



Pictured above is the Executive Director of The Friendship Circle of WI Levi Stein with his wife Leah Stein.

THE HEART OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Find coffee, pastry, friends, and more at Friendship Circle

With more than 80 chapters in the U.S. and around the world, the nonprofit Friendship Circle is in the business of forging relationships, connecting volunteers and people with special needs to help them find employment. Levi Stein opened Southeastern Wisconsin's very own Friendship Circle of Wisconsin Bakery and Café in 2016.

WaterStone Bank Marketing Intern Roberto Zuniga sat down with Levi to find out what sets this business apart.

RZ: Tell me about your business and its role in the neighborhood.

LS: Friendship Circle of Wisconsin offers children and adults the opportunity to create friendships. We are focused on helping people with disabilities and mental health challenges, which we do by employing them in the café and bakery after having them go through a couple of months of training.

What's unique about our cafe is the welcoming feeling you get once you walk inside—you get vibrant colors, followed by a welcoming crew that immediately raises your spirits!

We also have an art studio—it's available for kids and parents to make art projects during Open Art times. People also rent the space for private events, birthday parties and field trips.

RZ: What inspired you to start your business?

LS: My main reason for starting this business began when I learned the unemployment rate that is connected to people with disabilities—a staggering 80%. I actually was a member of the first Friendship Circle program, located in Detroit, Michigan, where my family lived. Seeing the benefits that this program offered firsthand, I knew that no matter what city a Friendship Circle is placed in, it will create change and benefit the surrounding communities.

RZ: You've been a WaterStone Bank customer for several years. What do you like about the bank?

LS: I started banking with WaterStone in April of 2019. Initially, I liked that the Fox Point branch was really convenient—less than a three-minute walk from us. On top of that,

my banker Megan Weigand not only showed us hospitality but was outstanding with the services that she provided. During the Covid pandemic, I was in the process of applying for a PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loan when I encountered some trouble with it. Again, thanks to Megan's amazing work, I was able to complete the loan application.

Outside of that, I also love the amount of volunteering that bank employees are involved in, and appreciate the bank's mission statement of prioritizing the communities where its branches are located.

RZ: What would you like people to know about your business?

LS: I wish people knew that our café and programs are available to everyone—you don't have to be part of the Friendship Circle organization to be able to enter and enjoy the services that we offer. Anybody can just walk in and be a part of this! If you are in the Fox Point area, come visit our café, enjoy a cup of coffee, and know that you're making a difference! ☺