

# The Press Democrat

## Becoming Independent 'concessionistas' to offer food service aboard SMART trains



Michelle Stoffer of Corte Madera orders a snack for her daughter Nora, 2, from Meghan Harris and JayJay Rico at BI Buzz on the SMART train during a free ride day on Thursday, July 13, 2017. Becoming Independent will begin employing adults with disabilities in the train concession when train service kicks off later this year. (JOHN BURGESS/PD)

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Meghan Harris had quit her job at Starbucks and gone on hiatus from college when a recruiter from Becoming Independent contacted the 21-year-old about a "concessionista" position with the Santa Rosa-based nonprofit.

A what?

The title wasn't the only interesting aspect of the job. Harris, who lives with her parents in Windsor, would be serving food and beverages aboard the first passenger trains to operate in the North Bay in more than 60 years. She was hooked. "When I saw the train, I was pumped," said Harris, who is now more than a month into her new job.

Becoming Independent, a local organization that has been providing support services for people with developmental disabilities in the North Bay since 1967, was selected by Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit to be its exclusive concessionaire aboard the trains.

The commercial enterprise may seem an odd one for the nonprofit, but according to officials it is a perfect marriage of industry and altruism. The revenue Becoming Independent earns from concession sales will be used for services benefiting about 1,000 disabled people living in Sonoma, Marin and Napa counties.

"Their mission is really similar to ours," Jeanne Belding, a spokeswoman for SMART, said about Becoming Independent. "It's a mission of serving the community."

Becoming Independent has hired 13 outside staffers to operate the train service, including nine concessionistas, a term the non-profit claims to have coined. A Google search for the name didn't turn up any results.

After the concession service has been operating for several months, Becoming Independent is planning to make jobs aboard trains available to disabled clients, whose day-to-day challenges include living with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism and other developmental disabilities.

SMART is awaiting final approval from federal railroad regulators before launching passenger service, possibly later this month, according to the latest time-line provided by rail agency officials. But thousands of train riders already are getting a taste of the "BI Buzz" concession during preview rides along the 43-mile route from north Santa Rosa to downtown San Rafael.

Becoming Independent offers employment opportunities for program participants ranging from document shredding to landscaping. But the concession contract is the non-profit's most ambitious employment endeavor to date, one officials say is critical for raising needed revenue.

The organization's share of state funding continues to erode, and comprises about 87 percent of its revenues. The agency's total projected budget for this fiscal year is \$13.7 million. "With the state's other needs, it is more and more apparent to us we must create our own revenue streams," said Luana Vaetoe, Becoming Independent's chief executive officer.

She said the concession service also raises the nonprofit's visibility. Signs in each of the food and beverage areas inform paying customers that the proceeds go toward "Elevating human abilities one cup at a time!"

"We saw this as a great opportunity to support a growing community that has supported us over 50 years. We're happy to be on the front lines of this innovative service," Vaetoe said of SMART.

SMART is not charging Becoming Independent rent or demanding a share of concession revenue for the first year of passenger service because it's not clear how heavily the trains will be used. The non-profit was on the hook for start-up costs, however, including refrigerators in the concession areas and at SMART's operations center on Airport Boulevard to keep perishables fresh.

Concessionistas are paid a starting wage of \$13 an hour, which is roughly the same as what employees earn who provide direct care for their disabled clients. Concession workers also are eligible for full medical benefits, including dental and vision, if they work more than 20 hours a week.

That applies to Harris, who gushed over the compensation package and working "for an organization that's really focused on helping the community." She said the recruiter from Becoming Independent reached out to her after spotting Harris' resume on an online job search site.

Wearing an apron emblazoned with the word "Buzz," Harris sold food and beverage items to riders who packed a SMART train this week for one of the preview rides.

Molly Stoffer of Novato bought a granola bar, water and a chocolate muffin for her 3-year-old son, Ellis. The food was as much about nourishment as it was "making a long ride go fast," Stoffer said.

The concession contract encourages Becoming Independent to feature Sonoma and Marin county products, serve coffee of a "premium quality" and use environmentally friendly packaging. The beverage offerings include hot and cold-brewed coffee from Sebastopol's Taylor Maid Farms, beer from Lagunitas Brewing Co. in Petaluma and red and white wines from Healdsburg's Longboard Vineyards.

Prices range from \$3 for hot coffee to \$6 for a 12-ounce beer and \$7 for a standard 6-ounce pour of wine.

Harris said part of the challenge of working on a train is keeping her footing as it winds along its route and stops and starts at stations. By the end of the day, it takes some time for her to regain her equilibrium.

"When I first get home, it's hard standing," she said.