successful that it wasn't long before Yutzy was wondering how they might acquire more space. The corner storefront had a Chinese restaurant neighbor on the east

side, but beyond that the storefronts were vacant. Was there a way to move the Chinese restaurant?

There was. After Yutzy had a conversation with the property's landlord, the Chinese restaurant was offered an all-expense paid relocation opportunity, and the Encounter Café was able to expand. A year ago, they completed the build-out, and now have a spacious bakery counter and additional seating space.

What does it mean for the café to be successful? There is the obvious, which can be quan-

tified on financial statements, but that was never the churches' main goal. All of the café's profits go to local charities and ministries; thank you notes fill the entry way corkboard.

An atmosphere of love – that was a goal. Before opening six years ago, church members gathered in the space for a dedication prayer, which included “a request that God would provide his presence for this place, so when people come through the door, they would feel something different. That it would be an atmosphere of friendship, love,” Yutzy says.

By all indications, visitors to the restaurant do feel the love. Yutzy says that four campus ministry groups use the café as a base for socializing and Bible study.

“Anytime the Word of God is opened out here, that alone is an atmosphere of love and support,” he says. “They know they can come in here, they can pray and sit with these students, and nobody's going to stop them or ask them to leave.”

“We make no distinction, whoever comes through the doors, whatever they believe, represent, or support. Everybody's welcome,” he continues. “We want this to be a safe place.”

The café supports the people of Kalona, both by employing them – all employees come from five area churches and include

both old and new order Amish – and by sourcing food from area producers, including Farmers Hen House (eggs) and Kalona Organics (cream). And the people of Kalona support the café.

“The support from the Kalona community has been amazing,” Yutzy says. “Early on they started coming up here out of curiosity to see what we're doing. The Mennonite community in particular has been very supportive. Even beyond that, we feel a lot of support from the local church community.”

When you choose to visit the Encounter Café, which is open 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday – Saturday, don't be surprised to find a line out the door. In addition to students looking for a coffee fix, you'll find families sharing French toast and pancakes, and friends meeting for panini sandwiches and fresh salads.

The line may be a little shorter at the bakery counter, where you can score a just-baked cinnamon roll, scone, or one of the exact same soft pretzels you've enjoyed for years at the Kalona Fall Festival.

“As far as the Kalona community is concerned, we love it when people come up here because it tells us that they're supporting us and what we're doing,” Yutzy says.

If you haven't dined at the Encounter Café before, it may be time for you, too, to feel the love.

James Yoder, Bob & Kristie Black, and Paul & Julie Roberts present:

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## NEW ROOTS FESTIVAL AND TORNADO BENEFIT



CHERYL ALLEN/THE NEWS

A crowd turned out Sunday evening for the New Roots Music Festival and Tornado Benefit at the Wellman Band Shell, where three acts performed, and several food trucks provided good eats. The event raised funds to replace trees at Washington County farmsteads that experienced losses in the March tornado. The Young Ramblers are pictured entertaining those gathered.

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