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A Restaurant Takes On the Opioid Crisis, One Worker at a Time

A Kentucky couple realized that restaurants have an unusual power to help addicted people recover, and created DV8 Kitchen to hire, train and encourage them.

By Priya Krishna

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LEXINGTON, Ky. — Five years ago, Rob and Diane Perez found a spoon and a ramekin in the trash at a branch of their Saul Good Restaurant & Pub, and realized that their top server was doing heroin in the bathroom.

They had already lost the first manager to join their staff; she died in jail after trying to obtain prescription pills illegally. But they didn't put the pieces together until last year, when they got a call that a cook would not be coming into work because he had overdosed on opioids and died.

They realized that they had lost 13 employees to addiction over 10 years, and that half the cases were related to opioid drugs. "They were not fired," Mr. Perez said. "They were dead."

So Mr. Perez, 53, and Ms. Perez, 51, decided to take a nationwide crisis into their own hands. Last September, they opened DV8 Kitchen, a restaurant that not only hires people in treatment for addiction to opioids or other substances, but also focuses its entire business model on recovery, using the restaurant setting as a tool for rehabilitation.



Rob and Diane Perez, who own three other restaurants, in front of the mural outside DV8 Kitchen. They opened it after losing 13 employees to addiction over 10 years; half the cases were related to opioid drugs. Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

An estimated 115 Americans die every day of opioid overdose, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One of the hardest-hit states is Kentucky, which in 2016 recorded nearly 24 opioid-related deaths for every 100,000 people, almost double the national rate, the National Institute on Drug Abuse reports.

Here in Lexington, a charming, pasture-draped city known around the world for its horse farms, there hasn't been a single day since July 2016 when paramedics have not administered Narcan, the lifesaving drug for opioid overdoses, to at least one person, said Lt. Jessica Bowman, a public information officer for the Lexington Fire Department.

Restaurant culture has long been steeped in alcohol and drugs. Many places offer free shift drinks, and servers earn tips in cash, the common medium for drug transactions. Mr. Perez, who started working in the business at 19, struggled for a decade from alcohol addiction but has been sober since 1990. In restaurants, he said: "There are more late nights than early mornings, and it's acceptable to have a hangover. You think all this is fun and normal, because everyone else has that lifestyle."

Still, the Perezes saw restaurants' unusual potential for helping addicted people recover. "There's customer service, culinary, baking, finances," Mr. Perez said. "We can teach you any of these businesses from scratch."

Cooking, in particular, he sees as “100 percent therapy.” In making bread, for example, “there is something magic about kneading the dough side by side with someone else, not making eye contact,” he said. “It is very tactile and freeing.”



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A number of restaurants in the United States are giving workers with addictions a second chance, including Sérénité in Medina, Ohio, and Archie’s Grill in Shelburne, Vt. The Perezes visited several of them, but thought the standards that some set for troubled employees were too low.

“My guess is that they wanted to meet people where they were,” Mr. Perez said, but “I didn’t see a spark in people’s eyes, or pride in the food. I didn’t see professional behavior. I could always tell who the heroin addicts were.” Many of these places, including one of the couple’s favorites, Blothead Pizza in Cincinnati, ended up closing.

At DV8 Kitchen, one of four restaurants they own, the Perezes pay just over \$12 an hour on average, which Mr. Perez said is 20 percent above the rate at many local fast-food chain restaurants. In turn, employees are held to exacting standards. There is no bar, and a zero-tolerance policy for tardiness. Tips are pooled, then added directly to paychecks, so no cash is exchanged. (The name is a play on the word “deviate” — a reference to the employees’ aim to detour from their pasts and rebuild their lives.)

The couple also hire from and work directly with treatment centers, adding an additional level of accountability for employees.

“We are not certified experts on this, nor do we claim to be,” Ms. Perez said. “We are just providing the piece of the puzzle that is giving people a job right away when they are getting clean.”

The restaurant, opened with \$300,000 invested by local people who believe in the cause, is a plant-filled, garagelike space in a strip mall within walking distance of the area’s three largest rehabilitation centers. Its walls and tables are adorned with colorful graffiti by local artists. An open bakery lets customers watch employees as they pound dough into brioche buns.

