

Recovery Café: The gift of brokenness

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

Organizations committed to helping the addicted and the homeless can be found in every city. Few of them resemble the Recovery Café. As founder Killian Noe told me, “It looks like a Starbucks.”

Sure enough, the site is painted in welcoming and trendy bright blue and red, with exposed pipes in the ceiling and with gobs of sunshine (at least by Seattle standards) pouring through the glass front wall.

Some of the people who wander into this inviting space in Seattle’s Belltown neighborhood aren’t necessarily looking to shed their addictions or receive help amid their homelessness. “Many come just because they’re hungry,” said Noe.

They’re in the right place: the coffee is always hot, and soup and salad are available at mealtimes. If visitors want to become a member of the community, they need only to have been clean and sober for one day. “That gives them an incentive not to use for 24 hours,” explained Noe. They also have to join a small group to which they’re accountable. There are myriad recovery groups they can be part of. There is also what the café calls its School for Recovery, where students can take classes that meet five days a week for an entire semester. “We even have graduates and a dean now,” Noe said.

The Recovery Café was started in 2004 by the New Creation Community, an ecumenical group that Noe began when she moved to the area in 1999. It pursues the combination of contemplation and activism modeled by the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. When she lived in that city, Noe, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, founded and ran Samaritan Inns, which helped homeless people recover from addiction and find housing.

Noe’s gracious spirit, infectious laugh and quick smile fill the café. I noticed that she offered an encouraging word to everyone in the place.

A man named Don, with the disheveled manner and stilted speech of an addict but the intent gaze and light manner of a recovered one, greeted me at the door. “I’d be

dead if not for this place,” he told me. “No doubt in my mind.” Now he’s able to give back. “They trust me with the keys, to open and close, to get the food ready, sometimes all by myself.” Another man, Leo, said he has a habit of disappearing for months at a time. “Now, if I’m not here a while, people notice. I have to call if I’m going away.”

Cora told me she’s been clean and sober “21 years and eight months.” She’d been an entertainer—“Not a has-been, but a not-yet”—and was abused by “every man she was ever in relationship with,” from her father onward. (Noe says that some 90 percent of addicted people connected to the Recovery Café had been sexually abused.)

As if Cora weren’t facing enough challenges, she fled Hurricane Katrina several years ago and her purse was stolen along the way. Alone, without resources, she was directed to the café. “Now I’m more confident, a giver to others, and help others stand up for themselves. We’re not worthless people, as we’ve been told in so many relationships. And we can tell others that.”

Cora is slowly picking up her old talent of singing, sometimes at the RC’s open-mic nights. Noe suggested to Cora that she has another gift that is even more valuable: “Your gift of brokenness might be even greater than your gift of singing.” Cora didn’t disagree.

For Noe, a sense of the deep relationship between being healed and healing others is the theological marker of the café. “We have this view that to offer healing to others you have to be perfect yourself, and it’s just not true. In our woundedness we are a blessing to others.”

Recovery Café is situated in a gentrifying area where new high-rises with condominiums costing \$1 million lie close to gritty tattoo bars and funky restaurants. The city’s fabulous harbor and Space Needle are in view, as are several drug dealers. “They’re not usually here,” an embarrassed Noe commented. “The police must’ve pushed them farther from the tourists.” One yells threateningly at a squad car that flies by.

When one of the café’s many volunteers asked me why I was visiting, I said I was interested in several ministries in the area. He flinched. “I’m a spiritual person, and that’s helped me in my recovery. But I’m not religious, and this place isn’t a ministry.”

But the work of ministry was clear enough, especially in light of Noe's account of her understanding of the café. "You have to be broken to offer yourself," she said, echoing Henri Nouwen. "The bread in communion has to be broken to be given away. We teach that brokenness allows us to give ourselves away."