

Benevolent Brew

Another coffeehouse? In Seattle?

America's most caffeinated city (where a single downtown intersection has no fewer than four Starbucks outlets) recently witnessed the opening of yet another haven for java junkies.

It's called Habitat Espresso, and what distinguishes this small establishment in the trendy Capitol Hill district is not its menu but its mission. All the profits that Habitat Espresso generates are being donated to local charities.

It's the brainchild of Jeff Reifman, a 27-year-old Microsoft program manager who says that he wanted to establish a business where people his age could know that the money they were spending was helping to support a good cause.

So far, the charities that have benefited from Reifman's plan include Chicken Soup Brigade, which delivers meals to homebound AIDS patients, and Childhaven, which provides a hotline and emergency foster care for parents with kids in crisis. Habitat Espresso's donations to the two agencies have been matched dollar-for-dollar with corporate contributions from Microsoft.

"Our primary goal is to generate revenue for our recipient charities while providing a comfortable space that our customers can use to support the growth of community awareness and action," Reifman says. Eventually, he adds, Habitat's customers will have a voice in "determining the projects and charities that receive our financial support."

All the coffees and teas served at Habitat Espresso are certified organic. That, the company claims, "means cleaner watersheds, the creation of habitat for birds and animals, safer conditions for farm workers, equitable pay, and a chemical-free cup of coffee." In addition, because organic coffees are typically grown on small farms, "more of the price of your coffee stays where it is most needed: in the community where the coffee was produced."

Another unique aspect of the business is its open-books policy. The company's financial statements are published on a quarterly basis and are open to public inspection. You can even check a monthly tally of its charitable donations at the Habitat Espresso Web site:

<http://www.reifman.org/home/reifman/habitat.cfm>.

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Startup and operating expenses for the coffeehouse have already amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Still Reifman and his partner, store manager Matt Gurney, are optimistic about their chances for success- even in this coffee-saturated market. "After all, we're giving people a way to support their convictions as well as their addiction," Gurney says.

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