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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Daily Leader

Though there is no documented evidence to support it, some legends have the origin of the coffee house dated as early as the 1500s.

In the latter half of the 20th century, with the creation of chains such as Starbucks, coffee houses have grown to become a part of American culture, and now, a small group of local residents has opened an establishment in Liberal.



Shannon Francis, his wife, Carol, and Susan Lukwago opened Spencer Browne's Coffee House in December, and Shannon said the idea came from a love the three shared for coffee houses.

"We wanted to bring a coffee house to Liberal, both for our enjoyment and the enjoyment of the rest of the community," he said.

Francis said coffee houses have become such a significant part of American society, and Liberal has not had one such as Spencer Browne's, which serves coffee and food.

"We're hoping to create a place where people can come and relax whether they want to eat or just visit," he said. "People can have some healthy alternatives to eat. We have several vegetarian offerings, as well as sandwiches and salads, that can be hard to find in this area."

The pairing of food and coffee together is what Francis feels makes Spencer Browne's different.

"We think that's a combination that works well," he said. "When people have a cup of coffee, a lot of times they want something to eat with it, whether it be a scone, sandwich, cheesecake. Coffee goes with it."

Spencer Browne's is located at 7 Village Plaza in Liberal between the north Pizza Hut and Sieber's Palace. This, Francis said, is a site close to many shopping centers and office buildings.

He said coffee houses are part of what many have come to expect with retail areas.

"Starbucks is one of the most popular chains in America, and I think what works in Wichita can work in Liberal, Kansas, if it's implemented that way," he said.

Francis said he, Carol and Lukwago hope Spencer Browne's will offer people a place to relax, meet with friends and have some healthy alternatives for food.

"We just hope we can add to the quality of life in Liberal and the surrounding communities," he said.

Francis said the coffee shop likewise offers entertainment, including some local artists who perform in the evenings.

“We’re hoping to continue that,” he said. “We hope this can be a place the high school and the college kids can go and relax, as well as couples that aren’t in to the bar scene, that can go and just visit and talk together and not feel like they have to hurry in and out.”

Francis described some of what Spencer Browne’s offers in the way of drink and food.

“We are offering PT’s Coffee, which was the 2009 Macro Roaster of the Year by Roast Magazine,” he said. “We have some books people can browse that are from books that Carol and I and Susan had at home. People are free to read them, take them home and bring them back.”

Above all else, Francis said the coffee shop is designed to be a relaxing social place.

“We want to be a place where students can come and study and hang out, where study groups from the high school and college can come and meet,” he said. “We have a meeting room at the front of the store that can be reserved by groups of 16 or less for smaller meetings.”

A unique feature of Spencer Browne’s is its meeting room, which has windows that can be opened up to create an enclosed patio. Francis said the name came from Carol’s great-great-grandmother, Elmira Spencer Browne.

“(She) was an original ancestor who moved to Seward County and was the first superintendent of schools for Seward County,” he said. “We thought that was a name that both sounded good for a coffee shop and also had some local meaning.”

Francis said the coffee shop offers more than just coffee.

“We try to have two soups each day, one of which is a regular soup, another one which meets the needs of vegetarians in the area,” he said. “We think there’s not a restaurant that really caters to those trying to lead a healthy lifestyle.”

Those items include salads and vegetarian soups, and for those who prefer more traditional items, the menu features food such as ham and cheese sandwiches.

“Kids are something we really like to see in our restaurant,” Francis said. “We’ve got peanut butter and jelly, grilled cheese. Whether you’re a little kid or a big kid, we hope you can find something on our menu that you’ll like.”

Smoothies are also available at Spencer Browne’s, which Francis said are made in the shop from real fruit.

“We’re trying to bring a really upscale eating establishment to Liberal,” he said.

The coffee shop opens at 6 a.m. on Monday through Friday and at 7 a.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Closing times are at 9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and at 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

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