

*“I believe in
a business
model based
on generosity”*

**The founder of London’s first Happy Cafe,
Ruth Rogers, wants to show how business
and community can work hand in hand**

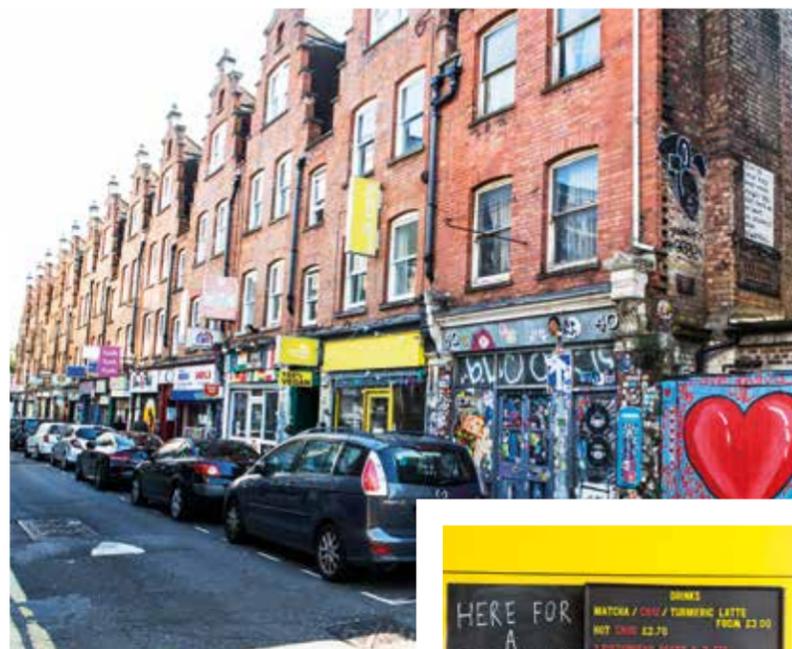
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ABOVE AND LEFT The walls of The Canvas are adorned with people's questions, illustrations, thoughts and feelings. The idea was inspired by Ruth's story-sharing sofa, which she describes as 'a blank canvas for positivity'

"I wanted to create a venue where the canvas was the walls themselves, with questions about happiness, wellbeing and community written on them."



ABOVE AND LEFT Ruth is proud to provide an inclusive, safe space in the heart of London

RIGHT The community hub is a blank canvas for local groups and individuals to launch new ideas



Ruth Rogers' dream for The Canvas began in 2007 with a rather special sofa. 'When I was 25, I founded a positive body image charity called Body Gossip. We asked people to share stories about their bodies, which we published and used to create theatre,' she says. But Ruth wanted to find a way to spread the message further. 'I decided to take my white living room sofa to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and ask passers-by to write one sentence about their bodies on the sofa.' She was touched by the outcome. 'People wrote really beautiful, honest things that they'd never said before. It was so powerful and broke down barriers.' The sofa toured the country and inspired Ruth to devise a more permanent space. 'I wanted to create a venue where the canvas was the walls themselves, with questions about happiness, wellbeing and community written on them. People often present a more closed version of themselves and I wanted a place where you could walk in and be reminded of how amazing humans are. That has ripples for miles. You might be kinder to someone on the bus or call someone you've not spoken to for a while.'

And so, The Canvas was born – 'a blank canvas for positivity' in the form of a cafe and community enterprise. But there's much more to it than just coffee and cake. 'We

enable and support the launch of community and grassroots ideas. Our space is safe, accessible and open to everyone,' Ruth says. 'We have a creative zone for live performance and events. Our community hub, which is our social heart, is then offered for free to anyone who has an idea that will improve the lives of others. It's a business model based on generosity. It draws people through the doors and all they need to do is buy a coffee to help keep us going.'

A happy medium

The Canvas has supported the launch of over 100 new ideas, including the Museum of Happiness, Shoreditch Dog House, which trains women in specialised dog care, and Mike's Table, which provides restaurant-quality meals for refugees. 'We make sure the ideas we host sit with our values of fairness, tolerance and generosity. In the community hub, if someone wants to run an event but has no money or needs to charge entry, we don't turn them away for lack of funds,' Ruth says. 'We ask them to donate to our pay-it-forward board from anything they raise – it's a circle of giving back to help people.'

