

New Coffee Stand at Sentara Breaks Grounds

Filling void at hospital, New Orleans Creole Coffee brings flavors found nowhere else in the area.

By Melissa James, York County Contributor

Banana bourbon frappuccino. Powdered-sugar beignet coffee. African nectar tea. Never heard of them (but wish you had)? Get in line at New Orleans Creole Coffee, a kiosk that opened in December at Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center in York County.

“It’s been a challenge keeping up with the inventory, we’re running out so fast,” said owner Woodrow “Woody” Jones. “People love the variety of flavors... it’s totally different than Starbucks. It’s plant-based chicory coffee, which is the flavor of New Orleans.”

New Orleans Creole is the Sentara’s first coffee shop, and it’s hard to say who was more delighted to see it open—the hospital patients or the staff. No one saw the need more than Woody, who himself has worked at Sentara for the past 15 years. His roles have included ER administrative associate, phlebotomist and OR tech. But it’s Woody’s role as parent where the coffee shop’s story actually begins.

A devoted single father, Woody had been raising Juan (pronounced Joo-Wan), now 18, Jeremiah, 11, and Kristina, 7, in the area since leaving his native New Orleans just three weeks before Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Things were going well until fall 2017, when Juan developed a relentless cough, dizziness and shortness of breath. The high school sophomore had always been in good health, with 4.0 GPA and talent on the football field. Woody took him to see Dr. David Cash, an emergency room physician he knew at Sentara. After trying a variety of antibiotics for Juan’s apparent pneumonia, Dr. Cash ordered a heart X-ray.

Juan arrived pale and weak, unable to keep food down. And then they saw the X-ray: his heart was huge and swollen. Dr. Cash diagnosed Juan with viral cardiomyopathy, a rare kind of heart failure strikes healthy young adults without heart problems, most often males. While some of these patients improve on their own, the others, like Juan, continue to worsen. Juan was admitted to CHKD and placed on a heart transplant list with priority status—meaning he wouldn’t be going home without a new heart.

His life changed on Jan. 17, 2018, when a heart became available. It was brought in from a Tennessee teenager who’d been an avid soccer player. When Juan first awoke after the surgery, he already felt better than he had in months. He threw himself in physical therapy and conditioning, set on returning to football before the year ended. He got morale boosts along the way from some UVA football players who came to visit him, as well as a private chat alongside his dad with Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk—arranged by the Make-A-Wish Foundation. His greatest takeaway from the conversation was that a person’s character is more vital than riches or intelligence.





This past fall, Juan played in every football game, starting on offense in several and also playing defense in each. He even rejoined the wrestling team. Coach Mike Faus called Juan's return since the transplant "nothing short of inspirational." Woody, too, has inspired the community through his faith and fatherly devotion.

"There are saints who walk around on this earth, and Juan's dad is a saint," said Dr. James Gangemi, the pediatric heart surgeon.

During Woody's many months at medical facilities with Juan, he noticed how popular the coffee shops were. And he noted how his own hospital lacked one. He also realized that it would be smart to supplement his existing income to have emergency funds for medical bills.

"I wanted to do a coffee shop because my grandmother in New Orleans used to talk about coffee. She loved coffee," said Woody. The idea was brewing, but Woody wanted to do it properly. So he turned to Launchpad, a business incubator sponsored by The Greater Williamsburg Partnership (communities of York County, James City County, and the City of Williamsburg). Launchpad provides a comprehensive support process designed to assist and accelerate the successful development and growth of young companies—through business education, targeted services, networking, and other programs designed to help the entrepreneur.

"After Launchpad, it was smooth sailing: talking to my lawyer, doing research, making sure everything was good to go. Launchpad is wonderful. You just have to listen, learn, and do what they tell you to do," said Woody.



Woody cuts the ribbon at his new business during his grand opening on Dec. 17, assisted by Sheila Noll of the York County Board of Supervisors

By all accounts, the grand opening of New Orleans Creole Coffee was a success. Woody is already busy expanding the menu, and hopes to have a storefront location in the future.

"I would love to see the business grow and even surpass Starbucks. Seeing that I created this, and now it's up and running, is actually a dream come true."