The menu is simple — sandwiches, salads, eggs, baked goods — and intended to teach widely applicable cooking skills. Employees greet every guest, bus every table, learn to cook sous vide, and bake their own bread for the sandwiches.

The restaurant serves breakfast and lunch, with a simple menu highlighted by a vast selection of homemade pastries. The cinnamon rolls, made with croissant dough to add more labor to the process, have drawn a cult following.

Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

On a recent afternoon, a sign in the kitchen read: “Attention all staff: When cutting cucumbers, use the mandoline at the specific size, every time. Failure to do so will result in termination.” Mr. Perez sheepishly admitted that he occasionally calls the restaurant to make sure that the person answering the phone is greeting customers enthusiastically.

Initially, business at DV8 Kitchen was slow: The restaurant, which proclaims its mission on its website and on the front of each menu, lost \$30,000 in its first five months. “When people heard ‘second chance,’ they were either concerned with their personal safety, or they were thinking second chance means second rate,” Mr. Perez said.

The couple soon realized that they couldn’t offer dinner service, since most of their employees — 18 out of 23 are in what Mr. Perez calls active recovery — had to attend support meetings at night.

The Perezes leaned into breakfast and lunch, pushing the homemade breads and baked goods. By March, they said, the restaurant was turning a profit. It started selling the bread wholesale to other restaurants, and DV8 was one of a few places in town that catered breakfast. The hefty cinnamon rolls, made with croissant dough to add more labor to the process, have drawn a cult following.

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Marsha Elliott, an office manager at Berea College, south of Lexington, said she originally stopped by DV8 because she had heard the food was good; she only later learned about its purpose. Now, she visits whenever she is in the area. On a recent afternoon, she carried a box containing two cream cheese muffins (her favorite) and four cinnamon rolls.

“You wouldn’t pay \$4 for a cinnamon roll anywhere else here, but I don’t mind paying a little extra to help people get back on their feet,” she said.

Another regular, Jason Johnston, the director of teaching and learning at the University of Kentucky College of Social Work, had the opposite experience: He came because of the social mission, then discovered that “the food was actually really good,” he said. (Mr. Johnston had two cinnamon rolls on his table for one.)

He said he brings friends to DV8, but often doesn’t tell them that the place is staffed by workers recovering from addiction. When he reveals the truth, “they are always surprised,” he said.

After nine months in business, DV8 seems to be serving its dual purpose as restaurant and recovery setting.

Dan Rison, 29, who greets customers and serves dishes, among other tasks, said he first started taking pain medication when he was 14, after an operation intended to correct a birth defect. He eventually became an alcoholic, was arrested and pleaded guilty to cashing a forged check, and went to jail.

When he got out, he was unable to hold down a job for more than a few months, and once he did find one that he liked, at an antique store, “there was a lot of drug and alcohol abuse during the workday,” he said. “I stopped caring whether or not I lived.”

This is his first restaurant job, and the environment at DV8, he said, builds camaraderie.

Dan Rison, center, who greets customers and serves dishes, among other tasks, started taking pain medication as a teenager, and eventually went to jail. Now 29, he is studying for a bachelor's degree in social work. Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

“In the darkest part of my addiction, I isolated myself,” he said. “Here, if you withdraw, the guest will notice you aren’t bringing their food or asking how they are doing. Your co-workers will notice if you don’t have a smile on your face.” At DV8, he added, he doesn’t have to hide his past — everything is out in the open.

Mr. Rison is 19 credits away from earning a bachelor’s degree in social work, and would like to earn his master’s in the same subject, so he can give others with addictions the kind of help he received.

Jennifer Ratliff, 42, a cashier and cook, used to work at a Cracker Barrel and a Waffle House, “but a lot of people came in high,” she said. “There was no understanding or togetherness.”

After her husband killed himself several years ago, she turned to opioids to “numb the feeling,” she said, and began selling heroin. Arrested and convicted on drug charges, she lost custody of her three children and served time in prison.

