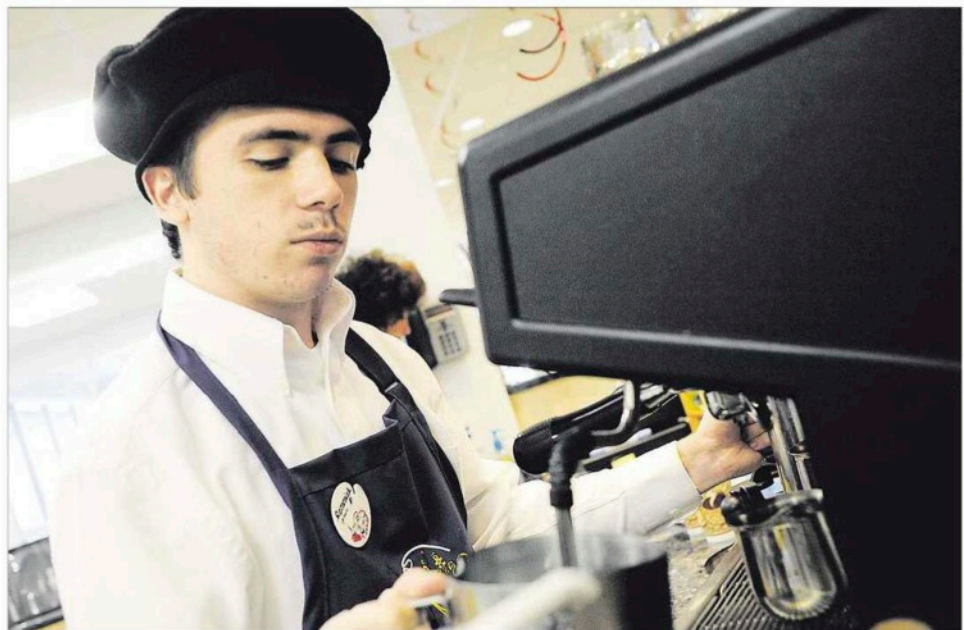


# North of Tampa

## Cafe serves a greater good



Remmick Wadsworth, 20, prepares coffee at Artistas Café, formed by the nonprofit Art for Autism and located at the Mercedes-Benz of Tampa. BRYAN THOMAS | Times

Baristas find a perfect fit at a business created to employ people with autism.



Clinard Wingate, 16, and his mother, Hope Greenlee, wait at Artistas Café while their car is serviced. The cafe, which began operating last month, is open to the general public. BRYAN THOMAS | Times

**BY SHELLEY ROSETTER**  
*Times Staff Writer*

Ray Lee-Pack struggled to find employment. ¶ Like many other job seekers, the 22-year-old faced a tough market. But he also faced something more: prejudice. ¶ Lee-Pack has autism. Finding an understanding employer has been difficult, he said. "I applied for numerous other jobs but seldom got interviews." ¶ In January, his struggle ended. ¶ Lee-Pack became a barista at Artistas Café. ¶ Formed by the nonprofit foundation Art for Autism, the cafe opened last month and is staffed by young adults diagnosed with autism. Located inside the Mercedes-Benz of Tampa dealership on N Dale Mabry Highway, it's the first of many that the organization hopes to open.

» See CAFE, 3



» CAFE continued from 1

# Cafe employs baristas with a difference

“Our goal is to raise self-sufficient young adults to the point that they realize they can do whatever it is they want to do,” said Vicky Westra, Art for Autism founder.

Dressed in a purple smock and black beret, Lee-Pack and the cafe’s other three employees serve drinks named after famous artists to the dealership’s customers and workers.

Russell Wadsworth, 21, of Tampa, found his first job at the cafe. An artist himself, it was a perfect fit.

“Being here is a blessing,” Wadsworth said. “I prayed for a job and this came along like a calling.”

Wadsworth and his brother, Remmick, also an artist who works at the cafe, draw when business gets slow.

The cafe provided Lee-Pack’s first job, too.

“It’s like having a significant burden lifted off my shoulders,” he said.

He likes the work, and as a bonus, “there’s a really nice aroma in here,” he said.

The cafe’s fourth employee, 19-year-old Josh Heissler of Wesley Chapel, has had many jobs before but never one that allowed him to truly be himself.

“When I got all those jobs, I held back that I have Asperger’s and autism,” he said.

“Here, everybody knows. There are no secrets.”

According to the National Institutes of Health, autism is a developmental disability that causes problems with social interaction and communication. Symptoms of autism disorders can range from mild to serious.

In the United States, experts estimate that one in every 1,000 children has autism.

Because of preconceived notions that some employers hold about the disorder, people with autism have a hard time finding jobs, Westra said. Many employers don’t realize how smart workers with autism can be, instead



BRYAN THOMAS | Times

**Remmick Wadsworth, 20, draws while business is slow at the Artistas Café at Mercedes-Benz of Tampa. The cafe gives young adults with autism an opportunity to gain work experience.**

lumping them with others who suffer from different disabilities.

The main difference between an employee with autism and one without is learning styles, Westra said. At the cafe, slight adjustments were made, including visual training guides and creating an atmosphere that emphasizes positive behavior reinforcement.

The cafe gives young adults an opportunity to gain work experience and to show others that they aren’t so different from everyone else, she said.

“They are very committed, very focused, always on time and sometimes they don’t even want to leave work.”

Westra, whose daughter has autism, founded Art for Autism in 2007 after she struggled to find information on the disorder. The idea for Artistas Café came in 2010 when the Mercedes dealership approached her company, Javámo Coffees, about running a cafe in the dealership.

Javámo, a coffee distribution company based in Tampa, usually focused on the supply side of coffee shops, but Westra saw a chance to help those with autism. The dealership agreed.

“We had always planned to have a coffee bar in our new facility,” said Frank Cuteri, the dealership’s general manager. “This is a win-win for everyone.”

Westra submitted a business plan for the cafe to the Children’s Board of Hillsborough County’s Innovative Business Plan Competition last July and was selected as one of the finalists. The organization received several thousand dollars in seed money it needed to open the first cafe.

Built in an area overlooking the dealership’s service garage, the cafe is open to the general public. Mercedes customers receive complimentary beverages, paid for by the dealership.

The baristas are paid by the foundation, which receives funding from the cafe’s proceeds and

a portion of Javámo’s proceeds.

Westra hopes the program will grow by implementing an internship program for local high school students with autism and building more cafes in the future.

So far, the cafe has been a success with both dealership customers and employees.

“I think it helps overcome a lot of the misconceptions of autism,” Cuteri said.

For Michael Glisson, the cafe’s manager, his new position has been eye-opening. With a background in the coffee business, this has been Glisson’s first opportunity to work with people who have autism.

“When you get involved with something like this, your objective is to change someone’s life,” Glisson said. “But what happens is that they make a difference in yours.”

Shelley Rossetter can be reached at [srossetter@sptimes.com](mailto:srossetter@sptimes.com) or (813) 226-3374.