

Noelle Alix of Simsbury & Kim Morrison of Avon

*Co-Founders, BeanZ & Co.,
Inclusive Coffee Café, Avon*



One of them is a lawyer. The other is a small business owner. Like a lot of women, they made friends years ago through their daughters' play group. They bonded because each of them has a daughter with Down syndrome.

As the years passed, those two moms – Noelle Alix and Kim Morrison – began to worry about what would happen when their girls turned 21 and aged out of the school system. The women knew that 80% of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are under- or unemployed. They felt compelled to do something about it – not just so their own daughters could have jobs, but so that others with IDD could, too.

In December 2018, Kim (owner of the New England Pasta Company in Avon) and Noelle (a telecommuting attorney for the Texas-based law firm Vinson & Elkins) co-founded BeanZ & Co., a unique coffee café in Avon where half the employees are intellectually challenged adults.

Almost immediately, the place was a hit. Open six days per week, BeanZ offers all the things that most cafes feature – jumbo muffins with crumbly tops, fruit- and granola-filled yogurt bowls, avocado toast, fancy coffees – and one thing that's rare: a warm and relaxed atmosphere that's gentle, patient, and accepting, where people want to linger over their coffee and chat with the folks at the next table.

It's infectious: The power of the BeanZ & Co. model is so strong that, slowly but surely, other employers are starting to embrace the idea of inclusive employment and hire adults with IDD. Last December, Kim and Noelle did a compelling TEDx talk, urging companies to think outside the box and consider hiring intellectually challenged adults – emphasizing that it would be good not only for the employees, but for the employers, too.

Like every restaurant, BeanZ & Co. stumbled a little during Covid, but it did not fall; in fact, Kim and Noelle say that the pandemic actually made their fledgling business even stronger, because it surfaced and solidified a level of support from the BeanZ community that they did not realize they had. Though the restaurant was just two years old when the virus hit, it already had a broad, deep, and generous following that sprung into action to sustain it – people who bought gift cards, and takeout, and helped deliver meals to frontline workers and the residents of Favarh group homes.

In short, it showed that they've built a community where everyone feels like they truly belong.