Working the grill, she said, “is a huge coping skill for me.” Making burgers, “adding the spices, the egg on top, making the homemade Dijonnaise,” and then seeing customers’ reaction when they take a bite, brings “a sense of accomplishment,” she said.

Hoang Dong, DV8’s general manager, who worked with Mr. and Ms. Perez at their Saul Good restaurants, said he was concerned at first “about whether or not these people were going to be aggressive, or trainable, or relapse,” he said. Instead, “everyone is wanting to turn their lives around, and they hold each other accountable.”

The most difficult part, he said, is that the restaurant doesn’t have enough jobs to keep up with the number of applicants. “There was a guy I had to turn down from employment because we were full, and he died of overdose a week later,” he said. “I know there is not much we could have done, but I felt horrible. What if I had hired him, and he had a chance?”

Tiffany Forden, 38, says she was addicted to marijuana. She now works as a supervising cook at DV8; she makes and packages her own jams and apple butter for the restaurant.
Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Local treatment centers are thrilled about their members' progress, and how closely they are able to work with DV8.

Jerod Thomas, the chief executive of one center, Shepherd's House, said that while he had been approached by other employers about hiring people recovering from addiction, no one except Mr. and Ms. Perez wanted to take such an active role in treatment. Other owners "may give somebody a second chance, but that's not their motive," he said. "Their motive is to get the work done. Rob wants to get the work done, too, he's just invested in offering support, and being a part of the treatment team."

Several local restaurateurs who have also had workers with addictions said that approach seemed difficult to sustain.

The Perezes have "combined the toughest industry with the toughest social problem we have," said Ouita Michel, the chef and an owner of Holly Hill Inn, just outside Lexington. She added that she would love to hire recovering addicts, but only after they worked at DV8. "That's why the work DV8 is doing is so valuable."

Debbie Long, who owns Dudley's on Short, recalled hiring a man who was highly recommended by his treatment center. "We noticed a decline in productivity, and then the police showed up all of a sudden because he had some outstanding warrants for his arrest," she said. "We have not heard from him, and we don't know how to get in touch. You feel bad, but what do you do?"

"Running a restaurant is difficult in and of itself," she said, "and then you add the employee element, *plus* knowing these individuals have a past and can relapse at any time. It's challenge on top of challenge."

The low turnover rate at DV8 Kitchen suggests it can be otherwise. Only five of the 25 or so recovering people they have hired have left because of a relapse or firing. (The national turnover rate for the hospitality industry, by comparison, was 70 percent in 2016, according to the National Restaurant Association.)

The restaurant holds a mandatory workshop for employees every Tuesday. Here, the therapist Katherine Middleton leads a discussion about healing from trauma.
Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Mr. and Ms. Perez have been lobbying the state government for money to help open other DV8 restaurants, and for incentives for businesses to hire people in recovery from addictions.

Every Tuesday at 3 p.m., the restaurant holds a mandatory workshop for employees. Lawyers explain how to get criminal convictions expunged from records, accountants talk personal finance and professional athletes discuss teamwork.

At one recent workshop, Vitale Buford, a transformational coach who was addicted to prescription drugs, quizzed workers about the everyday troubles they take for granted.

“What are you tolerating?” Ms. Buford asked.

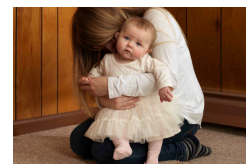
The employees scribbled down their answers: not getting custody of their children, being 50 pounds overweight, having strained relationships with parents. Then Ms. Buford told them to write all their excuses for tolerating these problems on a piece of paper, and toss it into the garbage.

As they turned, one by one, toward the trash bin to discard their worries, the backs of their uniforms became visible.

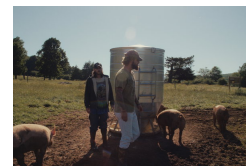
Inscribed on the shirts was a single phrase: “Life changing food.”

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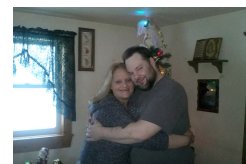
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