



# Freedom CAFÉ

**A Business Case Study for  
Building a Wellbeing Economy**

**By PivotAll**

## Case Study Summary

This case study reveals the challenges and learnings from a specialty café in Durham, New Hampshire, that strives to end human trafficking and the commercial exploitation of all people. In this case study we cover several key considerations when operating a mission-aligned business, including a pay-what-you-want pricing model, unique approaches to growth, and sustainably operating a mission-aligned business.

## About the Case Study Subject

**The Freedom Café:** Ending Human Trafficking One Ethically Sourced Cup at a Time

The Freedom Café, co-founded following a student trip to serve survivors of bonded slavery in Nepal, is a café dedicated to ending human trafficking and the commercial exploitation of all people. The Freedom Café provides a collaborative and lively third space that invites the local community to engage the issue and take action toward a world free of human trafficking. Situated near the University of New Hampshire in the town of Durham, the café serves consciously sourced drinks, baked goods, crepes, and breakfast sandwiches in an inviting space, empowering students and local residents.<sup>1</sup>



## About PivotAll

**PivotAll:** Pivoting Businesses to a Purpose-Driven Economy

At PivotAll (pi·vuh·tl), we are working to pivot from "business-as-usual" to "business-that-benefits" all. We believe in transforming traditional business models into ones that prioritize social and environmental impact. Our team works closely with businesses to identify areas where they can pivot their operations to benefit not just their bottom line but also the communities they serve. Together, we can create a sustainable future.



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<sup>1</sup> "Who We Are." The Freedom Café. Accessed June 4, 2026. <https://thefreedomcafe.org/about-us>.

# Acknowledgements

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PivotAll also acknowledges that the residence and place of business of the Freedom Café are situated on the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Pennacook, Wabanaki (Dawnland Confederacy) and the N'dakina (Abenaki / Abénaquis) peoples. The author acknowledges that his residence and place of work are situated on part of Naumkeag, a traditional and ancestral homeland of the Pawtucket band of the Massachusett tribe. We acknowledge the genocide and forced removal of the people of Naumkeag and their kin and recognize the ongoing colonization and dispossession of Indigenous homelands.

# Case study details and credits

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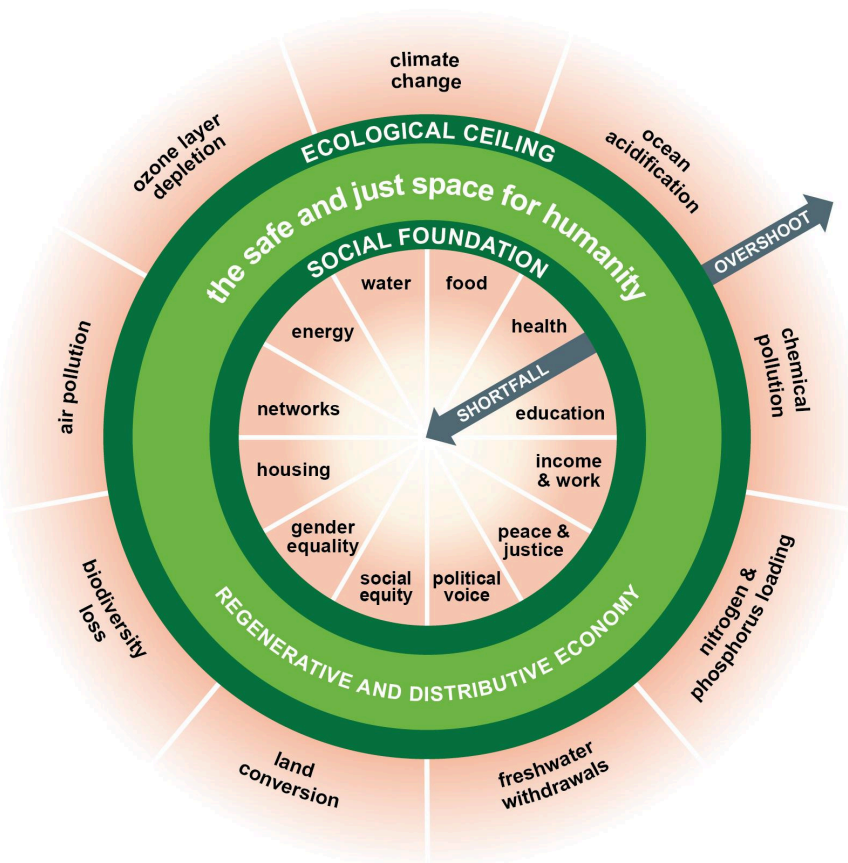
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# What do we mean by a 'Wellbeing Economy'?

A “wellbeing economy” describes an economic system that is *intentionally designed* to prioritize wellbeing for all. This kind of economy stands in stark contrast to growth-based economic models, which are what the United States and most other countries across the world have officially pursued since the 20th century in terms of economic policy.

Growth-based economies prioritize the growth of a single indicator called gross domestic product (GDP). This is a number that measures national income, or the sum of all monetary transactions within the formal economy, over a certain time period, typically a year.



The “Doughnut” model for designing and assessing a wellbeing economy, developed by economist Kate Raworth.

Unlike a wellbeing economy, a growth-based economy is not intentionally designed to prioritize wellbeing. As a result, even as GDP grows, key social and ecological indicators – from life expectancy to biodiversity – are suffering both nationally and globally. This is because GDP is just an aggregate number; it provides too little information, excluding what matters to us, while ignoring what causes harm. Under such a system, businesses are rewarded for prioritizing power and profits at the expense of the common good.

