

BLUE WILLOW CAFÉ



Photo by Daria Amato

Café manager Mark Rickman

“Everyone, regardless of ability, has a place in the workforce.”

—Sean Donohoe

*Blue Willow Café
2547 S. 17th St.
Monday–Friday 8am–3pm*

It's a little hard to find, but the Blue Willow Café has become a go-to lunch spot for people in the area. The café, near the intersection of 17th Street and Shipyard Boulevard, is tucked just inside the entrance to the parking lot.

Blue Willow opened in June 2022 as part of A Caring Heart Foundation, a nonprofit that supports individuals with developmental disabilities. The café serves as a job training and employment opportunity for those in the foundation's programs and is open to all for breakfast and lunch.

The café's 16 employees—13 from the foundation and three from the general public—each has a job best suited to their abilities, whether it be in the kitchen, washing dishes or busing tables.

Carol Choate, president of Caring Heart Case Management, emphasizes the impact of providing these jobs. “This is one of the most challenging things I have done,” she says. “But it gives me so much internal satisfaction. There is nothing that is more rewarding than seeing one of our individuals on the job.” Many are able to move on to find work in the greater community.

Recently hired Sean Donohoe, a vocational enterprise specialist, has extensive experience in supported employment and ran a similar café in Pennsylvania. “It's very rewarding to help individuals feel part of the community and see them grow in their roles,” says Sean. “Everyone, regardless of ability, has a place in the workforce.”

Donohoe works with Mark Rickman, the café's manager, who has a background in restaurants and found his calling when he started working at Blue Willow. He says the café's top seller is the club sandwich, with the chicken salad not far behind.

Programs at the café are starting to expand. A student from Hoggard High School is working in the kitchen as an intern. A Caring Heart Foundation is working with the UNCW Small Business Program to get help for a possible new location in Jacksonville.



Blue Willow staff: (Front row from left) Courtney Meyer, Warren Richardson, Lena Dunkelberger
(back row from left) Dawn Messina, Cathy LaBosco, Lisa Caputo, Mark Rickman

The Blue Willow Banana Pudding

Courtesy of the Blue Willow Café | Photo by Daria Amato

There's a secret ingredient in this Southern staple that gives it a tangy, creamy heft that somehow enhances its airy lightness. Make it bulk in a baking dish, or create an eye-catching single serve dessert in accommodating glasses. (It's cream cheese. The secret ingredient is cream cheese.)

Makes 12 Southern-sized servings

8 ounces softened cream cheese
1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
1 (5-ounce) box instant vanilla pudding
3 cups milk, 2 percent or higher
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 (8-ounce) tub thawed Cool Whip topping, halved
1 (11-ounce) box vanilla wafers
5 to 7 peeled and sliced bananas

In a large bowl with an electric mixer on medium, beat the cream cheese until smooth and fluffy.

Add sweetened condensed milk, pudding mix, milk and vanilla extract. Mix until well combined. Fold in half of the whipped topping.

To assemble: Layer 13 vanilla wafers on bottom of a 9- x 13-inch baking dish. Add a layer of sliced bananas and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the pudding mixture. Repeat 2 more times. Top with remaining whipped topping.

