



## Path Ways

*Paper Planes Café at Vancouver International Airport was created to offer employment opportunities to the neurodiverse.*

TJ CHEN POURS YOGURT from a bulk bag into small to-go cups, carefully checking that each contains the same amount. Behind him, a trio of flat-screen TVs mounted high above the work area silently air different sports, while pop music plays quietly in the background. At the far end of the long counter, another employee takes orders for coffee and snacks.

When a customer asks Chen where the nearest washroom is, he looks to his manager for help. She steps in and answers. Afterward, she tells Chen he must be prepared to answer general questions about the airport, then she sends him off with clear instructions to spend 20 minutes exploring the area around the café. “Do you have your notebook?” she asks, her tone matter of fact.

This is just one example of the job skills employees learn at Paper Planes Café. The social-enterprise coffee shop, which opened in October in Vancouver International Airport, is run by Pacific Autism Family Network (PAFN) and staffed by 12 to 15 neurodiverse

workers—people who have autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or brains that otherwise process information differently. Each employee spends up to six months working in the café, earning a regular paycheque while learning how to make cappuccinos, clear tables, and stock coolers, along with practising soft skills such as managing time, staying organized, and communicating with the public. For many of the employees, like Chen, this is their first job.

“It’s a great stepping-stone program,” Sergio Cocchia says. “It’s goal-oriented employment.” He and his wife, Wendy Lisogar-Cocchia, co-founded PAFN, and together they run downtown Vancouver’s Century Plaza Hotel, which has long offered both job-shadowing opportunities and permanent roles to neurodiverse people. Their aim is for up to 50 employees annually to work at Paper Planes, then secure positions elsewhere. “We succeed when we get more and more people into employment,” Cocchia says. “We have an employment specialist

who will work with them and their future employer for a period of time after they’re placed. So weekly check-ins, helping to communicate if something is a challenge, helping to advise or train the fellow staff members if there’s an issue around the neurodiversity.”

Employers have much to gain by accessing this largely untapped workforce. Across Canada, Cocchia says, there are around half a million unemployed or underemployed neurodiverse people. “These young people we have working are very dedicated,” he says. “They take this seriously. They want this job. They want to be successful. They want people to encourage them and be proud of them.”

Cocchia, who has an autistic son, has never liked the puzzle piece often used to symbolize autism spectrum disorder because it indicates that something is missing. “There’s nothing missing with our kids,” he says. “They just need support.” Contrasting the puzzle piece is PAFN’s paper-plane imagery, which suggests support

through a gentle boost. “My daughter and I will fight over who came up with it, but I believe it was me,” Cocchia says with a laugh. “With that little boost, there’s a whole flight that you can take, a whole path that you can do, and it isn’t some huge intervention. It’s as simple as that little boost.”

“That little lift” is how Tamara Vrooman, president and CEO of Vancouver International Airport, describes the café’s concept, adding that everyone has needed a helping hand at some point. She talks about “the dignity of work,” noting “how important meaningful work is to self-worth, to confidence.” She and Cocchia each stress that all employees should be compensated fairly for their work, and they both mention YVR’s commitment to being a living wage employer.

Vrooman is proud that YVR has partnered with PAFN to provide a rent-free space for Paper Planes, in the domestic arrivals area. “It’s a great space,” she says. “It’s a gem.” She emphasizes how the airport strives to be as welcoming as

possible to the 25 million passengers who go through each year, along with the 26,000 people who work there.

TJ Chen is happy to be one of those employees. He’s now comfortable at YVR, but he admits to feeling anxious during Paper Planes’ opening days back in the fall, a whirlwind of brewing espressos, restocking goods, wiping tables, dealing with garbage, and washing dishes. “But it turns out this café is absolutely great,” he says—though he’s still making progress on greeting customers. “At first, I didn’t say ‘welcome.’ But now I do sometimes.” Family and friends are pleased he’s holding down his first job, and he’s looking ahead to long-term prospects, possibly in the restaurant industry, housekeeping, or gardening.

For the time being, Chen feels content to keep learning and practising new skills in his position at the café. “It’s like home,” he says. “Working a job is like home.”

—Sheri Radford, illustration by Francesco Zorzi