That’s why PivotAll is inspired by fields of research – such as degrowth, post-growth, and doughnut economics – that align with the vision of an economy centered on shared wellbeing rather than abstract growth targets. In many ways, the wellbeing economy already exists in small pockets all over the United States.

We see it in creative and innovative business models and business owners who have figured out how to do the right thing for their workers, their communities, and the environment. We hope business case studies such as this one can inspire other businesses to pivot from business-as-usual to business-that-benefits all. Eventually, the wellbeing economy will be here before we know it.

# Case study introduction

The Freedom Café is a nonprofit café<sup>2</sup> dedicated to ending human trafficking and the commercial exploitation of people. The café fosters a unique community space that invites the locals of Durham, New Hampshire, and students at the nearby University of New Hampshire (UNH), to collaborate, express themselves, and take action toward a world free of human trafficking. Whether buying a cup of coffee or attending one of the café's many special events, the café and its co-founder, Bryan Bessette, seek to educate visitors about the nuances and root causes of human trafficking, the actions necessary for preventing it, and ways to support reputable organizations working to bring about a world where all people are free.

The Freedom Café serves food and drinks made with consciously and ethically sourced ingredients, following a pay-what-you-can model. This model is bolstered by a suggested donation to the cause based on what a customer might pay for their purchase at other coffee shops. Café proceeds support initiatives fighting human trafficking. This includes educational programming at the café and supporting the work of partner organizations, such as the New Hampshire Human Trafficking Collaborative Task Force, Love 146, and Stop The Traffik<sup>3</sup>. They raise additional funds for these partners through “round-up” payment options at the café register.



The Freedom Café has a volunteer program that equips dozens of individuals each year, the majority of whom are high school and college students, to be advocates in the fight against human trafficking. Through a series of onboarding modules, this program focuses on three pillars of the café's training goals: the café itself, the issue of human trafficking, and what it means to provide “radical hospitality,” as coined by Bryan. The Freedom Café's strategic location adjacent to UNH's campus allows it to bring its mission to future leaders who can carry their experience in the café community forward in various career paths. Furthermore, its close

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<sup>2</sup> For key differences between for-profit and nonprofit businesses, see Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> “Partners.” The Freedom Café. Accessed June 4, 2026. <https://thefreedomcafe.org/partners>.

ties with UNH's artistic communities regularly attract volunteers motivated to offer artistic expression on the issue of human trafficking and related social problems, highlighted throughout the year at the café.<sup>4</sup>

The café has a non-traditional business model, operating as a 501c3 nonprofit organization despite having the revenue streams of a more traditional food service business. That said, the café's pay-what-you-want pricing structure makes the business unique. While unconventional, the business is financially stable under this model and even considering opening a second location. The Freedom Café's unflinching commitment to its mission and quality makes these strategies viable. It reduces labor costs by attracting volunteers and interns, while ensuring a constant customer base as the café can rely on positive reviews of the quality of its product alongside its unique mission and offering.

## How the Freedom Café began

The Freedom Café was born out of Bryan's days as a chaplain and ethics teacher. Bryan always lets his "big heart" lead his work. Therefore, in his ethics course, he and his students would pick one nonprofit every year to work with, asking themselves: "How do we identify a social challenge and imagine a future that has full justice? And then, what are the action steps we can take, and mitigate the negative consequences of that action?" In 2011, Bryan's course was linked by True Sojourners with the Grace Foundation<sup>5</sup>, supporting survivors of bonded slavery in Nepal.

In 2011, Bryan took a group of students to Nepal to be part of a team serving bonded slavery survivors. Prior to their departure, the group endeavored upon their "One More for Nepal" campaign, raising \$3,600 in bars in downtown Durham on a random Thursday night. These funds supported micro economic loans in the form of goats for single female survivors, as well as the materials for a clinic. In this campaign, the UNH crew recognized the desire of their university community and its town of Durham, NH, to bring meaningful change to issues such as human trafficking.

The team's experience in Nepal itself was both a personal catalyst for many members, and a catalyst for Bryan's future business. While some Nepalese were thriving, others were forced to sell their children to forced labor – mainly brick-building and sex trade – to survive. These communities did not have enough support and trauma-informed care. To construct a clinic for the Grace Foundation would cost roughly \$3,600; in this need, an empowered student decided to leverage the care of the Durham community. The Freedom Café website summarizes, "many times we are affected by an issue, but don't know what to do about it, so [we] decided to create a simple pathway for people to get involved." Accordingly, the group successfully ran their first open mic night for the Durham community, named "Perform for Freedom", on February 6, 2013.

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<sup>4</sup> "Who We Are." The Freedom Café. <https://thefreedomcafe.org/about-us>.

<sup>5</sup> "Bridge to Nepal." True Sojourners. <https://give.truesojourners.org/bridge2nepal>.

Employing a pay-what-you-want model for food, beverages, and donations, Bryan and his students raised the funds needed for the construction of the clinic in Nepal.

The generosity of these locals showed Bryan how much people care about this mission, and their willingness to give. Bryan and his group of students continued to learn from survivors of human trafficking through the UNH Law School, claiming it “felt really easy at first to take that step,” after the social support from their night fundraising at local bars and at the open mic. With their knowledge base building, the group started weekly meetings, and turned the initial Perform for Freedom into an ongoing weekly series of open mics that, in the fall of 2013, escalated into the first iteration of the café model, with volunteers and a business plan. This plan was sponsored by a UNH student organization, who helped the Freedom Café get off the ground.



