

Written by Lauren Koble

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*Pictured left to right: Inside Cultivate Coffee; Cultivate Coffee Owners Bethany Priebe and Chris Priebe*

Located in an unassuming red brick strip mall in Sunnyslope is [Cultivate Coffee](#). Metal chairs with small tables line the front of the shop, and the door sits open at a 45-degree angle — just enough to hear the chattering buzz inside while still managing to keep the Arizona heat out. Smells of freshly ground Brazilian coffee and sweet treats pour out of the shop.

Inside, customers are met with an intriguing, mismatched collection of furniture that adds to this shop's humble appeal. Half of the space is adorned with wooden benches across from blue leather chairs coupled with metal studded tables. The other is filled with fabric couches and a low table covered in classic board games. Teal and terracotta walls are lined with an eclectic selection of local artwork that rotates every two months.

From the outside, Cultivate may look like a typical coffee shop, but to its employees and owners, it is so much more: A family. Most of the employees are homeless, refugee youth or young adults aging out of the foster care system.

"The criteria [our employees have to meet] is broad," Bethany Priebe, director and co-founder of Cultivate, says, taking a sip of warm coffee out of her ceramic mug. "[Our employees] are facing obstacles currently in their lives that hinder them from crossing into adulthood successfully. Oftentimes, they are refugees, kids aging out of foster care, but most of the time they are kids within the neighborhood who have lost a parent or are bouncing around from house to house."

## Serving neighbors near & far

Arizona natives Bethany and Chris Priebe met in high school. The couple spent their days working together at a youth-run music venue. A warm smile comes across Bethany's face as she describes organizing bands to play at the venue, working the snack bar, running a game room and building connections not only with the youth she worked alongside but with visitors. The Priebees walked away from this experience with an amazing sense of community, newly learned leadership skills and so much more.

When they got married, the Priebees had a vision to create a similar space in a community that did not have access to opportunities like they did. At this point in their lives, the two had been working for nonprofits. They had no offices and commonly found themselves meeting and spending time in coffee shops. Realizing their lives revolved around coffee, they started creating a vision for Cultivate.

"We wanted to bring a gathering space into the community," says Bethany. "We wanted it to be tangible, where youth could get actual life mentoring and job experience. We love how people came together over coffee and how [coffee shops] serve as a place of connection."

The couple sat on the idea for several years before asking themselves what they could do to get the ball rolling. It was on a trip to Yellowstone that they began to brainstorm different names, logos and business plans for their potential shop. They learned to look at what was right in front of them and focus on what they could do in the present rather than obsess about the future.

Receiving a donation of \$3,000 was just the kickstart the Priebees needed for Cultivate. Chris figured out how to build his own coffee roaster for \$1,000 to avoid spending five figures on a commercial one. He engineered a way to use a barbecue with a rotating drum to roast the coffee. They used the remaining donated funds to buy ethically sourced coffee beans.

"We want to serve our neighbors both near and far," says Chris. "But, you can't just Google 'Who sells ethical coffee?' Luckily, the coffee community in Phoenix is open, and I was able to talk to shop owners and roasters about where they source their coffee from. We wanted to make sure the farms we were buying from were doing something to take care of their local community too, while still providing high-quality beans."

Daterra Coffee is a farm in Brazil that does just that. This specific farm that Cultivate partners with employs single women who have faced traumatic or difficult experiences throughout their lives. The farm provides them with opportunities to earn fair and equitable pay.

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## The light at the end of the tunnel

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The Priebe launched Cultivate in their home during the summer of 2018, using their handmade roaster. Working from their home was not an ideal setting with three kids and a dog all running around. Even though the two didn't have much money, they realized they needed to find a space for Cultivate to be able to flourish.

The couple found a co-working space where they could keep their roaster outside underneath a stairwell for just \$100 a month. With that arrangement, they were able to use a common space once a week to meet with the youth they had started working with.

"We fed them dinner and paid them to package our coffee if they agreed to go through a set curriculum with us," Chris says while sipping his coffee. "We wanted them to be ready to get jobs. Most importantly, we wanted to show them even with limited resources it is possible to be successful if you take risks."

After being in the shared workspace for a few months, the couple had generated enough revenue to build a coffee trailer. The business was a quick success, and they felt like they finally had space to grow. All of a sudden, two weeks before Christmas 2018, the shared workspace went bankrupt and all of the tenants were forced out. Just three days after that, their trailer was stolen along with 600 pounds of coffee, a generator and all of their roasting supplies.

