

## **Panera chairman: Pay-what-you-can cafe 'test of humanity'**

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Ron Shaich's been working 15-hour days since he reopened the [Panera](#) Bread Co. in Clayton as a nonprofit where customers are encouraged to pay what they feel is fair.

"It's a real test of humanity," he says. "It's not a charity; it's a café of shared responsibility."

The Saint Louis Bread Company Cares Café at 10 S. Central Ave. has attracted endless phone calls and headlines, as Shaich tries to do what's never been done before on a national scale. He first got the idea a year ago when he saw a story on NBC Nightly News about a café in Denver patterned after one started in Salt Lake City by Denise Cerreta, founder of One World Everybody Eats. It took a year to get the Denver nonprofit restaurant going. Shaich turned to his wife and said, "We open three stores a week. We can do this."

So he traveled to Salt Lake City, Denver and Highland Park, N.J., for research. Then he took the plunge in St. Louis on Sunday and opened the nonprofit. Shaich stepped down as Panera's CEO but is still working three days a week as chairman. "I wasn't going to play golf," he says.

The new restaurant's menu is the same, except for the muffins and pastries "baked fresh yesterday" at sister stores.

The social experiment was going strong Thursday, when the restaurant was packed with a lunch-hour crowd of office workers and high school students. A lot of people have walked in to the bakery-café to see for themselves what the new concept is all about, says Kate Antonacci, a Panera spokeswoman.

A sign near the front door says, "Take what you need, leave your fair share." Some pay more than the suggested price, some less. If people can't pay, they are encouraged to volunteer.

"This just feels different to people," she says. "They can come in, see their good work in action and see people coming in who need a meal."

The Heigerts came to town to see their son, Elliott, graduate from Washington University. They had read about the nonprofit in their suburban Chicago paper, the Daily Herald, and decided to give it a try. "It's a great concept and really nice to see," Patti Heigert says. The family donated money above the suggested retail price for their sandwich-and-soup combos.

The money goes back into operating the restaurant. Anything raised over that could go toward good causes, such as training at-risk teenagers with employment and life skills and then eventually giving them jobs with the company, Shaich says. "We're not going to cure poverty here but we can make a difference," he says. "We're not just writing a check."

He said he'd like to open more nonprofit locations but the one in Clayton has to be successful first. So far, so good: Transactions are up 20 percent this week over last week, when the store operated as a for-profit.

"We've given the gift of the cafe," Shaich says. "Now we have to prove it's sustainable."