

Oct. 21, 2007----

SHEBOYGAN, Wis.---Like a falling leaf, the Weather Center Cafe landed in a century-old fishing shanty along the Sheboygan River. The wind is brisk and the coffee is hot. The restored shanty and coffee shop is on the new Harbor Centre Riverfront, just north of downtown Sheboygan.

The cafe is open year round -- weather always permitting.

The knotty pine walls are adorned with nautical maps and weather gauges. The television is tuned into the Weather Channel. A salty fisherman's net marker hangs in cotton mesh webbing suspended from the ceiling.

Sheboygan native Teek Phippen and his wife, Tricia, opened the Weather Center Cafe in 1997 as an offshoot of their Nature's Best health food store, which is adjacent to the coffee shop. The cafe name comes as a spoof of the geeky "Weather Centers" on the Weather Channel and Milwaukee's WITI-Channel 6 as well as Chicago's WGN-Channel 9.

The cafe overlooks the river, which leads to the harbor entrance of Lake Michigan. It is appropriately down the road from the Map & Globe Exchange travel store at Harbor Centre.

"The Great Lakes commercial fishing industry was thriving at one time," Phippen says during an interview at the cafe. "That's what created this area. I want to keep that history alive. You won't see starfish and shells here because they have nothing to do with the lake.

"This was the first shanty built here, around the late 1800s. I'm trying to bring back a nautical feel, a weather feel. I want to do a wall with the history of the shanty. The original working shanties had gravel floors and a double swinging garage door." During the harsh winters, fishermen would move their boats inside the shanty and prepare them for the spring. During the summer they hung their nets in the shanty. They slept in an upstairs loft.

Phippen maintains the coffee and snacks take precedent over the weather at his 60-seat cafe. I don't think he is blowing any hot air. The Noreaster is a fine turkey breast, avocado, tomato and greens sandwich topped with blue cheese dressing . The El Nino quesadilla features pinto and black beans layered with melted cheese, red onion and red pepper and comes with chips and salsa on the side.

The cafe carries more than 10 blends of coffee, including organic and fair trade products. Among those is the 16-ounce Pirates Revenge coffee drink, which brings

together a triple shot of espresso, steamed milk, chocolate spice, honey, whipped cream and a choice of flavored syrup.

"Weather remains a side thing and the reason for that is that we have really good coffee and food," Phippen says. "People come here to eat and drink and enjoy it. If they get the whole experience I want them to get while sitting here, they'll start reading the history on the wall or checking out a weather gauge. They'll start to get into that vibe.

"And they always say when you don't know what to talk about with a stranger, you talk about the weather. I do that with a customer. I'll be looking at the television and I'll say, 'Ohmigod, there's a big low pressure system coming.' They ask what that means and I fill them in. A low pressure system runs counterclockwise and high pressure systems go clockwise.

"I'm a big weather fan."

The 46-year-old Phippen surfs on Lake Michigan, which is why he began following the weather so closely. He studies weather systems to predict waves. In the Pacific Ocean a swell can come from as far away as Japan. However, in Lake Michigan, a swell can be only three hours away. No pun intended, but surfers have to be on top of it.

There is heightened interest at the cafe during major weather events such as Hurricane Katrina. "I do get excited about hurricanes," Phippen says. "A couple of employees and I will pick the names of hurricanes for the season, print them out and put them on our bulletin board. We'll guess which one will be the strongest. The vibe got bad after Katrina because it was so tragic. And it is very tragic, but it is Mother Nature. You're never going to stop it. I certainly don't want people to get hurt, but Katrina will make people wiser."

And Phippen cautions visitors on vocations such as storm chasing.

"Tornadoes are way too erratic. I'm afraid of tornadoes. It's like a violent whip flipping around. People think they can follow them and I get scared for them because one of these days a couple of them are going to come together and they'll be driving one way and it will turn on them."

Phippen's late mother Joyce was a schoolteacher in Sheboygan and his late father was an architect/designer. Two of Dad's findings, a coal freighter anchor and a U.S. Coast Guard cutter life ring, are on one wall.

"My father found those on the beach at two different times in his life," Phippen said. "We would walk the beach all the time. I was pretty young and he found that life ring frozen into one of the icebergs. We dug it out with an ice pick and a shovel. Later on he found the anchor. He tied the two together and hung it from the studio in his

house. When he passed away, I acquired it because it was perfect for here."

It was something about blue skies.

WEATHER MIX

The top 10 songs for an autumn trip to the Weather Center Cafe:

1. "Couldn't Stand the Weather," Stevie Ray Vaughan
2. "Stormy Weather," Billie Holiday
3. "Subterranean Homesick Blues," Bob Dylan
4. "Blue Skies," Willie Nelson
5. "Blue Umbrella," John Prine
6. "Get Off My Cloud," Rolling Stones
7. "Sky High," Jigsaw
8. "Ain't No Sunshine," Bill Withers
9. "Fool In The Rain," Led Zeppelin
10. "Hurricane," Bob Dylan