As the Freedom Café continued operating, the University insisted upon the formalization of their model as a nonprofit because revenue was constantly running through the café. Therefore, in 2014, Bryan and his team began the board formation process. The café partnered with law firm Nixon Peabody to assist in the paperwork and legal processes towards becoming a nonprofit. Finally, on April 3, 2015, the café submitted its application to become a 501c3

organization, and was approved later that year while the UNH community was on Christmas Break.

Bryan emphasized that the café began with zero overhead, instead relying upon the strength and pooled resources of the Durham community. The initial café space was in an underutilized office building on Mill Road, once a UNH fraternity house. When Bryan asked the landlord for permission to operate the café out of the building, the landlord took Bryan’s request a step further, gifting a plethora of leftover coffee and tea equipment from a previous tea business venture that went bankrupt. The café quickly ran into zoning issues, as the former frat house building was zoned as a student organizational center. However, Bryan’s close relationships on the town zoning board helped him navigate this process with relative ease. He cites the importance of relationships, particularly the way in which the community of Durham sought to engage in and support the cause to end human trafficking.

## The services: Full-service café and programming

The Freedom Café now operates as a full-service café serving consciously sourced drinks, baked goods, crepes, and breakfast sandwiches. The café is meant as a place of connection with the community, hosting events to foster awareness of human trafficking and galvanizing support for the movement to end human trafficking. The business hopes that its space will help customers learn how organizations are fighting human trafficking through prevention, legislation, intervention and survivor after-care.

### **Pay-what-you-want model**

Freedom Café's pay-what-you-want payment model has remained from the original Perform for Freedom open mic nights. All items are served for a recommended donation based on what one might pay at other coffee shops. Bryan cited the Panera Bread series of stores that used this model as the café's inspiration. These Paneras, together labeled Panera Cares, were located in economically diverse areas and run by nonprofits tackling food insecurity. The stores closed in 2019<sup>6</sup>, ultimately unsustainable because Panera Cares was dependent on the profitability of its parent company, Panera, LLC, and thus heavily embedded within traditional growth-dependent models<sup>7</sup>.

Bryan notes the model requires in-person nudging to ensure the Freedom Café meets its revenue goals. For example, using language like: "your recommended donation today is \$7.50. Does that sound good?" With such prompting, Bryan finds about 98% of people pay at least the minimum, while around 70% round up to the nearest dollar.

The café makes sure to onboard new customers with this process, so no one is caught off guard by the approach. Team members greet café guests by introducing the Freedom Café's mission and current fundraising goal, so customers know what they are contributing to. This face-to-face interaction is highly effective in encouraging customers to contribute the recommended amount while effectively contributing to the café's mission of educating guests on human trafficking. However, it does limit fast-paced expansions and potential revenue streams, including delivery.

This unique payment plan allows everyone to pay what they can afford while being more aware of what they are paying for, but Bryan and his team recognize the potential issues – particularly as they consider expansion to new locations. They postulate that the success of the model may stem from their location in a college town, or the social stigma of 'receiving' a gift as opposed to 'offering' one. Taking learnings from the Panera Cares experiment and acknowledging the

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<sup>6</sup> Cornish, Audie. All Things Considered: What Happened When Panera Launched A "Pay What You Can" Experiment. Other. Planet Money by NPR, January 24, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Ishak, Natasha. "Panera Cares, but for How Long?" CommonWealth Beacon, October 10, 2017.

boundaries in which a “pay-what-you-want” is most effective, the Freedom Café team is strategically eyeing their next expansion.

## Programming and education

Programming is integral to the café’s purpose-driven education. The presentations, discussion groups, community events, and more serve the core of Freedom Café’s mission: to activate others to take action towards a trafficking-free world. To Bryan, this activation can range from simple choices, like an attendee donating financial support and sharing their experience at the café with family and friends, to larger changes like pivoting a volunteer’s career trajectory to professionally supporting trafficking survivors.

The Freedom Café’s programming includes a variety of events, such as Open Mic Nights, Seed to Cup Seminars on the supply chain process for regular commodities, or Freedom Friday Teen Nights, in which teens can engage in the material through a night of music and activism.

Music nights, whether through the Freedom Friday Teen Nights or a scheduled Live Band event, are a particularly important piece of community organizing for Bryan and the team. The musicians serve as another form of activation, as they find a space to try new things with their musical talent and passion, investing their abilities to bring people together for a shared cause.



Unique to the Freedom Café’s programming is its emphasis on education and engagement around the issue of human trafficking. The café educates its guests on the complexities of the issue, its root causes, human trafficking prevention, and ways to support viable organizations dedicated to this same mission. Recognizing the tie between everyday commodities and human trafficking – whether exploitation of migrant farm labor in the United States or child labor on West African cocoa farms – conscious consumerism is key for the Freedom Café. Bryan has, since the café’s beginnings, framed its rhetoric around making people aware of the ways in

which we are all connected to exploitation, and how our purchases inform global human trafficking.

Navigating this message in the political climate of 2026 has increasingly become a challenge, with high levels of political co-optation and polarization around human trafficking. Beyond the politicization of certain topics, conscious consumerism has increasingly been critiqued as a driver of consumer behavior that changes nothing at the systemic level; serving as a relief to consumer guilt as opposed to a pathway towards change<sup>8 9</sup>. Bryan has no holds barred about the lack of global impact from one consumer decision, recognizing that “corporations are doing incredible amounts of greenwashing,” and “whether you care or not, they are making money.” However, he still sees power in the chance to critically engage in a topic like human trafficking as part of one’s day. Whether stopping by for a coffee on a commute to work or attending an open mic night, Bryan believes in the run-on effects that one carries with them into their daily routines and communities of family, co-workers, and friends.

