

Humble Heart: Thrift, Coffee, Love

The Humble Heart Thrift Store will be celebrating its 5th birthday on August 10, 2015. Five years ago, Michael Modrow Jr. was laid off from his job as a manager at Midas where he had worked for seven years. To get by, he started doing yard sales at his home, selling off a handful of personal things that he had collected over the years. Mike is an active member of his church. Upon hearing about Mike's situation, the church offered to give Mike permission to sell the variety of donated items that weren't a good fit for distribution to the homeless, such as furniture. Previously, the church had been giving these items away to a thrift store, but they were happy to give them to Mike to sell out of his home instead, granted he give the church a small percentage of the proceeds. Mike could see the potential for this business to grow and make a greater impact so he pulled together about \$3000 that he had from tax returns and rented a space in East Village, on the corner of 16th and Island. This was barely enough to get the place up and running and cover the first month of rent.



Mike and his father Michael Modrow Sr. set to work building up their new family business. Mike Jr. committed himself to the store completely while his father split his time between working as the church custodian, which he has done for the past 15 years, and working at the store. His father chose the name Humble Heart to pay homage to Jesus, the man with the ultimate humble heart. And the slogan, *Thrift, Coffee, Love*, captures the essence of the store quite well. In addition to the organic coffee, excellent deals, and eclectic selection, Mike makes sure that customers feel the love when they walk in.

Because it is a small family-run business, they have more flexibility to provide direct help to homeless people nearby. Thrift Stores like Salvation Army, for example, cannot give away merchandise to people in need. They have to sell their merchandise and then give the proceeds to the larger organization to distribute. At Humble Heart, however, homeless people walk in and ask, humbly, for a shirt or a pair of pants and Mike simply says “take what you need”.

In addition to building up the store downtown and offering access to essential items, Mike wanted to do more to support the homeless community nearby. He began hiring them as volunteer staff at Humble Heart, giving them vital work experience to build their resume and eventually get more stable jobs. He is currently renting part of his store to the Stand Up for Kids Ministry, which runs a vibrant center for homeless youth aged 12-21 where they can shower, use computers, lounge, and create art.

Everything at the Humble Heart Thrift Store is donated. And there is A LOT of stuff. But despite the abundant donations, the store doesn't make a profit. Each month they make just enough to pay the bills and keep up operations. Mike says it keeps them humble. But ultimately it's all about sacrifice. And although he hardly gets anything from the church anymore, Mike continues to donate a percentage of proceeds to the First Presbyterian Ladle Fellowship.



Almost four years ago, Mike and his father decided to open a second location to help increase their sales. They found the City Heights location, near the intersection of El Cajon Boulevard and Fairmount and felt it was too good to pass up. The location allowed Mike to dream bigger, to think about what the thrift store could grow into. He imagines the back parking lot as an event space where he could have a café, host auctions, fundraisers, and other community events. But staffing continues to be a challenge. Currently, all the staff at both locations are friends and volunteers.

Mike's dreams are now moving closer toward reality. Last month, City Heights CDC and the El Cajon Boulevard BIA worked closely with him to organize the recent “Take Back the Alley” placemaking event in City Heights. Mike granted the community permission to paint murals in the alley alongside Humble Heart, re-paint his sign, and host a temporary parklet, with live bands and seating, in front of the shop. The store's all-volunteer staff even set up a BBQ in the alley and sold hot dogs on the day of the event. Mike is thrilled about the bright colors in the community mural and hopes to carry this theme over to his outdoor space, the future site of the Humble Heart Coffee Shop.



Their lease at the downtown store expires in August and there has been talk about raising rents. If that happens, they might lose that building. But Mike isn't too worried about the future. He has learned a lot in five years. Whatever happens, Mike is happy and excited for the next chapter of this adventure. He's convinced that if someone made a TV show about the store, people would watch it because there is always some kind of drama. Who knows, maybe someone will take him up on this prime time offer, but in the meantime, come visit Humble Heart to enjoy a cup of organic coffee, good conversation, and a new-used item. You are sure to find what you need.

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