

Laura Fergusson Trust (Canterbury)

Diversability

Canterbury's Can Do Catering is not only getting rave reviews for its delicious food and great service, it's also creating meaningful employment for a group of adults living with significant disabilities.

The Laura Fergusson Trust Canterbury launched the catering operation as a social enterprise as part of its vision to provide "ordinary life opportunities" for the people it supports.

The Trust, which has been operating since 1979, is an independent, charitable organisation providing services to people with impairments, particularly those who have suffered a brain injury. It has about 170 staff working with clients and their families, both in the community and at its residential rehabilitation centre.



"Part of living an ordinary life is having access to meaningful employment," says Chief Executive Kathryn Jones. "The clients we support face huge barriers to gaining access to paid employment due to their physical and cognitive impairments and the hands-on support they require daily."

Can Do Catering was launched in May 2015 to address this issue - its seven catering assistants have impairments from conditions such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, spinal injury and traumatic brain injury.

A head chef was employed to support the catering assistants and grow the business. The catering assistants can only work for an hour to 90 minutes at a time due to issues with concentration and physical ability, but volunteers support the staff when they are at work to ensure productivity levels are sustainable.

All the staff are recruited and selected for the positions, have formal employment agreements, are paid at least the adult minimum wage and are given training opportunities.

Can Do Catering operates from the Trust's commercial kitchen in Christchurch, providing food for a range of the city's businesses during normal office hours and has also catered for evening council functions and weekend weddings and funerals. A wheelchair-accessible van, purchased with grant funding in 2016, ensures that the staff can work on all aspects of the business, including deliveries.

The Trust's aim is to run the business sustainably. Annual turnover in the 2016/17 year was \$85,174 and the budget for 2017/18 is \$117,500. At the end of December 2017, turnover was \$16,135 ahead of budget and Can Do Catering had posted an operating surplus of almost \$12,000.

A marketing plan, a new website and a bigger social media presence are all part of the strategy to increase orders, which will mean the operation can employ more catering assistants in the next six months.

This successful business model has made the Trust's staff more aware of the possibilities for people with disabilities to enter paid employment, says Kathryn Jones.

Working with organisations across Canterbury has also raised the profile of the Trust and the work it does, she says.

For the catering assistants and their families, the opportunity to perform paid work with a purpose, earn respect and recognition and be part of a team is life-changing.

"Seeing our employees proudly receive their first pay cheque and observing their enthusiasm and commitment has been extremely rewarding," says Kathryn. "One of our Can Do Catering employees never had her own bank account before starting work in the business and is now saving for an iPad."

Another of the catering assistants is a 45-year-old man who suffered three multi-trauma accidents, most notably a motorcycle injury in 2006. He was diagnosed with C2 tetraplegia, and despite notable gains in rehabilitation, including gradually regaining movement in all four limbs, he required ongoing help for his symptoms and pain management.

Prior to his accident, William worked driving trucks and found his job fulfilling. His rehabilitation team encouraged William to pursue a position with Can Do Catering.

"Can Do Catering has helped me with my depression since my accident. I feel useful to be a part of a team again. They accept me for who I am, I have wonderful support and they do not judge me. This has been a huge help as I used to think I was a huge failure, letting people down. Now I feel like a part of society again. I feel good inside and it makes me feel I have achieved something for the day," he says. Another employee is a 44-year-old woman who has cerebral palsy with epilepsy. Before starting work with Can Do Catering, she would refuse to participate in scheduled activities at the Laura Fergusson Trust and have difficulty managing her frustration with other residents and staff. But since taking up her role, her family have reported a marked difference.

"She is happy, she is a lot calmer and has direction. She talks a lot about what she does at Can Do Catering, the orders, the team and is very proud. She feels important and is a lot more settled," her mother says.



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