Between the passion, education, and community found in the Freedom Café’s regular programming, a strong sense of purpose is built. Bryan has discovered that many of the most consistent volunteers come from the community cultivated by these events, which provide a welcoming third-space free of alcohol. This creates a self-reinforcing structure that makes the Freedom Café’s way of doing business sustainable, especially in a university town with high turnover. Its business model, where profits go entirely to the cause, fosters a shared purpose and community activation. While it depends on high levels of volunteerism to operate, the community events and programming thoughtfully engage café guests and foster a sense of shared purpose and community, keeping people around as volunteers and deepening the business’s collective resiliency.

This approach is not limited to the Freedom Café and other nonprofit businesses that build up a repertoire of volunteerism. For example, the Park Slope Food Coop in Brooklyn, NY, has operated as a member-owned and operated food store since 1973, presenting an alternative to commercial profit-oriented business. This business requires members to contribute their labor, finding “working together builds trust through cooperation and teamwork and enables us to keep prices as low as possible within the context of our values and principles”<sup>10</sup>. Similar to the Freedom Café, Park Slope offers regular events to its members, now numbering over 17,000<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Gathen, Andreas von der, Nicolai Broby Eckert, and Caroline Kastbjerg. “The Myth of the Sustainable Consumer.” MIT Sloan Management Review no. Winter 2025, November 14, 2024, <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-myth-of-the-sustainable-consumer/>.

<sup>9</sup> Cole, Nicki Lisa. “The Promise and Contradictions of Ethical Consumerism,” *Consumers, Commodities & Consumption*, Vol. 12 (No. 2), May 2011, <https://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu/newsletters/12-2/cole.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Foodcoop.com. “Park Slope Food Coop, 1973-2023 50 Years of Cooperation & Community.” ParkSlopeFoodCoop. <https://www.foodcoop.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> Foodcoop.com. “Essentials of Coop Membership.” ParkSlopeFoodCoop. <https://www.foodcoop.com/ort-about/>.

# The process: Volunteer staffing, scaling deep, and refusing to compromise

## Volunteer staffing

When the Freedom Café began, it was entirely volunteer-staffed, and Bryan was the only salaried employee. This changed when the café moved into their new location on Main Street in the summer of 2021 and acquired a food license. As of June 2026, barista staff are paid \$12 to \$14 per-hour plus tips, Angie, the kitchen manager hired in September of 2025, is salaried at \$22 per-hour plus tips for counter time, and Bryan is salaried at \$26 per-hour plus tips for cafe counter time. Additionally, the café has three UNH work-study employees and pays 50 percent of their salary plus tips, with the other 50 percent paid by their work study grant. These students usually work 10 to 12 hours a week.

The café has a few volunteers who support behind the counter a couple of hours per week providing hospitality, taking orders, and serving guests. However, the majority of volunteers focus on educational event support and communication of mission. Considering the centrality of the mission to the Freedom Café's process and Bryan's focus on activating people through programming and education, developing a robust volunteer program is essential to the business.

Therefore, Bryan heavily invests in the mentorship of volunteers, especially students coming from UNH, a natural fit for "sparking action." As part of this investment, he encourages boundaries among the volunteers, referencing a particular group of students that were working eight to twelve hours a week. While this was the most impactful season at the café, they all became burnt out and needed to step back the following spring. From this, Bryan learnt that leading in this space means inviting staff to set boundaries, even when they do not know they need them.



Additionally, the café conducts a survey every semester for employees and volunteers about feedback on the organization's mission, employee treatment, ideas for growth, ideas for innovation, and more. This heavily informs each iteration of the volunteer program, and presents opportunities for a more democratic, collaborative, and innovative workplace.

## Scaling deep

Scaling deep, understood in systems practice circles as “the deep personal and broad cultural transformational work required to create durable systems change”<sup>12</sup>, is essential to the Freedom Café's work. Bryan emphasizes, “our purpose is to activate people,” whether this activation comes from rounding up a donation at the counter, or redirecting one's life path to be centered on fighting human trafficking.

Scaling deep has been a major success for the Freedom Café. In a 2025 podcast interview with ‘Granite Goodness,’<sup>13</sup> Bryan cites the story of one young person who attended a Perform for Freedom night after hearing the Freedom Café was raising funds for a clinic in Nepal, the home country of her roommate. After getting excited by the vision and purpose, the student raised \$250 from friends and family while home on winter break, returning to donate it to the cause. Bryan suggested trying to double the money by matching every dollar donated at the next Perform for Freedom night. The event overachieved, gathering \$636 and empowering the student so much that she helped form a Freedom Café outreach team. Alongside five other inspired students, the team created a curriculum to circulate around UNH. By the end of the spring semester, the group had facilitated 23 education events on campus and connected with over 900 students – all because of the activation of one student. After discovering her passion to address exploitation, this same student decided to change their major to social work and later became the New Hampshire Task Force's first social worker to work directly with human trafficking victims in the state.

Another former regular open mic attendee and performer shared, "Going to the Freedom Café every Wednesday night during my time at UNH taught me about community. When I think back about the Freedom Café, and the mission to secure human rights for those in need, I see that it has become a part of me as a public health graduate student at Cornell"<sup>14</sup>.

These are the types of activations that allow for both business exposure and deep systems change, creating another self-reinforcing process that fosters the mutual flourishing of the business and the cause to which it is dedicated. Bryan would like to build the capacity to track these activation outcomes. The café has about a dozen case studies as of April 2026, but they have struggled to get the staffing for this particular task. He is planning a survey of 375 current

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<sup>12</sup> “Scale Deep.” The Systems Sanctuary. <https://systemsanctuary.com/scale-deep>.

