

I wondered: What exactly happens at a 24-hour copy shop? I spent the night and found out: So much more than photocopying.

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**THE DOOR TO HOPE IS ALWAYS OPEN
A DAY (AND NIGHT) AT THE COPY STORE: A DEPOT FOR PEOPLE ON THE WAY
TO SOMETHING BETTER THE DOOR TO HOPE IS ALWAYS OPEN**

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The building's sign glows in the warm spring night, a beacon to people with to-do lists on the brain.

They push through the glass doors of the Kinko's on Charlotte's East Boulevard, on the run, in a hurry. The smell of heated toner ink hangs in the air and from the Muzak system, dance-beat pop songs pound. The staff hustles behind a counter, serving up orders.

It's a 24-hour diner of copying and collating.

With the economy lurching for two-plus years, you might expect that many of the people who filter in are on bleak errands. Desperate job-seekers, grimly copying resumes for job openings that probably don't exist. Small-business folks, running off fliers to revive sales.

But in a nearly 24-hour stretch on one spring day, most of the people who walk into this Kinko's have something else in common:

Hope.

Some fairly burst with it - all shining eyes and expectancy. Others, as they talk, unspool their dreams one thread at a time. They are college students, temp workers, business owners, stay-at-home mothers.

There's nothing magical about the store. It's a place of anonymous encounters between people and machines. But it's also a stopping-off spot for people on the way to something better.

Sometimes the task that brings someone to the copy store - the resume, the reference letters - is what's fueling their hope. But others are driven by a hope unrelated to the task, an optimism not connected to a plan for the future.

'You can make it'

Around midnight, a couple of hours into our vigil at the store, comes Gwen Ingram, a petite, 42-year-old home-schooling mom dressed in denim jumper and black ball cap, one of more than a dozen people who stops to talk over the course of a night and the next day. With her are her children, Bobby White, 14, and Christina White, 12.

Ingram exudes purpose. She strides to the counter to pick up an order. Suddenly she asks assistant manager Jomo Henry to turn down the Muzak. He does.

In the next moment, the mother-and-kids trio is singing the theme to Disney's "Beauty and the Beast." Mom does a little backup and the kids' harmonies weave into a fine, tight web. When they finish, the few people in the shop clap.

Because she teaches her children, their schedule is flexible. They're picking up the agendas for the Charlotte Gavel Club, a speaking club run by Toastmasters International. Both kids belong; Bobby's moderating the next day's meeting.

Ingram has the energy of a cheerleader. The kids smile and make a lot of eye contact when they speak. Ingram puts a hand on her son's Panthers jacket and tells his story. Bobby was born early and weighed just 1 pound. The doctors said if he lived, he'd be brain-damaged, she says. "But there was a divine power."

Bobby's recovery, "is the part of our life that does give hope," she says later. "No matter how grim it might seem, you can make it."

Now Bobby and Christina sing at churches and talent shows. She wears glasses and pigtails and loves horses. He wants to be a teacher.

"What do you want to close with?" Ingram asks the kids, as if they're on a stage right now. They launch into a gospel song: "If you can use anybody, Lord, you can use me "

Then they troop out the door and into the night.

About 4 a.m., Lucretia Joyner steps up with an armful of brochures she wants folded. Joyner is 32, single, and a lifelong Charlottean. She shows off one of the teddy-bear-themed day-care brochures, part of a business she opened last year.

She's doing this at 4 a.m. because she's on "lunch" break from BellSouth, where she processes customer payments from midnight to 8 a.m.

Joyner first made brochures for her aunt's day care. Word got around. Now, she uses her computer to create day-care brochures and wedding programs. The business, Miscellaneous Art by Lucretia, is doing pretty well, she says.

She turns to leave and then stops to add something. "My ultimate goal," she says, "is to be a millionaire."

Oh, right.

But Joyner doesn't deflate when you poke at her dream.

"I'm inspired by Oprah Winfrey," she says later. "Listening to her give advice about starting your business. I'm just laying the bricks. I'm on my way."

Working third shift is laying bricks, she says. It frees her days to meet clients, take calligraphy classes. Sleep? Unimportant.

Joyner knows what it's like to be financially adrift. With help from her mom and the four jobs she then worked, she dug out from credit card debt a little over a year ago. She told herself she would find a way to enjoy material things without being a slave to their payments, and that she would get ready for the day when her parents needed her help. "You need to develop a financial plan that gets you where you want to be," she says.

