

An East Vancouver café known for being a hub of grassroots activism, social justice events and queer and marginalized human rights groups, is struggling financially. But while the future remains uncertain for the five-year-old business, its patrons are rallying together to do what they can to stop another queer-friendly space from disappearing.

Rhizome owners and lesbian couple, Lisa Moore and Vinetta Lenavat, say the café, located on Broadway near Main Street, is much more than a business venture. "We started this space because we wanted to create a community living room," Moore says. "We wanted to start a space that would be a self-sustaining, autonomous community space that didn't necessarily rely on outside funding." Rhizome is anti-profit, she explains.

Rhizome's Lisa Moore and Vinetta Lenavat turned to community for help to keep the financially-strapped café afloat. "There're all these people who have told us time and time again that this is a space they care about and are committed to."

(Shauna Lewis photo)

"It's always been really, really challenging for us to operate a business with this location in this particular city and operate it with certain political, moral and ethical principles rather than a profit generating machine," Moore admits. She says the global economic downturn, combined with rent and food cost increases, has put a strain on the café's operations, leaving the future of the space uncertain.

Last summer when the couple realized they did need shoulders to lean on, they looked no further than the community. Moore said she and Lenavat felt it would be irresponsible to try and deal with the challenges behind closed doors "when there are all these people who have told us time and time again that this is a space that they care about and are committed to."

Asking for help is not easy, Moore admits. "It was kind of a scary thing to do, to lay this on the table and say to people, 'We need your help.'"

But Rhizome's patrons responded to Moore's call-out, which led to the formation of 20-person committee to brainstorm ideas for the space.

One of those ideas was the Friends of Rhizome donation group. Once someone donates, they automatically become a member of the group, owning a piece of the space. "You can donate 50 cents and be a Friend of Rhizome or you can donate \$500 and there's no distinction or value judgment placed on one or the other," Moore explains. "We've had an amazing response."

In the week after going public about their need for support, Rhizome raised over \$5,000 from about 150 short- and long-term donors.

Asked if the cafe, located outside of the gay village, would be more financially successful if positioned within the city's queer hub, Moore shrugged. "I don't think so," she said. "We are queer, and a lot of issues that we work around are queer issues, but we see

ourselves as a radical social justice space and that includes queer issues but it's not exclusive to them," she explains.

"It's a welcoming space," says queer artist, entertainer and writer, Ivan Coyote, who has attended and participated in literary readings and shows hosted by the venue. "They don't hold social justice as an ideal, they live it as a business model; it is a vital part of the activism in the queer literary and music scene."

"It's a great space, a very unique space. I want to support queer business," adds Peggy Lee, a longtime patron and new Friend of Rhizome donor. "There is nothing like it. It would be a real shame if we lost the space. There are so few queer spaces left in Vancouver, particularly for queers of colour," says Lee, who is Chinese-Canadian and a lesbian.

Both Lee and Coyote have promised to help save Rhizome in whatever way they can, and they are not alone. With an email list of 1,700 people and a Facebook group of over 600, Moore says there is a great deal of public support for the café, and is hopeful it will stay afloat. "In order for this to continue, we will need monthly donors. But I feel that the momentum that is gathering just might be what it takes to keep this thing going in a way that is deepening the roots in the community," she adds.

"This is important, our community needs it. The kind of conversations that happen here are vital. The kind of work that is able to cross-pollinate here is vital. The kind of analysis that is projected through the work that happens here is vital," Moore concludes.

To become a Friend of Rhizome, or to attend one of the many future charity events, go to rhizomecafe.ca