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PROGRAM: 3 Cups of Coffee

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## The Philadelphia Inquirer

THE UPSIDE

### How powerful are three cups of coffee? For these mentors and mentees, java leads to jobs.

by Shaun Brady, For The Inquirer, Updated: August 28, 2019- 5:00 AM



JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

When Liberty Gaither moved to Philadelphia in January, she had a lot going for her: a degree in finance from the University of Pittsburgh; experience in sales and marketing; and a wealth of disparate interests, from writing poetry to political advocacy to launching a fashion-critique website.

One thing the Atlanta native didn't have was a professional network in her newly adopted city. Seven months after Gaither's arrival, that lack has translated into an ongoing — and often frustrating — job search.

"People say, 'It's all about who you know.' And if I'm in a place where I don't know anyone, that doesn't bode very well for me," Gaither said. "When I got here I jumped right in and started applying for jobs, going to job fairs and networking events, having a few interviews. But I've found it difficult to make [inroads] in a new city that's much bigger than the one I'm used to."

Gaither's situation made her an ideal candidate for 3 Cups of Coffee, a new short-term mentorship program launched in Philadelphia last October by JEVS Human Services. The program pairs people seeking jobs with volunteer mentors in their desired line of work, who agree to three meetings at local coffee shops to share their experience and advice.

"Everyone's had someone who's helped them along the way," said Nora Cothren, program manager of 3 Cups of Coffee. "We look for people who face some small barrier to finding that next [position]. Whether they started in one industry and want to change careers, or need to find their next spot due to downsizing layoffs, or took some time off to take care of a sick parent or a kid — that resumé gap can be a barrier. We give people the little boost they need to get over that barrier and find a job that's going to be the right fit."

Since the program launched, 13 mentor/mentee pairs have completed their trio of meetings, with many continuing to meet and talk well past that point. More than 30 pairs are currently involved. "It's an easy way to help someone help themselves," said Nancy Astor Fox, JEVS chief development officer. The program "brings people together who might never have met otherwise, and allows [our mentors] to make a real impact on someone's life."

The program was launched in 2014 by Pennsylvania Women Work in Pittsburgh, the brainchild of executive director and CEO Julie Marx-Lally. The organization was already helping job-seekers with interview and computer skills, resumé-honing, and time and money management through its New Choices career program. But the program wasn't resulting in high placement rates in the job market.



## LINETTE KIELINSKI

Nora Cothren, program manager of 3 Cups of Coffee

“It hit me square in the face that a lot of the people we were serving just didn’t have the social capital they needed to get jobs,” Marx-Lally explained. “A lot of them had not been in the professional job market for a long time — or had never been in it in the first place. There was no ‘who you know.’”

The beauty of 3 Cups of Coffee is how the mentor/mentee interaction unfolds in the relaxed realm of a coffee shop.

“There’s no imbalance of power,” Cothren said. “Even in an informal meeting, going to someone’s office can be anxiety-provoking. A coffee shop is more neutral, which allows people to open up a little bit more.”

(Although mentors/mentees can meet anywhere, JEVS has partnered in Philadelphia with Saxbys Coffee to provide free beverages to those who meet in their stores.)

The structure of the program is a definite incentive for potential mentors. Stephanie Ledesma, COO of AETNA Better Health of Pennsylvania, has met with two mentees since the JEVS program’s launch in October. One was looking for a late-career change; the other, a recent college graduate, was exploring the possibilities of health-care policy.

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“It allows you to have that coffee-shop banter,” Ledesma said. “You’re not feeling like you have to be somebody you aren’t, as you might in a job-interview situation. I’ve done a lot of hiring and see people focus too much on trying to fit a job description and not on allowing their own strengths to shine through. Sometimes, a little bit of encouragement and a lot of reassurance go a long way.”

JEVS paired Gaither with Rachel Zatcoff, a media relations specialist at Vault Communications, a Plymouth Meeting PR and marketing agency. The two, both 29, have forged a friendship and continued their relationship beyond the three meetings.

Gaither has high praise for 3 Cups of Coffee.

“It helped give me a concrete direction, with action steps to get where I want to be. My ultimate goal is to own my own business,” she said. “But right now I would just like to continue doing something I’m good at and that would be useful to society — and to this new city I’m in.”