"Not only did we lose our roasting space, but we lost the space where we would work with the youth," Chris says with a solemn face. "We had no money in the bank. So we figured we were done."

Without their knowledge, someone reached out to the news on their behalf. A GoFundMe was created for them, and all of a sudden the Priebe started receiving donations. Although the donations were realistically not enough to start a coffee shop, the Priebe took another leap of faith. They had faced obstacles before, but with the outpouring of community support, it seemed the odds were in their favor. In February 2019, they got the keys to the suite in the unassuming red brick strip mall.

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## Why Sunnyslope?



Coming into this new space was both overwhelming and exciting, Chris recalls. There was a lot of work that needed to be done before they could open their doors. The floors, plumbing, bathroom and electrical all needed to be fixed. People from the community chipped in to help Cultivate become what it is today. A friend of the Priebe came out and painted the shop for free, while others donated furniture. Six months later Cultivate celebrated its opening day.

"We didn't want it to feel like you're walking into a nonprofit," Bethany says while proudly glancing around the shop. "We didn't want it to have donated furniture and subpar drinks like some may expect from a nonprofit. We wanted someone who may not know our story to walk in and be shocked that we are a nonprofit because we meet the quality and level of professionalism of a craft coffee shop."

The Priebe felt as if they had a duty to take care of the community their shop benefits from. Nestled between million-dollar homes and methadone clinics, Cultivate serves as a place for everyone. Within the same hour, a lawyer and a person experiencing homelessness could

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both be in Cultivate enjoying a cup of coffee.

"There is so much diversity in Sunnyslope," says Chris. "That can be a hard thing, but we think it can also be very beautiful."

From the beginning, Cultivate has had an outpouring of community support. When a chain coffee shop opened in the same strip mall, regular and new customers alike came to Cultivate on the other shop's opening day. They wanted to show support for the local small business, according to Chris.

The youth at the shop spend time building relationships with the customers. They get to share their stories and become friends. It is a great way for them to build communication skills.

Devontae Reed first stopped in to Cultivate by accident. One day on his drive to work, the Starbucks he normally went to was closed. He decided to stop at a mom-and-pop coffee shop, which happened to be Cultivate. After trying their famous Kentucky Joe cold brew, Reed, a cold brew connoisseur, was hooked. The attention to detail is what caught his eye first.

"It's the little things," says Reed. "When you make your own breakfast you pay attention to how much salt you use. It's the little things that matter. Big chains can't focus on the small things because the drinks need to be the same at every location."

Now a regular for almost two years, Reed has not only developed a deep admiration for the Kentucky Joe cold brew, but also for the Cultivate community. He comes to get his Kentucky Joe almost every morning before work to kick off the day. After work, you might find him getting his second cold brew of the day and chatting with the staff and other regulars at Cultivate.

"I love these people," says Reed. "I wish I had a place to come to like this when I was younger."

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## More than a coffee shop



There were two main points of focus when the couple was brainstorming the foundation for the shop. Cultivate needed to be a place that generated income, but also worked simultaneously as a chance to employ underprivileged youth.

The Priebees work to provide leadership opportunities and life skills for these individuals in addition to jobs behind the bar making coffee. They are challenged to use the space to improve the community, build tangible skills and prepare their newly learned transferable job skills for the current market. The shop and its owners take two yearly cohorts usually made up of between five to 10 teens and young adults.

The first Cultivate cohort focuses on employability. In this three-month program, the youth have a paid internship at the shop. They receive on-the-job training, which usually includes how to make different coffee orders, how to communicate with customers and your boss or bosses—in this case, the Priebees—and the importance of being on time for work.

In addition to working at the coffee shop, participants have weekly dinners where they learn different skill sets, which aids them as they eventually move on to different jobs in the future. Some of those skills include resume building, practice interviews, professional communication and more. After they complete the three-month program, there are a few different outcomes.

If a youth demonstrates hard work and dedication to Cultivate and the coffee community, they are asked to stay on as a staff member. In some cases, a youth may be better suited to working in a field that interests them more. The Priebees work to partner the youth with other businesses that agree to give them a chance. Some of the Cultivate youth have gone on to work in salons, restaurants or maintenance jobs. The third outcome is meant to give those who still need some training the chance to continue with Cultivate. They offer them the opportunity to volunteer to keep building their employability skills.

The newest cohort Cultivate offers focuses on entrepreneurship. In this cohort, the Priebees host weekly dinners and discuss what it takes to become an entrepreneur. To help out, they hired longtime friend Anthony Suarez as the program facilitator. With a background in youth ministry and education, he works to provide different types of training to the entrepreneurship cohort.