<sup>13</sup> Demeo, Andy, and Bessette, Bryan. “A Cafe, but it Fights Human Trafficking,” Granite Goodness, March 25, 2025.

<https://www.granitegoodness.com/p/44-bryan-bessette-the-freedom-cafe>

<sup>14</sup> Bessette, Bryan. “Looking Back on 10 Years of Perform for Freedom!”, The Freedom Café (blog), April 17, 2023.

<https://thefreedomcafe.org/blog/2023/5/31/looking-back-on-10-years-of-perform-for-freedom>.

and former volunteers spanning the breadth of the café's operation to assist in this process.

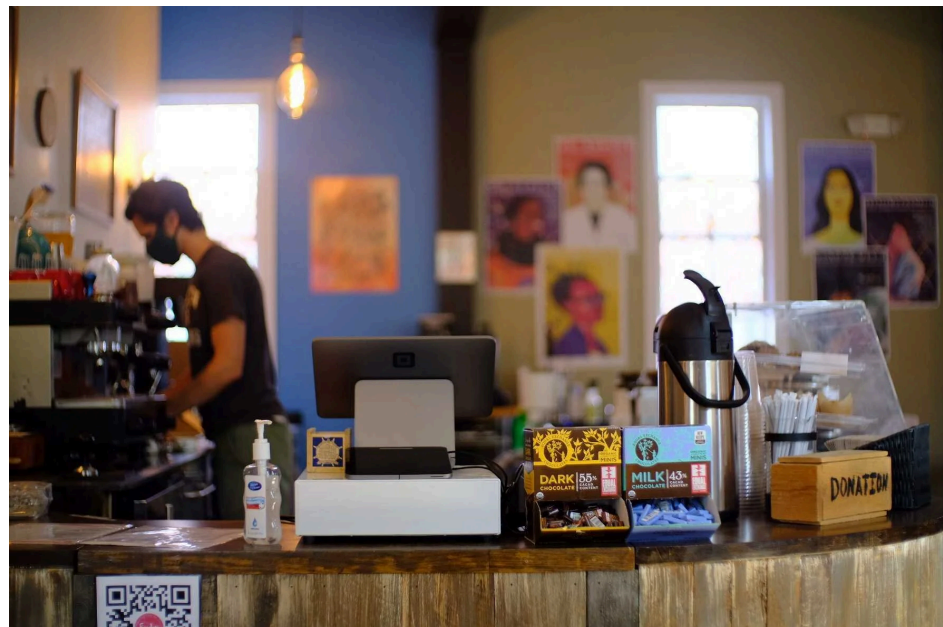
## Refusing to compromise

In the pursuit of deep systems change, “one ethically sourced cup at a time”<sup>15</sup>, the Freedom Café has long faced tension around generating more profit through products that may be marginally less sustainable or ethical.

The café originally did not have the necessary license to make its own food and could not find a sustainable bakery, so it did not sell food until it discovered a bakery that was willing to change its sugar and chocolate chips to fit the café's direction. This heavily limited the café's initial profits and inspired them to lean into the “specialty coffee” direction.

Bryan admits that this aggressive, no-compromises attitude is not for everyone; it may be a challenge for a for-profit business to sustain this when initially starting up. However, he emphasizes, “the more deeply connected we are, the more sustainable we are.” For example, despite the slower growth of profit due to Bryan's refusal to compromise, a local for-profit bakery changed their supply chain to better align with the Freedom Café's mission, supporting the café's theory of scaling deep to create systems change.

These difficult decisions were not limited to the early stages of the business. Bryan mentions a group of volunteers who took the initiative to sell a branded mug with chocolate. However, sourcing a sustainable mug and chocolate would reduce the café's profit by sixty-seven percent, leading the volunteer students to suggest the café source the less sustainable option. Bryan used the opportunity to gently reinforce the importance of scaling deep, centering the café's mission in all decisions. The café regularly asks itself: “do the ends justify the means, or vice versa?”; always trying to find a win-win, “which can be a slow, deliberative process.”



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<sup>15</sup> The Freedom Café. <https://thefreedomcafe.org/>.

# Financials, operations, and approach to growth

## Financials

The Freedom Café is committed to being open and transparent about their finances and organizational practices.

All proceeds from the Freedom Café support projects and initiatives to end human trafficking and the commercial exploitation of people. Around seventy to eighty percent of the suggested donation that customers are prompted with goes towards the cost of goods sold and the staff time included in the price of a coffee. Bryan labels this as the main program of the café: keeping the coffee shop running and maintaining the space for engagement. The remainder of the suggested donation amount is directly funneled towards supporting open mic nights, educational events, and programming.

Each January, the Freedom Café disburses funds to two or three specific programs for National Human Trafficking Awareness Month. This money is accumulated over the course of the previous year. Whenever a café customer chooses to round up their payment to the next dollar, their additional payment is set aside for this cause. The “round-up” strategy has proven substantial, with the café raising \$2,182 from round-ups alone in 2025.

The Freedom Café’s income generation model at times presents a challenge in combination with their 501c3 fundraising efforts. While nonprofits regularly operate with an expectation of donor funding, major donor and grant funders have consistently hesitated in choosing the café as a recipient.

