

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Cannon Coffee Brookline, Pa.

Nathan Mallory issued a disclaimer before we began our conversation. “I’m the oddest person you’ll ever meet. My energy goes where other people’s doesn’t.” He is too modest. That energy, along with that of his partner, Ben Haake, has created a coffee house called Cannon Coffee and furthered a sense of community in Brookline.

“When I bought my house a few blocks away on Woodbourne Avenue five years ago, I bought a ‘structure.’ I purchased it because it was cheap and accessible to other parts of the city, but it was not presented to me as part of a neighborhood.” Now, as a business owner and a board member of the Chamber of Commerce and the South Pittsburgh Development Corporation, Mallory works to nurture that very feeling of a community.

The shop is located at 802 Brookline Boulevard, near the war monument for which it is named. The “Boulevard,” as residents call it, is six blocks of eclectic shops. There are no Starbucks here, but you will find a Chinese restaurant, a Mexican butcher shop, Pita Land (whose tender breads are found all over Pittsburgh), a few more restaurants, newsstands, bakeries and coffee shops, and few saloons. Residents seem pleased to have a main street for strolling, and they patronize their independently owned shops. It appears to be a neighborhood on its way up, rather than down.

Cannon Coffee opened February 3, 2010, two days before the Big Snow Storm. That worked to the advantage of the two young owners.

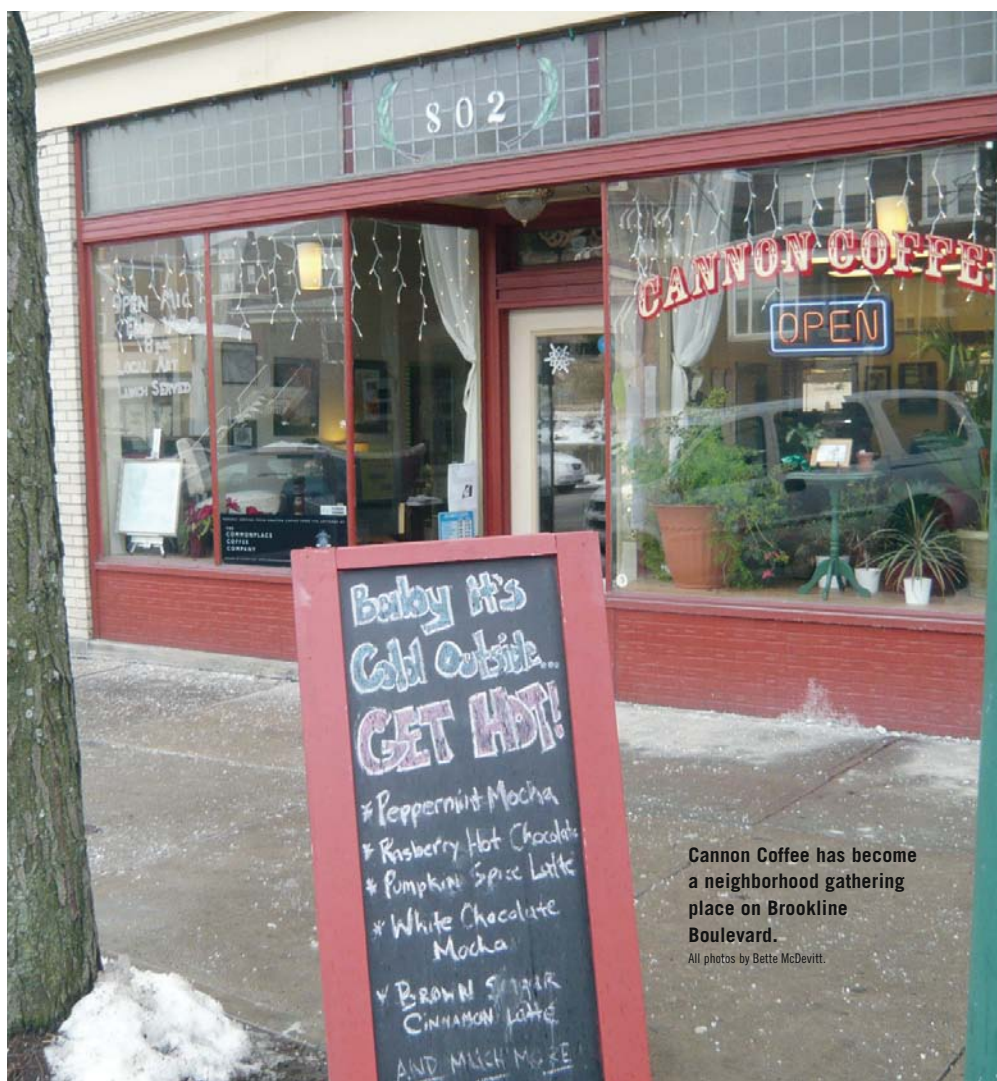
“We did really well, because people couldn’t get any place in their cars,” said Mallory, “but they could walk here. We were the hot chocolate center and, immediately, we became a common ground for the community.”

You feel that common ground when you step inside. The staff greets you warmly, people are chatting across tables, some are snuggled into overstuffed chairs, and you feel that you can

linger for a long time over a big cup of reasonably priced café latte. It is a welcoming atmosphere.

