

The man with more than a 45-year-old donut shop.

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*DISCLAIMER: Donuts were received and consumed in the writing of this article.

There is a donut shop, nestled in a corner of one of Melbourne's shopping centres, that is something special.

The kids know it. They fog up the glass as they gaze wistfully at the ice cream.

The grey heads know it. The shop's yellow and aqua coffee cups are scattered all over the food court.

The young families know it. Once they came with their parents, now they're bringing their kids.

But you wouldn't know it, unless you looked around.

Con Scopas, the short and lovable owner of this donut shop, is wandering around the Westfield Knox food court in his faded aqua 'Royal Donuts' shirt, picking up dirty cups.

He seems detached from the customers all around, many of whom have known him for decades. But when he sees a cup on their table, they receive a greeting and a pat on the shoulder as he collects it. Sometimes, they say, he leaves a bag of donuts in his wake.

Con has made himself a coffee and is sitting with a friend at a nearby table. They chat like old Greek men do, solemnly, and in their mother tongue.

Con's business, Royal Donuts, continues to steam along as he sits. Hints of cinnamon and sweet fried flour drift through the air. There is a line continually reforming at the register. Grey heads nurse their yellow cups.

It's almost 11am. There is a rush before lunch. Con is busy. He doesn't have time for an interview.

A bag of donuts appear in my hands, a very European apology. But suddenly he is sitting on one of the booths, elbows on the table, recounting the history of a business which has been serving his community for nearly half a century.

These donuts, Con says in his thick accent, they're a "special recipe from my grandma".

"That's why my donuts [are] something special."

Con is over 80, which makes for a very old recipe, and he says it hasn't changed.

"The people who taste it, they reckon it's the best donuts in Australia," he says.

"That make me proud and happy."

Con's wife Roula and his children John and Vanessa work with him, along with a close-knit staff, some of whom have been working here for 25 years.

For Con, Royal Donuts is about more than money. Con loves his customers.

"I'm stay with this business because I be in love with these people," he says.

"I love the people, but they love me."

Wendy, a customer, has just leaned over. She's been listening and wants to put in her two cents. She and her husband have lived here since before the shopping centre was built and have been coming to Royal Donuts from the very beginning.

"They never shut their door, they've always been open to accommodate everybody," she says.

Not only do their grandchildren like the donuts, but their coffee is also the "absolute best".

"It's just part of our home to come have a coffee here," she says.

If you were here on another day, you might find Con's son John bustling about the shop and waving an eager hello to his regulars.

It's almost symbolic. John's name rhymes with his father's. He may be a few feet taller than Con, but they look remarkably similar, and John loves the people like his father does.

"Our customer base is like one big family. Our customers come first," he says.

What has kept his father working at the shop past 80 years old? It is seeing little kids he knew from 30 years ago, now come to his shop with their kids.

"We love that," John says.

And he wasn't kidding. On a Facebook post by the local paper celebrating Con and his family as one of the area's longest-serving retailers, over 150 people commented on their fondness for Con and his family, with many saying they now take their kids here.

There are more sweet stories. John tells me about two 80-year-olds who met at his father's shop and got to know each other over coffee. They ended up getting married.

Cons bags of cinnamon donuts made it into the hand of a girl sleeping rough in the shopping centre.

If you sit in the food court near the shop, you'll see one of the big round tables occupied. If you came the next day, you'd see the same group of people on the same table.

"A lot, a lot of people come daily," John emphasises.

"It's their outing, it's their happy time because a lot of people - the elderly - their kids have moved out of home. They meet up here, they have a coffee, they have a laugh. It's something to do. Somewhere to go."

You get a free cinnamon donut with your coffee, so it's easy to understand why coming here would constitute a happy time. John says 99 per cent of the time the complimentary donut is accepted and eaten.

"It's good to get anything free to be honest, especially in this day in age with the cost of living," says John.

The group on the large round table are often in relaxed discussions, like those accustomed to each other's company, happy to sit quietly if the conversation wanes. Denise is sitting there on her walker. She has problems with her legs. Robyn is next to her like she is every morning.

Robyn has been married to Gary for not quite as long as Denise has been married to John, less than 56 years, but still a long time. Robyn can't remember. She's also a bit sick of these questions. Their husbands will be back from shopping soon.

Mark has a lot to say. He sits across the table, often by himself because his carer apparently wanders off a lot. Mark doesn't let the fact he is deaf stop him from talking, though unfortunately, his carer is the only one who can translate sign language.

For 52 years Denise has lived here, and she remembers a time when this area was nothing but swamplands. Her soft, wispy way of speaking makes every sentence sound like a sigh.

"We just happened to share a table with them one day," she says.

"We get together most mornings and have a chat."

"We like it here. We've made a lot of friends, good friends."

When your doctor tells you it's good to get out and socialise, she says, "you've got to do as you're told don't you"?

Clinical psychologist and leading international expert on loneliness and social isolation Professor Jo Badcock agrees when it comes to getting out and socialising.

She says the fact that loneliness and social isolation puts such stress on the body is likely why it is associated with so many bad health outcomes.

"The need for human connection is a really basic human need. If we're short of it, both objectively or subjectively, it's a really big stressor on the body," she says.

"It's strongly linked to poor cardiovascular health, for example. It's linked to cognitive difficulties and the onset of dementia. It's linked to a whole host of mental health problems."

But loneliness and social isolation, so often associated with retirees, are not the same thing.

Professor Badcock's studies are used to define both terms for the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare who describe social isolation as "having objectively few social relationships or roles and infrequent social contact".

Loneliness on the other hand, is a "subjective, unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying, social relationships".

"I come from the UK, where the pub - the village - was the heart of the community, right? It was the place everyone could go to. Everyone was welcome," she says.

"There's a magnificent opportunity there to have something like a cafe that is so accessible within your own community that older people can visit easily and readily and on a regular basis, help them maintain face to face social connections, which are so important."

It's community-led connections like these, where people know each other by name, that is the focal point of the Chatty Cafe initiative happening in Australia.

Chatty Cafe was born out of a situation we've all experienced. We go into a public space like a cafe, feeling particularly lonely and everyone is silently standing around, in their own worlds.

But when a young social worker from the UK experienced it, she imagined a different situation, one where she sat down with the strangers to have a chat. She created an initiative out of it, creating spaces in all sorts of places dedicated to fostering new conversations, and Glenys Reid brought it to Australia.

"The most successful venues are those that have an interest in the concept of profit with purpose, that it's not just about making a profit, that it's about engaging with your customers and being interested in their well-being," says Glenys, Chatty's Managing Director.

She has her own experience of feeling seen in her community. At her favourite Hampton café, Eclair, her barista, a "very politically incorrect Greek fella" called Mario, makes her laugh.

"He knows everybody by name, and he knows everybody's orders, and it's a great little community", she says.

"The ambience that the cafe has created, and the sense of welcome, as well as their products and the quality of the coffee, brings people back day after day after day."

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