Bryan cites two reasons for this challenge. First, many funders assume the organization can take care of itself through the café’s consistent, more traditional-style business revenue stream. Second, the Freedom Café engages in its work to address human trafficking in a relatively indirect, prevention-focused manner. While direct service organizations can tell a powerful story of number of individuals served and survivor transformation, gathering measuring sticks for big donors to gauge success, the Freedom Café does not yet have a way of measuring the direct results of activating people. As of 2025, the key statistical metrics for organizational success highlighted in the yearly impact report<sup>16</sup> were:

- Number of frontline workers and organizational leaders trained
- Number of industry-specific prevention trainings
- Number of guests welcomed into the café
- Number of advocacy and educational events
- Number of volunteers trained and supported
- Number of UNH Student Fellows supported

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<sup>16</sup> Bessette, Bryan. “2025 A Year of Action and Impact at the Freedom Café!”, The Freedom Café (blog), December 22, 2025.

<https://thefreedomcafe.org/blog/2026/1/2/2025-a-year-of-action-and-impact-at-the-freedom-caf>

- Dollar value (USD) of direct financial support to frontline partners

A key part of the café's five-year-goal is to build a robust alumni network. With 900 volunteer program alumni over the course of eleven years, the café sees its next step as building an alumni organization and prioritizing outreach; some of which is already under way. Once this is in place, the café will develop a thoughtfully-crafted survey in tandem with the UNH Survey Center to measure the full breadth and influence of its activation and impact philosophy.

The café is financially sustainable under their existing model and it is considering opening a second location. However, Bryan is unwilling to compromise on the mission, even if it might allow for more revenue streams (e.g., opening more locations, expanding to delivery). There have been many instances of people encouraging him to focus on increasing revenues through various expansion tactics, or compromising ethical sourcing to raise more money for the cause, but Bryan has resisted.

## Operations

The Freedom Café works diligently to build a supply chain with products that are traceable to their source so they can ensure the ethical treatment of the people, animals, and natural resources involved in production. For this reason, the café only works with equal exchange farming co-ops, and roasters who have a strong, highly-visible supply chain, and pay more than a fair-trade premium. All of the café's wholesale partner organizations are displayed on their website<sup>17</sup>.



Additionally, its paper hot cups are sourced to have the lightest environmental impact possible, using Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified paper. For to-go drinks served cold or room temperature, the café uses a line of special clear cups made from Poly Lactic Acid (PLA), a compostable, plant-based bio plastic derived from U.S.-grown corn. All in-café food and beverages are served with traditional reusable dishes and silverware. All of the used grounds, coffee filters, and tea leaves are composted.

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<sup>17</sup> "Partners." The Freedom Café. <https://thefreedomcafe.org/partners>.

Governance of the café is shared between Bryan and a board of directors. Bryan shares daily decision-making with kitchen manager Angie. He has personnel control and can spend \$1,000 without prior approval and justify it at a board meeting, but the board must approve major equipment purchases and full-time staff hiring. The board makes decisions about the scope of Bryan's leadership, his salary, and things of this nature. As their focus is ultimately on the accomplishment of the mission, per the café's nonprofit status, the board itself is quite business-focused and considerate of financial risk since Bryan already leads with both eyes towards mission and social impact.

Aside from Bryan, Angie, and the barista staff, the delivery of the café's mission is largely supported through volunteerism. Volunteer roles range from serving as a barista for a two-hour shift to helping in outreach, event planning, program and web development, research, communications, marketing, accounting or fundraising. The café often draws from the local university community for staff. Bryan tries to mentor the students and prevent burnout, developing their enthusiasm for the cause. He and Angie have collaborative decision making, and try to involve volunteers and other employees through a semesterly survey about the café mission, menu, and programming.

Situated in a college town, the Freedom Café serves some locals and many college students. It frequently partners with the local university, UNH, where it has roots as a student group. While this location has its perks for the café, it also results in lots of transition among its regular customers. In 2025, it had 17,000 transactions and 3,500 regulars, but Bryan says this group of regulars is set for fluctuation every year. However, he can always count on people visiting after reading reviews of the café's coffee quality, or upon learning of the unique mission and community-centric experience of the café.

## **Approach to growth**

In the early stages of the Freedom Café's development, the team of founders envisioned "the Freedom Network," in which a series of cafés would start in a variety of New England college towns and mutually thrive. At the time, however, Bryan emphasized the importance of building a stable base before trying to get multiple cafés up and running, as "growth is totally set by the amount of staffing we have, which is set by the funds we have." And while nonprofits often operate with an expectation of donor funding, the Freedom Café model is an exception. Because it has an earned-income model and measures success differently from the 501c3 norm, donors often second-guess funding the café. This is not entirely unique to the Freedom Café in the nonprofit world; the YMCA serves as an example of the same phenomenon<sup>18</sup>.

For future expansion, the Freedom Café team is focused on finding and repurposing underutilized spaces. As the Freedom Café considers expansion, with a ten-year goal of

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<sup>18</sup> Penny Anderson, "I heard it again today: "We chose not to fund your proposal because the committee felt the Y had other resources if we didn't."" LinkedIn, May 2026.  
[https://www.linkedin.com/posts/penny-anderson\\_ymca-nashville-middletennessee-share-7462889674022367232-cDAP/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/penny-anderson_ymca-nashville-middletennessee-share-7462889674022367232-cDAP/).

opening five new cafés, underutilized spaces (e.g., empty fellowship halls in old churches, or abandoned annexes in university buildings) are a critical part of their strategy. By covering insurance and utilities for the place out of which they operate, Bryan has found that the café could land themselves a space for a quarter of the price a traditional business may pay, citing the “need to look for opportunities to collaborate.”

Furthermore, Bryan thinks future expansions should be located in or near a college town, claiming: “that’s where our skill is.” When situated in a college town, Bryan believes that the café is able to make a far bigger and far more lasting impact by activating young adults who have an entire career ahead of them to consider whatever experiences or questions were prompted by their time with the Freedom Café community and build lasting values. Most immediately, the café is exploring Manchester, NH, with the University of New Hampshire at Manchester and Southern New Hampshire University nearby.



