

**Sisters Of The Road a month later:
What our community has to say about the changes we've made**

By: Galadriel Mozee, Associate Director of Operations

On the 27th of July 2009, Sisters Of The Road's Administration Team made a hard decision. We decided that as a direct response to increased crowding, drug use and selling and violence outside our doors we would close our doors through the month of August. During this closed time we dedicated the majority of our resources and staff hours to coming up with a solution to these concerns in a way that represented our values of nonviolence and honored our mission to find systemic solutions to homelessness.

Before the August close staff had already begun making changes to address the overcrowding happening inside the cafe. An ordinary day saw us serving an average of 350 meals in a period of four and a half hours. We had changed the 29 year old tradition of customers lining up against our building waiting to be seated to a waitlist format that allowed people to put their name on a list and wait to be called, much like any other restaurant you would visit. We found that this slowed our service enough to actually have conversations with our customers, address issues before they became violent and perform our jobs in healthy and sustainable ways.

While these changes greatly improved the atmosphere inside the cafe, tensions out on the street continued to grow. A heightened demand for our services, increase in drug dealing downtown and uncertainty around which way the sidewalk obstruction ordinance would go was a recipe for disaster for neighborhood relationships. Sisters knew that something had to change, that something needed to make space for change. That, along with concerns raised by local police, was the catalyst for the close.

We closed our doors and worked long hours inviting customers, community members, local service agencies and neighbors to engage with us to create a different way of doing things. With the belief that change comes most effectively when all those affected are part of the solutions we hosted break-out groups to address the most pressing issues while creating next-step plans so ideas and concerns that we didn't identify as pressing wouldn't slip through the cracks.

On Tuesday, September 1, 2009 Sisters reopened our doors with a new way of addressing the concerns outside. We implemented a clearly defined code of conduct for our customers, posted inside the cafe and in our windows visible to the outside. We began using chalk to mark the required passage way on the sidewalks around Sisters. We changed our waitlist sign up to a time slot format that allows fifteen people to be served every half hour. Customers are given a slip of paper to remind them when they have signed up to eat lunch and asked to keep a passage clear on the sidewalk for others to pass. We also invite them to engage in our services by participating in barter work and/or in activities that may be going on in the Personalist Center.

A month later the response we're getting to the changes is positive:

“At first I was nervous that Sisters was just going to move us along like everyone else,” says one customer who wishes to not be named, “but now I see that it's actually safer and better for everyone”.

And the positive feedback isn't just coming from our customers:

Howard Weiner, Chair of the Old Town/Chinatown Visions Committee and business owner in Old Town since 1984 stated, "the conditions are greatly improved and the changes are better for the customers and for the neighborhood at large".

He also said that he appreciated the way Sisters is working with others in the neighborhood to address concerns and supports our strategy of "having conversation with each other."

"I've seen a huge difference when Sisters reopened and it has continued to get better." said Marylee King, Director of The MacDonald Center, our nearest neighbor. "People are very respectful of the new rules. I've been noticing that people are more aware of others' passage and stepping out of the way on the sidewalk without even being asked".

MaryLee also reported that there has been less drug dealing and traffic at the bench outside their organization. "Police and Clean and Safe have been proactive but a lot of the change has to do with the respect that this community has for Sisters and their dedication to making their mission work".

We continue to fine-tune the changes we've made here at Sisters and work in partnership with our neighbors, community and authorities. We truly believe that developing authentic relationships with others will bring about sustainable and systemic change.

Please come down to the cafe and pay us a visit - let the work we've done speak for itself. If you have any questions or concerns about the changes at Sisters we invite you to call our Executive Director Monica Beemer at 503.222.5694 ext 19 or send her an email at monica@sistersoftheroad.org.