The two owners met while working as wine stewards, servers, and sommeliers at the Grand Concourse. They were eager to set out on their own, to move from the world of wine to the world of coffee, “a more pedestrian world,” as Mallory calls it. “Everyone can talk about coffee, from a simple cup on to espresso.”

During a conversation with Mallory’s mother, who still lives in his hometown of Titusville, the young men began to dream about having a coffee shop somewhere. “Just

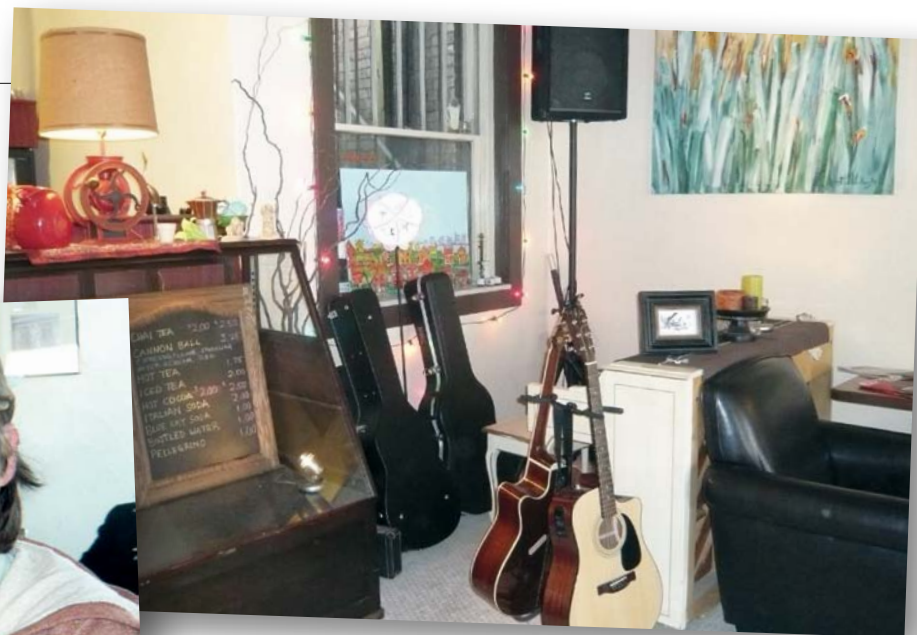


Cannon Coffee has become a neighborhood gathering place on Brookline Boulevard.

All photos by Bette McDevitt.

RIGHT: Open Mic night at Cannon Coffee is popular with poets and musicians.

BELOW: Nathan Mallory and Ben Haake, owners of Cannon Coffee.



do it then,” said his mother. “Just do it, I’ll get the loan for you.” And she did, in spite of her worries about how many cups of coffee they would have to sell to meet the rent.

Mallory and Haake have others to thank for the realization of their dream, including the landlord, who did all the renovations they asked for, because he wanted them as tenants. “He gave us outlets every five feet,” said Haake. And they are grateful to the community of Brookline. “We have this quirky, amazing, group that advocates for the Boulevard,” said Haake. “People come in here every day, to support the process. In this neighborhood, opening our doors created a buzz. There was something new and shiny on the Boulevard.”

Helen Ortmann, who lives in the neighborhood, was drawn to the coffee house by two things. “They have a chair that is exactly like one that my grandmother had in her house, and they have Fair Trade coffee.” The term refers to coffee grown by a collective of farmers, for which they receive a fair price, without a

local talent, and it is amazingly good.” It can be poetry, music, or whatever talent has been waiting for that very moment. The owners call the Wednesday evening gathering their “reward for the week.” Sometimes Haake sings for the audience.

Some talent is displayed on the walls. Bob McCullough, who lives nearby, was hanging his artwork as we spoke. “I paint houses inside and outside, and I paint on canvas,” he said. He is a café regular—“Sometimes three or four times a day,” he added.

The coffee roasting was a big issue for the young partners. “We wanted to find a local affordable roaster, so that people in Brookline could buy a cup of coffee,” said Haake. They were thrilled to find Commonplace Coffee, a coffee roasting company founded by two young men in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

A nonprofit agency, Renew Pittsburgh, whose mission is to revitalize Pittsburgh neighborhoods from within, has taken note of Cannon Coffee. Director Kevin Acklin has

middleman taking the profits.

Ortmann often attends the Open Mic sessions on Wednesday evening. “It’s all

invited Mallory and Haake to establish a similar coffeehouse in Beechview. They have secured a rent-free location courtesy of a property owner who has a few vacant storefronts.

“We’ll get it started, as a catalyst for other businesses to move into the neighborhood,” said Mallory. “Ben and I will run it for the first year and provide training, in conjunction with the community needs of Beechview. In the second year, we’ll hire a manager, and then the third year, the community takes it over and creates a true business from a nonprofit.”

Meanwhile, they will still work at building their own business. “People tell us it takes a year to create a successful business,” said Haake with the beginning of a grin. “Some say five years. I say ‘Oh, please, not five years, just one year!’” Then he broke into a big, open-faced smile. ☀

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