Bryan wants the café to orient itself around giving people a great experience, empowering them, and raising a little bit of money at a time. Through these items, Bryan recognizes the growth in individual people, and how that can activate them to be thoughtful, conscious consumers, who are more aware of deep needs in their own communities and more willing to get involved. He asserts that scaling deep in this way promotes larger and longer-lasting change, as opposed to scaling too quickly or getting directly involved in an issue in a community.

All proceeds from the café counter go towards initiatives to end human trafficking, which can limit the rate of business expansion. Bryan closely holds the paradox of wanting to invest in and fund as many programs as possible, while “building the strongest, most sustainable, and most revenue-generating café in the area,” admitting, “I love that [the tension] exists. It keeps fostering creativity, but in terms of growth.”

# Challenges and opportunities

## **Expansion to delivery**

One regular deliberation for the Freedom Café is the possibility of expanding to delivery. This activity would generate an additional revenue stream and UNH students have shown interest in delivery options from the café. However, they decrease the activation possibilities that are so integral to its mission. Additionally, the “name your price” options through delivery apps like Uber Eats or Grubhub are limited to different levels of cost coverage, as opposed to setting an exact price with freedom of choice. Alongside this limitation, the café would lose the impact of face-to-face social engagement and its strategies around conscious consumerism without the chance to explain the suggested donation. Furthermore, as of 2026, academic research is increasingly recognizing the overlapping physical and psychosocial demands and risks of last-mile delivery work<sup>19</sup>, jeopardizing the Freedom Café’s “do-no-harm” bedrock.

Currently, the café does utilize online ordering features for pickup, allowing for in-person interaction and payment. However, the Freedom Café team is still considering ways to integrate their mission into delivery-based models.

## **Low profit margins and lack of funding**

Between the salaries of full-time employees, donations to like-minded organizations, creating a comfortable and accessible space, educating people on human trafficking, hosting industry-specific prevention trainings, and maintaining café operations, the Freedom Café is balancing many fiscal responsibilities. These responsibilities are so heavily integrated within the organizational mission that Bryan is concerned that models to scale out profits might impact their purpose. For example, expanding to delivery may lessen the education potential of the café.

As a café, they inherently struggle with low profit margins. At the same time, despite their incorporation status, the Freedom Café struggles to receive funding from donors because of their business model. Without significant revenue streams – whether from grants or from café operations – the café has to focus on meeting its essential fiscal goals, and has little room to maneuver expansion to another location.

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<sup>19</sup> Sergio A. Useche, Sergio Traficante, Francisco J. Llamazares, Cristina Marin, “The human cost of fast deliveries: A systematic literature review of occupational risks and safety outcomes in last-mile delivery workers”, *Journal of Transport & Health*, Volume 44, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2025.102133>.

## Tracking activation outcomes

To emphasize the indirect way in which the Freedom Café makes a major impact with its mission, Bryan has been trying to build out capacity to track “activation outcomes.” As demonstrated by the case of the student who became a social worker, the activations prompted by the café can have a series of run-on effects stronger than any direct intervention.

Bryan wants to write case studies – he has about a dozen currently in mind – to continue proving the power of scaling deep. Additionally, he would like to release a survey to 375 former volunteers spanning the lifespan of the café to gather data on its impact. However, the café has struggled to get the staffing for these specific tasks.

## Messaging in the current political climate

The messaging of the Freedom Café has long been framed around conscious consumerism, emphasizing the ways in which people support exploitation in their daily purchases. However, over the last three years, human trafficking has been increasingly politically co-opted, causing Bryan to feel a bit frozen. Bryan has found the framework of conscious consumerism to feel relatively unimportant to many people in the United States, as communities increasingly distrust the federal government.



Additionally, this messaging is highly dependent on the ways in which all of us are connected to exploitation, and raising awareness about how our daily decisions treat victims and survivors of human trafficking. Unfortunately, the Department of Labor, which once provided bi-annual reports of goods known to be produced by child and forced labor, redacted their 2024 report two months following its release. As of January 2026, only solar panels and Ivory Coast chocolate have up-to-date information on unethical production practices. This withholding and misuse of information reframes exploitation as something happening “over there,” as opposed to the framework pushed by the Freedom Café. This further complicates the café’s ability to build effective messaging around human trafficking.

## Scaling out

While Bryan has always thought about scaling deep and ripple effects, he admits to increasingly considering legacy and scaling out, asking: “what does it mean to tackle systemic change beyond individual change?” The Freedom Café team is considering expansion to a second location. However, Bryan is unwilling to compromise on the mission, making it a long and arduous road to expansion.

## Takeaways for entrepreneurs and business owners

Freedom Café offers these takeaways for the business world:

1. The Freedom Café’s strategy of **running a food service business as a nonprofit can be viable and self-sustaining**, under strategically selected circumstances. A mission-driven model can attract volunteers and reduce labor costs, but requires intentional investment in mentorship and burnout prevention. Additionally, the corresponding transparency of finances and supply-chain practices may not only promote volunteerism and community support but also builds trust with customers. However, the nonprofit status creates fundraising challenges when the model resembles a for-profit business, and donors may hesitate without measurable direct-service outcomes. Depending on the goods or services offered, this may limit the business’s ability to expand.
2. **While refusing to compromise on ethics comes at a cost, it deepens mission credibility and community trust.** Holding firm on ethical sourcing may limit short-term revenue, as globalized supply chains often hide their misdeeds, making fully ethical sourcing a rare capability. Additionally, for-profit business models may struggle to make this work, particularly in their beginning stages. However, by refusing to compromise, businesses can strengthen their identity with a unique offering and community credibility. Mission-aligned businesses will also recognize the opportunity to scale deep by lifting other organizations’s standards as a result of uncompromising ethics.
3. **Community-driven, self-reinforcing business models are a powerful and sustainable tool**, as they create a virtuous cycle. In developing community- and mission-driven programming and events, a business can generate volunteers to sustain operations. Meanwhile, volunteers gain the purpose and community they were seeking, causing them to return for more. Finding a place near universities or other high-turnover communities requires these sorts of systems to onboard new customers and volunteers. This idea is not limited to nonprofits who are structured for volunteerism, but can also be applicable to certain for-profit models.

