

## Room with a viewpoint

by [Hal L. Millard](#) in Vol. 14 / Iss. 43 on 05/21/2008

At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss Firestorm Café & Books, slated to open May 24, as just another downtown java spot in a town that's swimming in them—not to mention that it's tucked away in a corner of downtown with little visibility where previous businesses have gone belly-up.

"This town is filled with coffee shops; if that's all we were, we would never make it," says co-owner **Kila Donovan**, who's been busy renovating the premises with partner **Evan Scott**. The 2,100 square foot space at 48 Commerce St. (adjacent to the Thirsty Monk pub) was last home to Eaties Cereal Bar.



**Building community:** Evan Scott, along with the other co-owners of Firestorm Café & Books, hopes to put a new spin on the downtown-java-shop concept. Photo By Jonathan Welch

But if Firestorm is uniquely Asheville, it's anything but typical, the owners say. Sure, it will offer a wide range of coffee and teas, as well as selected baked goods, gourmet panini sandwiches and wraps. And there'll be free computers to use and free wireless Internet access to draw customers. But to further diversify, the business plans to offer a wide range of books, zines and other independently published materials, including a selection of children's fare that's largely unavailable in the area. It also will offer discounted course books required by many

local alternative schools, such as those catering to the healing arts.

The café's back half will be partitioned off to provide meeting space for community groups or events. Currently, notes Donovan, there's a dearth of such space downtown, and groups often have to scramble to find a gathering place. There'll be a sliding scale, with nonprofits paying less. Sponsors of for-profit events will have to pay a percentage of their take, says Donovan, while nonprofits will pay an hourly fee ranging from \$5 to \$15 an hour. The space features a comfortable meeting area with plush chairs, a small stage, a PA system and projection screen.

Besides meetings, Donovan and her partners envision things like book readings, acoustic-music performances and film screenings in the space. And though it's not even officially open yet, she adds, the café has already hosted many meetings and events, with several more already scheduled for the coming months.

### Shifting the paradigm

But what really sets the café apart, says Donovan, is its business model, pioneered by Red Emma's Bookstore Coffeehouse in Baltimore. With business-planning help through Mountain BizWorks' Foundations Program, and in collaboration with consultants from the Asheville-based Southern Appalachian Center for Cooperative Ownership, Firestorm was officially established on May 1 as a nonprofit, worker-owned LLC. Worker/owners—there are 10 so far, ranging in age from 19 up into their 30s—will share equally in the business. Many have

a background in community activism and organization through such groups as Asheville LETS (Local Exchange Trading System), Citizens' Awareness Asheville, the Asheville Global Report and Sustainable Asheville.

The worker-owner model is gaining traction, says Donovan, among people who've never had that level of input into their daily work.

"Many of us have worked retail and restaurants for years with little or no job security and creative input," notes Firestorm worker/owner **Matthew Sherwood**. "Becoming part of an owner cooperative gives us control of our working conditions and allows us to incorporate our ideas and ethics into the business model."

And before long, the business hopes to achieve a level of viability that will enable it to pay a "living wage," a rarity among downtown cafés, say Donovan and Scott. In Asheville, that works out to \$11.35 an hour for someone working 40 hours a week, 50 weeks per year, according to Just Economics, a locally based grass-roots group. "We also hope to get the workers health care," says Donovan. "People think we're crazy to think we can pay our worker/owners a living wage, but we think we can eventually do it."

One good way to get off on the right foot is to avoid getting mired in startup debt. So far, says Donovan, the entire enterprise has been aided and abetted by significant donations of volunteer labor and supplies, and financed by low- or no-interest loans from enthusiastic community members

"who believe in what we're doing." The only real encumbrance to date is a couple of thousand dollars' worth of credit-card debt, she says.

And in keeping with Firestorm's goal of promoting local self-sufficiency, notes Donovan, any net profits will be used to endow a grant program to assist local community groups dedicated to sustainability in its various forms.

Both Donovan and Scott say they're not fans of the late-night bar scene—another reason they and their fellow worker/owners feel they can fill a niche by catering to folks who share those sentiments.

"Because I have to be up early most mornings for work, a late night at the bar isn't usually a good idea," says **Eli Welch**, who'll be doing some of the baking at Firestorm. "So I'm happy that there will be a place downtown with evening events that start early and aren't focused on alcohol."

Firestorm Café & Books will hold its grand opening Saturday, May 24. Festivities will include live music by Braidstream from noon to 2 p.m., kids' activities from 3 to 5 p.m., and additional acoustic performances that evening. The café will also offer free samples of its organic and fair-trade coffees throughout the day.