

# Freedom Cafe: The Coffee Shop that Fights for Humanity

Local coffee shop operates as a non-profit with the goal of stopping human trafficking.

## Aimee Rothman, Staff Writer

“Your recommended donation is:” are not typically the words one might expect to hear at a coffee shop. However, the Freedom Cafe works differently than the run-of-the-mill coffee shop. Working as a non-profit, the Freedom Cafe donates its proceeds, which tend to be about 25 to 30% of its sales, with the mission of ending human trafficking. These proceeds help support initiatives, organizations and projects with similar missions. Dedicated to this mission, the cafe also holds events, posts information and collaborates with organizations and the community in hopes to raise awareness about human trafficking. The Freedom Cafe opens the door for charitable donations to enter the coffee business.



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The interior of Freedom Cafe in Durham.

This non-profit business model was inspired by a fundraiser that one of the cafe's co-founders and now director, Bryan Bessette, was involved in. In an attempt to raise money for a mission trip that would help victims of human trafficking and exploitation in Nepal, Bessette took to the Durham bars to ask others for donations.

“One of the things we did to get to Nepal [for the mission trip] was go to every bar in downtown Durham and ask people to donate what they would spend on beer that night to support survivors of bonded slavery in Nepal,” Bessette said.

Having raised \$3,600 that night, the idea later grew into a coffee shop that would allow customers to donate what they are already spending on their drinks. By 2015, the cafe became certified as a non-profit organization, and in 2021 they moved to their current location on Main Street in Durham. The proceeds made from items in the cafe help support local projects such as Brigid's House of Hope, which provides housing and other resources for those impacted by trafficking.

How does the Cafe Operate?

The cafe pays for their food and drinks, supplies and the salaries of staff members. Prices are pre-set by the cafe, based on similar prices at other cafes. However, customers have the option to pay what they want, because the transaction is a donation, not a purchase.

“Everything is served on a recommended donation basis, and 100% of the proceeds support our programs and grants,” Bessette said.

The cafe sources its products ethically and locally. They offer a wide range of products that venture outside of the cafe standards such as coffee, lattes and teas. On top of these classics, they serve freshly squeezed lemonade, flavored sodas, baked goods such as cookies and both sweet and savory crepe options. The cafe also has a small store inside selling products that are either sourced locally or from other ethically sourced businesses and nonprofits. Customers can consciously buy pottery, jewelry and even chocolate from ethical and sustainable sources.

On top of the wide array of educational materials that plaster the walls, the cafe spreads their mission in other ways. The cafe hosts events such as their open mic night and is active on social media to help spread information about their mission. The cafe also hosts educational events open to community members who want to learn more. Bessette explained that he doesn't want to come on too strong, but instead wants to give community members the option to get involved. "We run educational events, so we always try to be very open and honest about our mission but also have this unopened hand where we invite people consistently to events and programs," Bessette said.

### Fellowships

To help spread the cafe's mission, students have gotten involved by working as fellows. This semester, Bessette applied to have a fellow at his cafe through Semester for Impact, a program that sets students up to work a 400-hour internship or fellowship at a local organization to learn about its social impact. This semester, Suzie Scharff was matched with Freedom Cafe and is working on a special project for them, giving her the time to create a conscious consumer guide. She had been a regular customer of the cafe for some time and grew interested in getting involved in their mission.

"I would come here and do what I could to support, but then I applied to be a semester for impact fellow, and I was so fortunate enough to have Bryan already have applied for a fellow and I got to start working here," Scharff said.

As a fellow, she spends 40% of her time on a special project.

"I'm creating an assessment tool to be used on a local business to assess how consciously they are sourcing and operating," Scharff said.

The assessment tool can be used for consumers to determine both the environmental and ethical impacts of the places they are shopping at. This consumer guide is still in the developmental stage, but both Bessette and Scharff hope to be able to expand this idea into a guide that can be used over a wider domain.

"Every time that I get to work with a fellow, it's so inspiring to feel like our mission is moving forward and other people are also equally energetic about it," Bessette said.

### Volunteers are Encouraged

As a non-profit, the cafe offers volunteer opportunities for the community. Oftentimes, the cafe will have both employees and volunteers working on the same shift. Volunteers help employees with tasks while learning about and engaging in the mission of the cafe.

"Volunteers are support and help assist with prep, learn job skills, learn about the mission but are not ultimately responsible for the operations of the cafe," Bessette said.

The goal that the Freedom Cafe has for volunteers is that they walk away with not only new job skills but also more awareness of the issue of human trafficking and how they can get involved in the fight against it.

"Ultimately, the goal is to help people become activists, to understand the mission, to understand their role as a conscious consumer and to build skills to take into whatever career path they go into," Bessette said.

## Keeping the Mission Alive

According to the U.S. Department of State, it is estimated that at any time there are currently over 27 million victims of human trafficking worldwide. With an issue as large as human trafficking, the cafe must work in a variety of ways to keep the mission alive.

One of the ways in which the cafe keeps the morale up is by getting their staff and volunteers involved and making sure they are aware of the intensity of the issue. The cafe works to give its employees and volunteers a sense of advocacy. The mission of the cafe is engrained in the training that they do, to give them the tools they need to be involved.

Volunteers first complete an hour-long orientation that teaches them about the cafe and their mission. Then, both the staff and volunteers attend monthly 15-minute business meetings to refresh their awareness of the mission.

The cafe also takes to social media to spread the word of their advocacy. In addition to aesthetic posts of lattes, crepes and more, the cafe posts informational content on their Instagram.

“On social media, on a minimum of once a week is a very intentional mission-related post about how you can get involved,” Bessette said.

## Community Values

Being in close proximity to the University of New Hampshire (UNH) has brought in a plethora of young customers. This has helped the cafe’s open-mic nights grow in popularity, so much so that the sign-up lists fill up in just minutes. It has also allowed the cafe to interact with the community, and bring in new volunteers and fellows that are eager to move their mission forward.

“I love people and the community, and I love being able to share energy with people to get to know community members, to see people light up when you know their name and favorite drink,” Bessette said.

Bessette enjoys interacting with the community and believes they are what makes the cafe so unique.

“Being close to UNH is what has made the Freedom Cafe what it is,” Bessete said.