4. **Innovative pricing models come with a unique set of requirements to be sustainable.** A pay-what-you-want model is more effective with in-person prompting, clear mission framing, and opportunities for customers to “pay it forward.” As a result, this model is not easily transplanted to delivery or self-service formats. While this affects the range of revenue streams for a business, it can further strengthen its identity while building social support and trust. This strong identity and unique community-centric offering can help a business thrive, but any expansion must consider whether the pricing and engagement model can survive in a new context, as it carries risks alongside its implementation.
5. When operating a **mission-aligned business, growth requires patience**, as it must be paced to staffing and financial realities. Scaling out before building a stable foundation puts the business at risk of undermining its mission and core capabilities. While the “business-as-usual” approach heavily prioritizes internal investment for rapid scaling out, the tension between funding external causes and building internal capacity is healthy and generative, and should not be looked at as a problem to be solved.
6. **The results of scaling deep and activating others serves as proof of the healthy and generative potential of patient, mission-aligned businesses.** Building a strong internal community and developing thoughtful offerings to potential customers serves as a catalyst for businesses to make an indirect but significant impact. In gaining the capacity to track these activations, a business can deepen its mission credibility and open up opportunities for funding or mission-aligned investment.
7. Barring legal requirements, **the incorporation status of an organization need not limit their means of financing their social or environmental impact.** The Freedom Café is financially supported by an earned income model; a model associated with for-profit businesses. By blurring these lines, Bryan can prioritize social impact and mission without needing to satisfy donors seeking quantifiable results, or shareholders emphasizing financial returns. Having the option of earned income gives nonprofits more freedom to focus on their mission, worrying less on external funders to sustain operations.

## The bigger picture

The Freedom Café seeks to contribute to ending human trafficking and forced labor by tackling systemic change, one ethically sourced cup of coffee at a time. In this way, they are actively contributing to the make-up of the wellbeing economy – an economy that is intentionally designed to ensure wellbeing for all. Bryan’s approach of scaling deep and staying cognizant of the ways in which he can activate others towards change is innovative and counter-cultural to our current economic system.

This approach requires entrepreneurs to reorient their economic expectations, conventionally focused on rapid expansion and growth, towards sustainable development that serves their business and community. It requires patience, intentionality, tough decisions, and an

uncompromising devotion to the common good. But Bryan, the Freedom Café, the town of Durham, the UNH community, and the cause of ending human trafficking have all been rewarded by its results.

## Appendix: Key Differences Between For-Profit and Nonprofit Businesses

<b>For-Profit Business</b>	<b>Nonprofit Business</b>
<p><b>Control</b> The owner or shareholders control the organization.</p>	<p><b>Control</b> The Board of Directors controls the organization. This board is generally made up of representatives from the broader community.</p>
<p><b>Dissolution or Sale of Business Assets</b> A private business can be sold for profit and the proceeds distributed to the owner or shareholders. When a for-profit entity goes out of business, its assets can be liquidated and the proceeds distributed to the owner or shareholders.</p>	<p><b>Dissolution or Sale of Business Assets</b> When a nonprofit organization sells its assets, the proceeds of the sale must be used for the organization's charitable mission. If the organization is dissolved, the remaining assets are typically given to another nonprofit after all debts are paid off.</p>
<p><b>Distribution of Profits</b> A for-profit business is organized to make a profit. Excess income or profit can be distributed to the owner or shareholders.</p>	<p><b>Distribution of Profits</b> A nonprofit entity is organized to further a mission that benefits the community. Any excess income or profit must be used only to further the mission and cannot be distributed to individuals.</p>
<p><b>External Accountability</b> A for-profit business is accountable only to the owner or shareholders. The finances of for-profit businesses are scrutinized less than the finances of nonprofits.</p>	<p><b>External Accountability</b> A nonprofit entity is accountable to its stakeholders and funders, and must meet stringent standards being certified as a (income) tax-exempt entity by the IRS. The finances and management of a nonprofit entity undergo a much higher level of scrutiny than a for-profit business.</p>

<p><b>Funding</b>  The owner or shareholders usually contribute their own funds or assets (property and equipment) to the business. These contributions are not tax deductible and may be at risk if the business does not do well. The business has access to funding from shareholder equity and business loans depending on the financial condition of the business.</p>	<p><b>Funding</b>  Nonprofit entities may have access to government funds and grants, foundation grants, and corporate donations. Depending on their financial condition, nonprofit entities may also have access to conventional loans as well as loans available only to nonprofits.</p>
<p><b>Taxes</b>  For-profit businesses must pay federal and state corporate income taxes, payroll taxes, property taxes, and sales tax on purchases. In some cases, individual owners or shareholders may also pay personal income taxes on profits or dividends they receive.</p>	<p><b>Taxes</b>  Nonprofit entities are exempt from paying federal and state corporate income taxes, but must pay payroll taxes. In some states, they may be exempt from property tax or sales tax on purchases.</p>