

Doughnuts and job skills for Portland youth, in a bright pink truck

by John Foyston, The Oregonian
Wednesday July 08, 2009, 8:50 PM



Motoya

The hard-to-miss Urban Opportunities van is patrolling Portland this summer with a can't-miss load: philanthropy, as in helping local youths; entrepreneurship, as in starting an innovative nonprofit-business alliance; and doughnuts, as in Voodoo.

Polly Bangs was having a tough time turning her bouncing pink baby loose.

"Troy, be sure and call me if you guys need anything," she said as she unplugged the power cord for the refrigerator and coffee maker that was tethering the bright pink Urban Opportunities doughnut van to the Voodoo Doughnut Too parking lot.

Driver Troy Lowder, an Urban Opportunities project leader, and his crew -- Cecilia Lopez, 17, and Janelle Kilbourne, 20 -- had just loaded 10 dozen of Voodoo Doughnut's finest and freshest into a tall aluminum rack and were headed for downtown Portland on the van's first official day of business last month.

"Are you good on gas? And wear your seat belts! Cecilia, are you belted in?"

Bangs comes by her protective-mom role honestly. She developed and directs Urban Opportunities, a job-readiness training program that helps about 100 kids a year from five Portland-area high schools. Urban Opportunities -- which recently received a three-year, \$251,000 grant from the voter-created Children's Investment Fund -- helps kids at risk of dropping out to learn job skills and find jobs.

Before that, Bangs owned Pasta Bangs restaurant on North Mississippi Avenue, which had a job training program for homeless youth and employed almost 50 kids during the three years she owned it. She sold the restaurant in 2007 to start Urban Opportunities, which has since become part of the 20-year-old nonprofit Oregon Outreach Inc.



Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian Polly Bangs (right)

started Urban Opportunities in 2007 to, in a nutshell, get kids working and earning. In her latest venture, Cecilia Lopez, 17 (left), Janelle Kilbourne, 20, and others are gaining valuable job experience while making minimum wage.

The new doughnut van is yet another way to get kids working and earning, Bangs says. "There aren't many jobs out there right now," she said.

Bangs came up with the idea for the van in April, just about the time a woman called and asked how she could help Urban Opportunities. Bangs and the prospective donor met for coffee, and the woman liked the idea of the van so much that she told Bangs she would raise the money to buy it -- which she did in three weeks. In fact, she raised \$11,000, Bangs said, and the well-used former Northwest Natural Gas Co. van bought through Craigslist cost a third of that.

Donated materials and labor helped refurbish the van, which was outfitted with counters, paneling, wiring, storage space and vending windows on each side by Rob Roy of Recycledelic, a Portland metal fabricator. Then it went to Diamond Truck Painting, where it received a coat of hot pink paint -- apparently not a color that was in stock, Bangs said -- for the bargain price of \$900.

Tres Shannon and Kenneth "Cat Daddy" Pogson, owners of Voodoo Doughnut, are enthusiastic about the van, as are the young people selling doughnuts from it.

"This is my first job," Cecilia Lopez said. "I was looking for a while, but it's really hard finding something in this economy, especially with no work experience -- this will give me the experience I need."

Lopez is a graduate of the Urban Opportunities program at Jefferson High School; her co-worker, Kilbourne, was referred from New Avenues for Youth, a Portland nonprofit. They are two of the eight youths who now have jobs -- at \$8.75 per hour -- on the van. Each will work two to three days a week for the next six months, after which a new group will sign on.

Doughnuts for sale

Get updates on the van's location at twitter.com/voodoodoughnut. To rent the van for parties, shop openings and other events, e-mail mobiledoughnutvan@gmail.com.

Three of the crew are political refugees from Nepal living in Portland with their parents, who are unemployed. "They're attending summer school at Benson (High School), and they're the breadwinners for their families," Bangs said. "There are language and culture differences that would've made it very hard for them to find jobs, if not for this opportunity."

The van and its crew are not only selling around town but also are available for rental for parties, shop openings and other events. They'll also appear at events such as Last Thursdays on Alberta Street and Sunday Parkways, when streets are closed to vehicular traffic. The next Sunday Parkway is July 19 in Northeast Portland.

"It's a great idea," said Voodoo Doughnut's Shannon. "We've been wanting to do something like this forever, but we've got about four gazillion other things to do. But the ice-cream-truck model is a good one, and we're glad to get the product out to more parts of Portland."

"Besides, this is a great way to give back to the community," said Pogson, who started the shop with Shannon in Old Town in 2003 and last year added a second shop in a former drive-in on Northeast Sandy Boulevard.

Voodoo Doughnut sells doughnuts to Urban Opportunities for less than wholesale; the van crew sells the pastries at prices ranging from \$1.25 for an old-fashioned doughnut to \$3 for a bacon maple bar. There are vegan doughnuts available, too.

They sell about 20 dozen a day and can sell as many as 60 dozen at street fairs and other events.

"This is such a known brand that it sells itself," Bangs said. "On a test run, we stopped for gas and some girls came up and wanted to buy doughnuts, and then the gas station attendant bought one, too."



Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian

On their first day in the Urban Opportunities doughnut van, Janelle Kilbourne (right) and Cecilia Lopez load their inventory of 10 dozen doughnuts. Van crew members have sold as many as 60 dozen doughnuts a day at street fairs and other events.

Sales pay for the youths and drivers -- the latter are Urban Opportunities employees -- and all extra money goes back to Urban Opportunities/Oregon Outreach Inc., which owns the van.

Crews will take the van out for two shifts a day, seven days a week, Bangs said, and she hopes that this van is just the first of several.

"I want a fleet," she said.

Visions of pink fleets may have been dancing in her head on the van's first day, but Bangs was very much in the moment as Lowder led Lopez and Kilbourne through the details of cleaning, stocking, inventorying and setting up the till.

"I'm so nervous," Bangs said. "They're just like my kids, and it's hard not to be in the van with them -- it's like the first day of school."

"Remember," she called to the crew as the truck rolled away, "you guys can always grab a rag and wipe things down if you're ever not busy. ... "

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