Ruth is passionate about social enterprises being sustainable. 'I speak from experience when I say that it's >>>



LEFT AND RIGHT Ruth carefully works with her team to pass on The Canvas's vision, including one of the most recent additions – baby Jim!



"Sometimes I think that my cafe baby is more demanding than my real baby!"

The more I'm with you, the more I love myself



"I want to get out there more to raise awareness and spread our message that humans do want to change the world"



ABOVE AND LEFT A spirit of kindness flows through the cafe, from the vegan

kitchen to the pay-it-forward board for those who are less able to afford a meal

>>> tough. I always look to the cafe to keep the rest of the business alive. If people donate to the pay-it-forward board, then that's good for the cafe, but also good for people.'

Coffee, cake and creative enterprises

Ruth is also a new mum to her son Jim. 'It's a bit of a juggling act. Sometimes I think that my cafe baby is more demanding than my real baby!' she says. She now manages The Canvas's events from her new home in Sussex, but that looked uncertain after sudden staff changes. 'When Jim was three weeks old, I was in a position where I was looking for a whole new leadership team. But it worked out and actually my new team has been amazing and really get it.' How does Ruth choose employees who support The Canvas's ethos? 'When we hire, we don't say, "Come and work in a cafe." We ask people if they want to work for a positive, creatively driven social enterprise that's helping new ideas get off the ground – oh, and you'll also be serving coffee and cake.'

Since working from home more, Ruth has enjoyed having the chance to connect over email with customers. 'When

you're the owner and it's your baby, you see all the problems. But I now receive emails every day from people saying how much they love it and feel they've found somewhere they belong,' she says. 'I try not to be there all the time. I work better when I'm a little bit distanced. I like blue-sky thinking but, if I'm in the middle of it, then I micromanage and I can't see the wood for the trees.' A typical day before Jim was born starts with admin and emails. 'Then I go into the cafe and have meetings with my team. On a perfect day, I would go on to speak about the cafe at an event. I want to get out there more to raise awareness and spread our message that humans do want to change the world.'

It took Ruth time to play to her strengths as a businesswoman. 'I look back and realise that I was so naive about what was needed to start a business,' she says. 'To be honest, I don't think I knew what my vision for The Canvas was at first. Now, the idea is so much more formed. Setting it up, for the first time in my life, I felt hectic anxiety. The task was so huge, and I was talking to electricians, estate agents and plumbers – I felt completely out of my depth. My friend taught me a fantastic

to-do list structure, where you break it down into quarters based on importance. That changed my world and calmed me down.' But she still hopes to adapt her role. 'Another hurdle has been getting to where I should be in the business. At the start, you have to be a technician, a manager and an entrepreneur. It's really hard to manage to *just* be the entrepreneur. For the first two years, I was closing the cafe most nights and managing admin and doing jobs that I'm not really right for,' she recalls. 'It's a long journey. You take a step back, then jump in again, then take a small step back. It's hard knowing I'm doing a job for the business that I'm not always suited to, but also not being able to afford to hire someone else to totally take over those parts.'

Shared rewards

Each member of Ruth's team is given a key to the cafe and she encourages everyone to view it as their space. She loves to see people thrive in that environment. 'A highlight for me is when you feel like you've helped to support someone that you've trusted to connect and run the business in a better

way – that's so rewarding. Those moments feel really good. When we have a team meeting, we always start by going around the circle and asking: "What does The Canvas mean to you?" Staff have told me about homeless people who have said that The Canvas is their lifeline. I often get told that it has changed people's lives for the better.'

The Canvas now only serves vegan food – an idea Ruth adopted after talking to her chef at the time. 'Tegan took me to a vegan event and showed me how many people support it. My worry was that I didn't want it to look like we were just doing something fashionable. But I realised that as a social enterprise which supports positive activism, veganism is the most positive step an individual can take to make an impact on the planet. The way that veganism has allowed my cooks to be creative is awesome.'

How would Ruth like to grow her message of positivity? 'I would love to open more Canvases in other cities across the UK. I think they would thrive.'

Visit The Canvas at 42 Hanbury Street, London E1 5JL. The Canvas's Christmas dinner for groups is £25 for three courses and a glass of bubbly. Or, for £35, pay it forward for someone in need to have a free Christmas dinner. To book or find out more, go to thecanvascafe.org