"I've never started my own business, but I know a lot of people that have," says Suarez. "So for me, I had to ask myself, 'How do I pull in other people to help with the things that I don't know?'"

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Soon after Suarez took on his role as the program facilitator, Cultivate started working with Hustle PHX, a nonprofit whose mission is to empower individuals from inner-city and urban communities with tools and resources to help them start and grow businesses. They coined their name from the term hustlers, which they outline in their [vision statement](#) as “risk-takers who seize the opportunity to move product and turn a profit.”

Hustle PHX provides a curriculum for the cohort focusing on what it takes to start your own business. Cultivate plans on starting a 202-level course focusing more on supply and demand as well as budgeting. They hope to dive more into the logistics of owning your own business and teach the cohort the tangible skills they need to be successful.

They are looking to expand into a second space to have more flexibility since right now they can only meet after shop hours. [The “Collective”](#) will be set up as half studio and half retail space. There will be a wide variety of tools, from sewing machines and woodworking devices to 3D printers at the youths’ disposal.

An important part of Hustle PHX’s curriculum is finding your why, as Suarez puts it. The cohort spends time taking personality tests and answering questions like, “Why do you do the things you do?” and “How have you been shaped by your family, environment and community?”

“For a lot of our youth, no one has taken the time to ask them those questions about themselves,” Suarez says with a smile painted across his face. “Sometimes we don’t know the waters we swim in and finding the answers to those questions can be the air that you need to breathe.”

Suarez says it has been beneficial for the youth to figure out their why because “when things go bad or sideways they will need to be able to lean on their mission or purpose.”

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## Finding a family



*The Priebees with Cultivate Coffee community members*

Being a patient sitter for people with suicidal thoughts at John C. Lincoln Medical Center in Phoenix is not what Ethan King expected to be doing at 21. He was born in Hayward, Calif., and spent most of his childhood there. Working odd jobs to help his family make ends meet, King started his own yard cleaning business. At the time, many of his peers were involved in illicit activities, like dealing drugs or stealing car parts, to earn income.

He didn’t always make the best decisions. King became homeless and, eventually at 15, he moved to Arizona. He worked in construction for a year before returning to school and enrolling at The Learning Institute in Phoenix where he met Bethany. When he first met Bethany, Cultivate was only in its beginning stages. Within a few months, King became part of the first Cultivate cohort and helped with the shop’s grand opening.

“Bethany always treats people nice,” says King. “She’s genuine and keeps it real. She and Chris helped me through my ups and downs. They are a strong anchor [for me] to have. They don’t just brush it off when I tell them I have been struggling. They let me know they’ll always be there for me.”

He developed a sense of family with his fellow cohort members, as well as the Priebees. In the few years King has known everyone, they have left a lasting impact on him. When King first came to Cultivate, he struggled with being open to learning from someone else’s perspective. He grew to realize that people did care about him and the decisions he made. He wants to show everyone who had helped him that the love they showed him wasn’t for nothing.

The biggest lesson King says he learned, though, was to not compare his life to someone else’s. Nobody will completely understand another

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person's life story because they can only explain it to a certain extent. You can't go around judging people and making assumptions because as King puts it, "people change like the seasons."

Sitting across from him at the table, I asked a rather broad question, "Where would you be without Cultivate?"

"Without Cultivate, my journey would be a lot more lonely and a lot harder," King says after pondering the question while his eyes glance around the shop. "It would have been less bright, and I honestly don't know where I'd be now. There are times when I've had no one, but since God led me to Cultivate I know I have everyone here to support me."

King is now working to start his new adventure, The Go To Spot. After taking some time off from Cultivate, he rejoined the shop for their brand-new entrepreneurship cohort. With the newly developed skills he has learned, King began making a model for his dream business. He wants The Go To Spot to be an all-in-one barber shop, music studio, tattoo parlor and cosmetology salon. He hopes to have booths for people to sell their own creations in a classic pop-up shop fashion.

"It's a big vision," says King, chuckling with a bright smile stretching across his face. "It will be a fun, positive and loving spot where everyone can go. I want people to be able to bring their own ideas to the table and make money doing what they love. It's a big vision, but I know it's gonna be possible."

Just like the Priebes, King knows he has to take it one small step at a time.

*Cultivate Coffee is located at 505 W. Dunlap Ave., Suite E, Phoenix, AZ 85021.*

Learn more at [www.cultivatecoffee.org](http://www.cultivatecoffee.org).

*Photos courtesy Cultivate Coffee*