

Temporary arts district in Norfolk ready for customers

NORFOLK

It's been eight years since Mary Joe Wilfong and a friend came up with the perfect name for the coffee shop and bakery she's always dreamed of opening. On Friday afternoon, Mary Cup of Joe will finally serve its first customer.

No matter how successful it is, the business will close just two days later. But if Wilfong's test run of sorts goes well, she hopes to soon launch a permanent coffee shop in roughly the same location.

Wilfong's is one of a handful of "pop-up" businesses that will temporarily set up shop on Granby Street just north of Brambleton Avenue this weekend. The pop-ups are part of a plan by the city and a consultant, Dallas-based urban planning firm Better Block, to quickly, cheaply and briefly revive a once-vibrant corridor, in hopes of inspiring permanent change.

For Wilfong, who has never owned a business, it's a chance to try Mary Cup of Joe with almost no risk.

"This was just sort of the perfect opportunity to see if this could really work," she said.

Wilfong is 47 and has three grown children. Professionally, she's done everything from managing a restaurant to working as an airline reservation agent. Right now, she's a registrar for Virtual Virginia, an online advanced placement school. She has always loved to bake, but it wasn't until she finished culinary school last year that Mary Cup of Joe felt achievable.

She found out about the Granby Street project when she visited the city's website for information on business licenses. She's been preparing for her pop-up debut ever since.

She spent Tuesday cleaning cobwebs and dust from the long-vacant storefront where she'll set up. Wednesday and Thursday included painting, building a temporary coffee bar, and lots and lots of baking at a borrowed commercial kitchen. Another Better Block volunteer and Wilfong's partner, Ben Mills, is handling the coffee.

By this afternoon, when the better block is unveiled, they'll be ready.

"This has been a long time coming," she said. "At this point, I can't imagine not fulfilling it."

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Source URL (retrieved on 04/18/2013 - 15:57): <http://hamptonroads.com/2013/04/temporary-arts-district-norfolk-ready-customers>