

Foundation funds new coffee shop in Newark arts district

By Diane Lilli, Staff Writer

There's a new place to grab a cup of coffee or a bowl of steaming soup in Essex County. But if you venture inside, you may not leave so quickly.

And it all started with the dream of a Maplewood native who decided to help fund viable new businesses in Newark.

The Coffee Cave on Halsey Street was partially underwritten by Paul Profeta as part of his joint venture with Rutgers Business School, known formally as the Profeta Urban Investment Foundation.

Residents from South Orange, Maplewood, Newark and other communities joined Rutgers University faculty and administrators and the mayor of Newark to celebrate the opening Dec. 10. The newest business on Halsey Street is part of an area fast becoming New Jersey's newest community art district.

And the new business, owned by John Murray, will not only tempt taste buds but also satisfy the eyes with art displays by local talent provided through Newark's Ice Gallery.

Just the existence of a new business in such dire economic times would be cause for celebration, but in this scenario, there's even more reason to take satisfaction.

The new foundation has deep ties with Rutgers School of Business in Newark, where the faculty and administration have embraced the notion that a new business in Newark could not only survive but thrive.

Rutgers Chancellor Steven Diner said the school's involvement with the foundation is a natural fit.

"Rutgers University sees itself and tries to be a true urban university," Diner said. "We are connected to Newark and like to think what we do will help the city.

People want places to go, to establish a nightlife. It's a particular joy to me to see our business school as a central player in urban entrepreneurship." Profeta agreed, adding that the driving force behind the new cafe, Murray, has already shown his mettle.

"He is the guy who had the energy, intelligence and perseverance," Profeta said. "In the middle of the whole ordeal he had broken his leg. In order to come to the store every day and supervise the construction, he realized he couldn't use crutches because the space was too narrow."

Profeta described how Murray overcame his temporary disability.

"He made a little cart and would drag his broken leg in that cart behind him as he hobbled around on his other foot," said Profeta. "That is the definition of persistence."

Murray said he was grateful for the assistance Profeta, Rutgers, and Mayor Cory Booker of Newark had given him throughout his journey as a new business owner.

And one point Murray was welcomed with applause.

"I don't see myself as a minority," he said, "I see myself as a businessman who happens to be a minority."

Newark Mayor Cory Booker, a well-known advocate of change and renewal in Newark, said Profeta was being true to his name.

"Paul, your name is Profeta but you are a prophet," he quipped.

Without minimizing the problems of a poor economy and crime in the city, Booker told the crowd the future still looks bright in Essex County.



New coffee shop owner John Murray, second from left, is joined in his shop by members of the Profeta Urban Investment Foundation that provided seed money for the venture. From left are Bill Kohn, in-house counsel; Murray; Paul Profeta, founder of the foundation; and Steve Coleman, CFO for the foundation.

"Every generation has had these challenges and times of crisis," Booker said. "Not that we do not have our problems, but I see people who are so audacious in this city, people who are standing up for the ideals of America. Not only will we survive, but we will thrive here."

Indeed, walking along Halsey Street is reminiscent of the Lower East Side or Soho of years past. Already, the arts community is sprouting new growth with galleries and small cafes in the area.

Local and successful artist Kevin Darmanie, who specializes in oversized, comic-book inspired pieces, said he believes the area already has a vibrant energy and new businesses will help to spread the word.

"I have been coming in to the cafe," he said. "I come in to use the free Internet, and I love their tea. I go to a lot of art galleries in the area, and this is another great place for artists to congregate."

Through Profeta's new foundation, which he has seeded with \$1 million of his own money, and other creative efforts, the Newark of the '50s, vibrant and welcoming to people from all over the county and state, just may be having resurgence.

Steve Coleman of South Orange and the chief financial officer of Profeta's private business said when he first heard of the idea to partially fund minority owned businesses in Newark he thought it was a good idea.

"I have been working with Paul for 22 years," he said. "When he said he wanted to do this, I had to agree. There is nothing better than giving back."

And as this Maplewood son sees it, dreaming big in Essex County is one way to give back to his community.

"What we are trying to do is just change perspectives," said Profeta. "We have begun."

As the fiscal realities stress all parts of the county, the state, and the city, there is still a dream being played out right in Newark on a small street lined with the shops of small business owners and artists.

This new venture, in the heart of Newark, may be the result of modern day pioneers who are trying to rebuild the community one small cave at a time.

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