"Being a millionaire," Joyner says, "takes planning and it takes ambition. I am very driven."

At 4:30 a.m., the store's lights make it seem unnaturally bright, bathing the revolving greeting card stand and the fake plant by the door. The relentless Muzak - which helps keep the workers awake - seems louder than ever; it's like an all-night club with no one dancing.

Stepping into the 'best job that ever happened'

Into this surreal setting steps Derek Epps, who himself is living out one pretty strange night.

He's wearing a rumpled Sherwin-Williams polo shirt, which makes sense when you learn the Johnson C. Smith senior woke at 6:45 a.m., sold paint at Sherwin-Williams until noon, took a final exam at 1 p.m., did a school exit interview, ran to the library to write a marketing plan as part of his on-campus internship until the library closed, then hunkered in an office until 3 a.m., working on a group project with another student, then zoomed here in his '93 Ford Escort to photocopy his professional development portfolio, a final assignment.

Next, he'll blitz back to school to turn in the portfolio, and tear over to Sherwin-Williams for his next shift, more than 24 hours after he last slept.

"I'm happy!" announces Epps, 22. "I'm wide awake!"

He seems buzzy on some kind of sleep-deficit high. Maybe that's because he's looking at a future that seems as stamped with a gold seal as the awards he's copying for his portfolio.

This, he says, is because a month before graduation, he landed what he calls "the best job that ever happened" - a position as sales rep for Ernest & Julio Gallo. He'll move to Florida after graduation to begin his career in the marketing of wine.

Epps wants to work through the company's management program, which takes five years. He says he'll do it in four.

The job seems tailor-made for him. "I love being around people; I love entertaining," he says.

He had a chance to stay on at the paint store. "I just wanted bigger things," he says.

He has a friendly competition for grades with his older sister and father, who are also in college, and he's a role model for his nephew. He wants to make people proud of him.

He slaps down the portfolio, which sums up his college accomplishments. He can graduate without turning it in, but he likes things complete.

"Mr. Epps equals success," declares the report's opening line. "This is the motto of a young man that is determined to succeed."

At 6 a.m. the sky outside slides from gray to pale blue and birds start singing. Traffic trickles past. Inside the store, the Pet Shop Boys sing their forgive-us-Willie Nelson remake of the "Always on My Mind."

A new dream flushes into color

The shop grows busy as the morning gathers strength. Libby Smart is at the laminating machine, which oozes a warm, waxy smell. She's crafting name tags for second-graders.

The Selwyn Elementary kids will be taking a nature hike the next day, and Smart's hand-drawn oak-log name tags will dangle from their necks. This is the kind of volunteer work you wind up doing when the other parents find out you're artistic.

For more than 10 years, Smart, 41, has run a decorative-painting business, painting murals, kids' furniture.

She is wearing khaki shorts and a cream-colored cardigan with ribbon trim, her blonde hair in a shoulder-length bob, looking every bit like a busy volunteer mom with a tidy business.

But she's got other ambitions. In a few days, she'll hold the first solo show of her oil paintings.

"I've kind of done this painting-on-furniture thing for a while and I've kind of hit a wall, " she says. "The oil painting is where I'd like to be in the next two years."

In a week, she'll tote 45 paintings - still lifes, landscapes - to her hometown of Greensboro for a show, fingers crossed. She hopes to sell five, maybe seven. That kind of response would encourage her, confirm that she's got the talent she believes is inside her.

There's already been some success. She's gotten commissions for portraits of houses and one boat. The transition from the known to the longed-for is "scary, " she says. "But I guess I feel if I don't try, I'll never know."

Kinko's was started in 1970 as one small store serving the students at University of California at Santa Barbara, but now focuses on corporate clients. The East Boulevard location, one of six in Charlotte and nearly 1,200 worldwide, is typical for the company, getting about 75 percent of its business from corporate accounts, the store manager said.

The recession has left its mark on those customers. With joblessness at a nine-year high, the stock market struggling toward improvement and the economy expected to add a trickle of new jobs in the near future, the customers worry more about prices on their copying orders than in the past, employees said, and more often opt for cheaper services than high-end printing.

