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## More Than Just Coffee: SOL Café Creates Job Pathways for Neurodiverse Talent



Image courtesy of SOL Café

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### **Who are Skills of Life Café students?**

If you've seen the black mobile café at the Simpkins Swim Center, you may not realize it's more than a coffee truck. It's a nonprofit job training program called [Skills of Life \(SOL\) Cafe](#).

SOL Cafe, a grassroots nonprofit job training program launched a year and a half ago to address a critical gap in meaningful employment opportunities for teens and young adults with mild intellectual disabilities who demonstrate high-functioning abilities. These are individuals who often fall between the cracks once they age out of school-based services.

As an Occupational Therapist, SOL founder Molly Turner created SOL Cafe with the intention of creating a structured, real-world job training environment embedded within an operating



focused on independence and workplace success, with each week centered on executive functioning themes. During the first month, participants set individual goals. Each student's goals are continuously reviewed and refined throughout the program. At the end of each quarter, students receive formal benchmark reviews that reflect on progress toward goals and/or goal enhancements.

In the café, students rotate through three core roles: Front-of-shop greeter and POS (register) operations, barista, and food preparation.

**Through each of these roles, students learn:**

- Coworker collaboration/Workplace communication
- Hard job skills (task-based café operations)
- Soft skills (workplace behavior and communication)
- Time management
- Task sequencing and organization
- Customer interaction (front-of-shop greeting) and small talk
- Confidence, sense of belonging, and purpose

When business is slow, they conduct mock trainings or practice off-site, including at the pool deck, where they have the opportunity to work on business marketing, offering product samples and program information to patrons.

**After graduation**

After graduation, the goal is to support the bridging of employment to those interns that qualified and demonstrate work independence. Both the program participants and proposed hiring businesses receive support to ensure a strong match.

Employment pathways are not limited to coffee - participant interests and abilities have included beauty (retail sales, nails), data input and front office demands, preschool work, landscape, audio/visual interests, mechanic, grocery/hardware store, product inventory, product stocking, event set up, restaurant host or busser, baker, and work with animals.

Recognizing that traditional interviews can sometimes limit opportunities to fully demonstrate a person's strengths, Skills of Life Café offers a **"working interview"** experience. For businesses that interview one of their qualified graduates, Skills of Life Café will cover the wages for the first three shifts.

This approach allows graduates to showcase their skills in a real workplace setting while giving employers the opportunity to see their abilities, work ethic, and team contributions firsthand. By supporting both the graduate and the employer, Skills of Life Café helps remove hiring barriers, highlight strengths, and create meaningful pathways to competitive employment.



and dedication to a supportive workplace.

#### **Awards:**

- “Wild Card” Business Award recipient by the Santa Cruz NEXTies
- Nonprofit Business of the Year by the Capitola–Soquel Chamber of Commerce.

#### **[How You Can Help!](#)**

Skills of Life Café is growing, and there are clear ways businesses and community members can step in:

#### **Donate!**

The nonprofit currently relies on grants, fundraisers, and community support to operate. While long-term sustainability through café sales is the goal, expanding this impact requires support today. Skills of Life Café is registered with **Benevity**—if your company participates in this platform, please consider supporting our mission through a workplace/matching donation.

#### **Partner as an Inclusive Employer**

Businesses interested in strengthening their workforce can partner with Skills of Life Café by mentoring qualified intern graduates, hosting working interviews, or hiring program graduates. Our interns complete over 360 hours of job training and are eager to contribute their skills in supportive workplaces.

#### **Hire a Graduate or Host a Working Interview**

Businesses across industries, not just cafés, can participate. To help reduce hiring barriers, SOL Café will cover the wages for the first three shifts of a working interview, allowing employers to see a graduate’s strengths and work ethic in action.

#### **Provide Mentorship or Professional Guidance**

Business leaders and professionals can make a meaningful impact by offering mentorship, workplace insights, or skill-building guidance to interns preparing for employment.

#### **Visit the Café**

Every purchase directly supports neurodiverse workforce training.  
Open Wednesday through Saturday, 8–4 PM (Saturday 9–1 PM).

#### **Attend the upcoming fundraising events:**

##### **[Spring Fundraiser “Brews Bands & Bites” \(April 11, 12:00–7:00 PM\)](#)**

2590 S. Main St., Soquel

\$25 tickets include a family-friendly event with a Skills of Life beer glass, one beverage, and access to 4 live bands, the makers market, food trucks, face painting, a magician, and more!

##### **[Participate in the 5th annual SCFFL Foundation Golf Tournament \(June 27- Seascapes Golf Course\)](#)** List SOL cafe as a beneficiary.



optimize training efforts. Because the food trailer is mobile, the location must be on a property and/or with a business that has a commissary (commercial) kitchen. Suggestions or connections to possible locations could increase both sales and training opportunities are welcome!

[Learn more](#)



### Bridging the Gap: Empowering Neurodiverse Employment

Skills of Life Cafe



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