

# Waiting is the Hardest Part <sup>[1]</sup>

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Beyond its delicious fully vegetarian menu and hearty French press coffee, Hard Times is a cross section of the depth and extent of Minneapolis individuality – a rough sketch of the people and style that compose the city’s charm. Located in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, Hard Times is the eye of the storm that is Minneapolis culture, a meeting ground and a refuge for anyone who needs somewhere to go. One only has to sit for a minute and listen to the caffeine fueled conversations to fully appreciate the diversity of its patrons. Students, bums, punks, hippies, suburbanites, hipsters, gangsters all meet and eat in the same café, each representing their respective style and crowd. Closed only from 4am to 6am, Hard Times is a haven to the nocturnal and late night wanderers, offering a safe place to study, get coffee, or enjoy a meal, even in the middle of the night.

Unfortunately, like its name implies, the cafe has seen some hard times. With a history of run-ins with the city, Hard Times has had to struggle to keep its doors open. Most recently, the cafe has had to comply with a complaint by the Health Department requiring a new grill ventilation hood – a process that inadvertently requires reconstruction of their entire ventilation system.

Once filled with loud music, rickety furniture, art, magazines, and the conversation of happy customers, the café has been reduced to a single dim, yellow light over a table covered in notebooks, pouches of tobacco, and half empty coffee mugs. Seated around the room at a recent meeting were the various employees, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and pouring coffee. To save energy, the heat and all other electronics had been shut off. The most vocal employees that were present consisted of Arik Xist, Karl, Graham, Helen, and Jason. They opted to leave their last names unpublished.

“The problem,” Arik says, “is a difference of six inches. Our old ventilation hood

was six inches too short.”

Hard Times is a collectively owned establishment, which essentially means that the workers are the owners, and it is up to them to fund any renovations needed. The new ventilation system is a huge process that costs a lot of money, the sum of which rests uneasily on the shoulders of the employees.

“I don’t know if I should find another job or if we’re going to open tomorrow. We’re all just really broke,” Karl says.

The owners of Hard Times originally expected to reopen within a month. Initially, the entire replacement process was quoted as a three-week job. However, due to several miscommunications with the city and extended wait periods, the renovations are taking far longer than planned. While the employees initially complain about “bureaucratic red tape,” they agree that the city isn’t directly responsible for delays. Unlike past run-ins, the city isn’t organizing against Hard Times and trying to shut them down. The delays are mainly a result of the process of finding a contractor and getting a permit, which requires going through several departments and demands a great deal of waiting.

“It comes down to the fact that the city doesn’t tell us everything, and we don’t know enough to ask,” Jason says. “It seems like with every question we ask or form we send in there’s a 10 business day waiting period. It all adds up.”

Pair this with Hard Times being collectively run, and the complexity of the situation increases, causing more confusion.

“The city wants to talk to one person, a boss or an owner. Hard Times is collectively run, so when the city holds meetings we end up bringing a few people, and they don’t know what to do. Even as a collective we’re pretty unique – none of us really even has a title,” says Graham.

While Hard Times’ patrons have been reduced to finding their own means of sustenance for the time being, nobody has felt the hit worse than the owners themselves. With no income and a responsibility to fund the renovations, the staff has been left unemployed and hungry. Most of the workers are so busy trying to reopen they don’t have time to find another job. Jason had enough

money saved up to last a month and is so consumed with trying to organize the renovations that he hasn't been able to look for more temporary work.

"Reopening is in the future," Karl says. "It's just a matter of time. Until then, the bills are piling up, and I have to eat."

The prospect of being an employee at Hard Times warrants a loyalty unimaginable at other places of employment. The strain placed on the workers is immense, and it is the strong unity and sense of place that has kept Hard Times open over the years.

"I'm unemployable anywhere else." Graham says. "I tend to freak out in other jobs."

"When I came here from New York, I immediately fell in love with Hard Times," Karl says. "I slept on the floor a lot of the time. Now I have to pay rent and I have no money."

"My reason for working in a cafe is kind of weird," Arik says. "Once I was in New Orleans, and this Nazi was threatening me for being with a few of my black friends. I needed a safe place to go, so I found an all-night cafe and was able to stay until morning. Hard Times isn't just a cafe, we provide a safe environment for people to come and relax."

"And we've got the strongest coffee in town," Jason adds. "I think we're one of the only places in the area with a French press."

Hard Times is shooting for opening by November 17th, its 15th year anniversary. Until then, the staff has set up a MySpace asking for donations via [HYPERLINK "voodoo://PayPal" PayPal at www.myspace.com/hardtimesmpls](http://www.myspace.com/hardtimesmpls), the money from which will support the renovations, bills, and the starving staff. Otherwise, donations of any kind can be sent to their address at 1821 Riverside Ave, Minneapolis MN, 55454.

"If anyone wants to send money, food, or beer, it would be really appreciated," Arik says.

"Yeah, if you see a Hard Times worker at a bar, buy him a drink – he needs it,"

Jason says.

1. <http://www.wakemag.org/cities/waiting-is-the-hardest-part/>
2. <http://www.wakemag.org/author/archivedstory/>