Gathering courage to launch a business, become a star

Employee Kevin Markie helps those customers navigate the copying machines and engages them in talk. The skinny 21-year-old is immediately noticeable for two things. First, he always smiles. He says he loves his job, likes the people.

The second thing you notice is Markie's technicolor arms.

"My friend's a tattoo artist, so I get all my work done for free," he says, turning his forearm. "I'm a big part of his portfolio."

The right arm is a copy of a painting by Swiss surrealist artist H.R. Giger, all dark and twisting biomechanical forms. The left arm is grass green, a backdrop for a mural of images. Each tells a story, like the 1940s pinup girl.

"I got this in memory of my grandfather. He was a sailor and he had her tattoo," he says. Originally the woman was naked, but this bothered employers, so Markie got her some tattoo clothing.

The tattoos start conversations, and Markie loves conversations. "I can talk to anybody," he says.

On his left elbow is a spider web made of drum sticks, an homage to his true calling. He plays for Aria, a Charlotte metal-influenced hardcore band. The band has two CDs out with Greensboro label Tribunal Records and is working on a third. Markie longs to tour full time.

But to make it to the big time, he says, more people have to hear the music.

Now the lunchtime rush. Seven Kinko's staffers juggle orders at the counter, straighten snarled copiers, ring up sales.

Kathy McGhinnis stops in, her "juror" tag hanging from a lapel. She's on break from deciding the fate of a dentist accused of accidentally breaking a patient's jaw.

In January she left a career in law firms and title insurance companies to pursue a longtime aspiration: self-employment. She's now a freelance real estate paralegal, performing title searches on property. Today she's copying letters of reference to show potential clients.

"I wanted to be my own boss," says McGhinnis, 53. She was scared to go out on her own.

But, she says, "I've got a lot of nice people helping me with referrals and I'm hopeful. So far, so good."

By early evening, the setting sun casts a warm, orangey light through the windows and more people arrive: an interior decorator copying photos of chairs, a medical student faxing his course schedule to school.

Kevin Markie stands nearby. If he was smiling before, now he's positively beaming. A guy came in, a regular. Markie doesn't know what he does for a living but he knows the man is someone important, has connections in entertainment. The man was copying photos of himself standing with Hillary Rodham Clinton. Markie says he's done the same with other photos - photos of him and rapper Fat Joe, him and actor Steven Segal. Markie told the guy about his band.

"He said, 'You're crazy. I'm gonna help you out, ' " Markie says. The man asked for a CD.

The guy told Markie he had contacts in music and would give someone the CD. Markie shakes his head, relaying the story. "I love this job!" he says. "You run into people who are so awesome!"

He heads out, shift over.

By 8:30 p.m., the store has emptied again. The light on the lamination machine blinks and threads of cut paper litter the gray carpet. The staff, thinner now, turns to jobs in the back.

Outside, the colors of day wash away. The night customers will soon start slipping in with fliers to print, business cards to order; some paper evidence of their plans for the future.

On the Muzak, the Fine Young Cannibals wind down and Sugar Ray begins: "I just want to fly/put your arms around me baby, put your arms around me baby/I just want to fly "**

Epilogue

In the weeks following the visits to Kinko's, the hopes of some hit a temporary setback. For others, optimism grew.

Gwen Ingram, Christina White and Bobby White: They attended Presbyterian Hospital's neonatal care unit's annual reunion of kids who were born prematurely. The trio sang at the reunion, held at Independence Park, performing the two songs they sang at Kinko's and a gospel song, "He's Able."

Lucretia Joyner: Miscellaneous Art by Lucretia is about to expand into wedding planning, Joyner says. She's found a wedding-planning course to take this August.

Derek Epps: He graduated on Mother's Day with 20 members of his family watching. He's headed to Fort Lauderdale to sell wine. "I'm not scared at all," he says. "I'm ready to go."

Libby Smart: The art show was a success, with 15 paintings sold. "I couldn't be happier," she says. "I would love to have well-known work one day." She's setting up another show.

Kathy McGhinnis: The letters of reference she copied that day won her some new work. She finished serving on the civil trial, finding the dentist defendant guilty of accidentally breaking his patient's jaw.

Kevin Markie: The customer who took his CD said he's given it to a producer and is waiting to hear back. Markie attended a tattoo convention in Charlotte and his right arm took third place in the "black and gray" category.