



MEREDITH HERALD

Volume XXVIII, Issue 21

Educating Women To Excel

March 29, 2006

Meredith's New Hangout

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Meredith's Weekly Weather

WEDNESDAY Sunny
High 69/ Low 46

THURSDAY Sunny
High 73/ Low 51

FRIDAY Partly Cloudy
High 74/ Low 58

SATURDAY Scattered T-storms
High 73/ Low 55

SUNDAY Partly Cloudy
High 74/ Low 53

MONDAY Isolated T-storms
High 74/ Low 53

TUESDAY Partly Cloudy
High 76/ Low 52

SARAH JACKSON
Contributing Writer

When you walk through the door of the Royal Bean, the new coffee shop across the street from Meredith College, the second thing you notice is the familiar smell of fresh roasted coffee. The first thing you notice is the feeling of calm that washes over you as you take in the cool colors and the relaxed atmosphere.

This feeling is exactly what Amanda LaRoque wants you to experience. LaRoque, a Class of 2000 Meredith graduate and the owner/barista of Royal Bean, felt an immediate sense of calmness and rightness when she first stepped into the building, though at the time it was a gutted video gaming hangout.

"I was in Ben and Jerry's one night and saw a note on the window [of the erstwhile video gaming spot]. I saw they were selling things and made a mental note to call them the next day because I needed a new couch." She emailed the owners about the couch and set up an appointment. A self-admittedly hyper person, LaRoque says that when she got inside the building, she took one look around and, feeling that sense of calm, impulsively made an offer for the whole shebang. "I loved the high ceiling and the amount of light through the window and the old brick; it was a lovely combination," she said. "I signed the lease on October 16th and opened on January 2nd!"

LaRoque decided to turn the empty space into a coffee shop. "Every morning I would fight traffic, having

to cross the street and fight for parking spaces at Cup-A-Joe's, and this seemed perfect!" Royal Bean's location is ideal; it has plenty of parking and is on the right (in both senses of the word) side of the street.

LaRoque made many careful decisions with the design of her coffee shop. In fact, in many ways, Royal Bean is the anti-coffee shop.

"So many coffee shops are overcrowded and cluttered, and you're sitting right on top of each other. You can't hear your conversation partner, and the clanging of the cups and saucers... it drives me nuts!" said LaRoque. "I went the opposite extreme - wide open spaces and no glassware."

A visual sweep of the Royal Bean gives you an idea of what she means. The floor is a neutral wood, the walls are a deep grey, and fixtures are painted purple. There are indeed wide spaces between the gift area, the bar, a smattering of couches, a game and newspaper corner, and an area of tables and chairs. All the tables and chairs are on wheels so they are conducive to student study sessions or group meetings, and the Royal Bean offers wireless internet as well.

As for the glassware, LaRoque uses environmentally friendly paper cups. Being environmentally friendly is important to both LaRoque and her clientele.

"I feel that it is important to give back to the community," LaRoque said. "Patrons appreciate the fair trade, the rainforest alliance, and the fact that we don't use the cheapest coffee. I could, and I know some people who do so, but that wouldn't be

right."

The Royal Bean offers a wide selection of coffees by Mr. Toad, and always keeps it fresh.

A sense of community is one of LaRoque's highest aspirations, and she aims to cultivate one with Meredith students in particular.

"I used to get eye rolls when I said I went to Meredith. 'You're one of those girls,' people would say. I realized that Meredith's goal for so long was to become well-known, and become known throughout the region, that nobody locally really knows what Meredith is all about; no one knows what goes on behind the gate, the talent, intellect, and goodwill, the community spirit," LaRoque said.

LaRoque inadvertently found a solution. After painting the walls of the Royal Bean, she realized the wealth of wall space she had, and she remembered one of her Meredith friends was in the art department. She called the department and asked if they would put their art on her walls, and they agreed. She now has one wall that will always be devoted to the work of Meredith students, leaving the other for local artists.

LaRoque sees this coffee house as a stepping stone of sorts for Meredith to have a voice in the community. The artwork is not the only piece of Meredith to reside at the Royal Bean. She has also been in talks to sell the Colton Review and to host poetry readings. She also is involved with theater students to host a storytelling time. She has also asked Meredith musicians to provide music on Saturday

nights from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m.

"It was cool to connect with the students. When I was at Meredith, I didn't participate much, and I just had a core group of friends from my major, people I would work on projects with, but I didn't have the larger sense of community. Now, I interact with students, professors, and administrators on a regular basis," said LaRoque.

Administrators often hold meetings at the Royal Bean (for no charge) and the Royal Bean hosts bible studies, French club meetings, and other small club meetings. "It's a nice change of atmosphere," LaRoque enthuses. "You're still at Meredith, surrounded by Meredith people, but it's a change of scene."

LaRoque aims to make Royal Bean a part of the Meredith experience. Students have already made suggestions for weekend movie screenings and Friday night board game nights. She would like to do an annual fundraiser, with a percentage of the Royal Bean's daily profits going to some scholarship fund or a fund of Meredith's choice. Most importantly, she wants Meredith students to have a place they can call their own.

"I have lots of friends who went to State, Carolina, or ECU, and they have their hangout that they have to visit when going back. Every State alum goes to Amedeo's or Mitch's, but Meredith has been here all these years and has no hangout!" LaRoque said.

She wants there to be a
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