

Pulp

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Brewing Hope on Smallman Street

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If you're a fairly typical Pittsburgher who only passes through Smallman Street in the Strip District every week or so – say, Sunday morning or Saturday night – the road's long stretch of loading docks and produce ware-houses probably suggests to you only one of two things: It's where you park to go shopping, or it's where you park to go clubbing.

But today, in an otherwise unremarkable storehouse on the corner of Smallman and 20th, John Notte and his co-workers are pouring a small bucket's worth of green, raw coffee beans into a roaster that chews them up like so much raw meat and then sends the caramelized, nutty scent of roasted arabica straight into the air and up to the ceiling.

Notte is the head roaster for La Prima Espresso Company, one of the Pittsburgh area's finest coffee roasters. But the small bucket of green beans – not to mention the dozens of bulging, canvas coffee sacks in the back room – don't belong to La Prima at all. Their life began, in fact, on top of a lush, green hill in the mountains of Nicaragua, where a cooperative community of nearly 50 families have been farming coffee beans for the past two decades.

Today, the cooperative, which was very recently teetering on the edge of financial ruin, receives four times more money for their crop than they would if they were selling at world market prices. That's because Building New Hope – a tiny, Pittsburgh-based organization that operates out of a Point Breeze living room – is buying the beans at better than Fair Trade prices, meaning a minimum of \$1.26 a pound. You might say that the members of the cooperative, which is known as el Porvenir – the Future – are now some of the richest coffee farmers in their small part of the world. So who, exactly, is behind Building New Hope? And why are they buying so much coffee from a co-op in Central America?

"Literally, people were dying on the side of the road," says Barbara Wein, who founded the nonprofit with her husband, Jorge Portillo. Wein and I are sitting on leather couches at Café Bliss in Point Breeze, one of many coffee shops in Pittsburgh that now serves Café de Nicaragua, which is the end product of John Notte's green beans.

Wein explains that Donna Tabor, a Pittsburgher



GEOFF KELLY

Jorge Portillo fills the grinder at La Prima Espresso Company's Smallman Street loading dock with freshly roasted Café de Nicaragua. Portillo and his wife, Barbara Wein, are cofounders of Building New Hope, a nonprofit that buys coffee beans from El Porvenir farm cooperative in Nicaragua and distributes the finished product here in the United States.

who'd been sent to Nicaragua on a Peace Corps assignment, had been sending newspaper articles back home about Nicaraguan coffee farmers who'd lost their land and had been forced into debt after the global market became flooded with cheap robusta beans. Many gourmet coffee companies currently pay farmers between 60 and 70 cents a pound, which is actually less than the cost of production.

Tabor and Wein had worked on nonprofit projects in the past, and Tabor asked if Building New Hope – which was originally founded to help repatriate Salvadorian refugees – could

help with the coffee crisis. After all, coffee is the second largest U.S. import, after oil. And the United States, Wein learned, consumes an astonishing one fifth of the world's coffee. That makes Americans the largest coffee consumers on earth. Wein and her team of volunteers felt a responsibility, and suddenly Building New Hope had a fresh project on its hands.

"We started by taking little bits of coffee," Wein remembers.

But before long, Tabor sent a letter mentioning the cooperative of families who were in danger of losing their livelihoods. "She said it'd be great if we took the whole harvest," Wein remembers, laughing. "Thirty thousand pounds. I actually thought she'd made a typo, because she does that a lot. [Building New Hope] was just a small handful of people. Nobody knew anything about coffee."

Nonetheless, Wein and Portillo decided to come up with a solution.

First, Notte eagerly agreed to use La Prima's facilities to roast the beans at cost. Then, Building New Hope volunteers began pounding the pavement. Today, organic, shade-grown Nicaraguan beans are sold at the Quiet Storm in Garfield, the 61-C Café in Squirrel Hill, Crazy Mocha in Bloomfield, the East End Food Co-op, Whole Foods and a handful of other shops throughout the city and the outlying suburbs.

"I feel like this project is a vehicle for helping people realize that their choices have an impact," Wein says. "What we buy, what we sell and what we put in our bodies has an impact all over the world."

Local organizations have been quick to take up the cause as well. The Spanish Club of the University of Pittsburgh recently held a general fundraiser for Building New Hope at Baja Fresh in Oakland, and because of a particularly bountiful 2003 harvest, Notte has been putting in overtime at the Smallman Street roasting plant, where he and Portillo are now standing in a storage room and shaking their heads at the towering pile of beans still waiting to be roasted.

"In Central America," Portillo says, "you spit out a seed and it grows. But our goal is just to give [the farmers] what they say they need to survive. They're not very sophisticated. They don't need a lot of material things. They don't need a new car. They just need to survive."