

North Dakota Coffee Shop Operates on Honor System

DAVE KOLPACK, Associated Press

VALLEY CITY, N.D. (AP) — The owner of a North Dakota coffee shop is flattered his decision to operate the business on the honor system garnered international attention earlier this summer, but those who equate it to the goodness of all humanity might want to help themselves to a decaf K-Cup.

David Brekke says it's about small-town living where people know their neighbors.

Brekke and his wife, Kimberly, run The Vault coffee shop in Valley City, a town of about 6,700 people that's about 45 minutes from Fargo. They renovated a nearly 100-year-old bank building and cut down on overhead by cutting out baristas.

The food and drink is located on a refurbished teller counter at the front of the shop. Coffee lovers can choose java from a commercial brewer, complete with gourmet creams and flavorings, or individual servings from a Keurig brewing system, or K-Cups. There also are soft drinks and homemade pastries.

This unusual setup has given customers a sense of ownership, helped revitalize the city's downtown — and, in the first 10 months of the business, brought in about 15 percent more money than the asking price.

"I think that people who haven't grown up in a small, tight-knit community like this are very surprised by honesty," Brekke said.

For David Brekke, who works from home as a business consultant, the idea seemed logical. He grew up in a small town in Minnesota where one of his neighbors used to leave corn on the cob in the yard with a cardboard box as cash register.

"Nobody ever took the box with the money in it," Brekke said.

The Vault's customers can pay by credit card, cash or check. There's a note below the cash slot that says "No. I.O.U.s." Another placard notes that exact change is not necessary ... "round down and give yourself a break or round up and help us stay in business."

Yes, there are security cameras, but so far there hasn't been much to view, Brekke said.

Brekke has turned the space with high ceilings, mammoth windows and unique architecture into a gallery of sorts. It features artwork by local artists, used books for sale, two pianos, Wi-Fi and a cupboard with games. Much of the furniture was donated by residents.

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"When people heard about it, they just started dropping things off, to make it work," Brekke said.

It has become the hub of Central Avenue. In addition to regular gatherings, the shop hosts concerts, independent film screenings and club meetings. Next year a wedding is planned. Customers can stay as long as they like, but the shop closes at 9 p.m. in the summer and 10 p.m. in the winter.

Nita Warcken, 14, said she and her friends like to visit a place where they don't feel hassled.

"I like the self-serve. There's not someone like hovering over you all the time," she said.

Margaret Schneider, an insurance agent from Fargo whose territory is Valley City, said she had been setting up shop at the town library but likes the fact she can eat and drink and talk with people at The Vault.

"The regulars who come in here have become friends of mine," she said. "It's a nice meeting place. You don't have to spend a lot of money and you don't have to be bored."

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