

Dragonfly Coffee

Grand Rapids, Minnesota

WRITTEN BY CHRIS MARCOTTE

Dragonfly Coffee, located in Central Square Mall, is bustling with excitement and energy from early morning to late afternoon. Small groups of customers gather at tables in the common area, and friendly boisterous greetings and hugs are often shared. The coffee shop is a social enterprise established by Itasca Life Options (ILO) in 2022 to provide their clients—adults with intellectual and developmental needs—with another employment opportunity. Dragonfly Coffee has received accolades from the Minnesota Department of Human Services for their innovativeness, and it is seen as an exemplary program. ILO attributes their success to the fact that they own the business and therefore have the capacity to integrate a client-centered model into the management of the adults with special needs who work at the café under the guidance of job coaches.

“Every single day here is totally different,” Sonia Lindgaard, associate director at ILO, says. “We have a work schedule for our Dragonfly Coffee employees [clients], but it changes depending on their individual needs. We make adjustments as necessary to ensure that every client has success every day.” Since it opened, more than fifty ILO clients have discovered and strengthened their skills in customer service, baking, and barista work at the coffee shop. Many have transferred these skills to employment at McDonald’s and other fast-food restaurants, as well as a few of the other local coffee shops.

The name for the café was the result of “brainstorming with clients and staff,” says Lisa Lassen, executive director. “Dragonflies are often seen as symbols

Sonia Lindgaard, associate director of ILO; Sarah Slaubaugh, Dragonfly Coffee manager, and Lisa Lassen, executive director of ILO. In 2024, Dragonfly Coffee was one of six organizations honored by the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation, Minnesota Department of Human Services, for going above and beyond for the services they provide to ensure that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are uplifted, celebrated, and given the opportunity to use their skills to add value to their communities (photo courtesy of Dragonfly Coffee).



Located in the center of the mall, Dragonfly Coffee offers a vast variety of hot and cold beverages and plenty of sweet and savory fresh bakery treats (photo by Chris Marcotte).




Clients in the Itasca Life Options program were instrumental in designing and painting the outside of Dragonfly Coffee (photos courtesy of Dragonfly Coffee).

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of transformation, change, and new beginnings. They represent the ability to adapt, overcome obstacles, and find joy in the journey of life. This concept totally fits our mission.” ILO has been offering job training and support for people of all abilities since 1965, so they have a lot of experience to draw from.

Dragonfly Coffee is truly a breath of fresh air for Central Square Mall and the community of Grand Rapids. Each employee proudly wears a Dragonfly Coffee apron, grins, offers customers a friendly greeting, and shares the extensive menu. You can’t help but smile as you wait patiently for your fresh-out-of-the-oven bakery selection and your made-to-order beverage. An Americano with a ham and cheese croissant on the way to work or an iced Peppermint Tea Latte and a scotcheroos bar in the afternoon—these are made and served with immense pride and complete joy.

Dragonfly Coffee provides shoppers, mall employees, and ILO clients in other programs a place to socialize and re-energize. It is also an excellent reason to come to Central Square Mall, which has changed over the last few years to become more community centered. In addition to conventional retail stores, there are also vintage and antique shops, pet stores, non-retail businesses, and several service providers. 

If You Go

- **Dragonfly Coffee** Monday–Friday 8 a.m.–3 p.m.; Central Square Mall, 201 NW 4th St., Grand Rapids 55744; 218-999-5771; itascalifeoptions.org
- **Central Square Mall** has many unique shops and restaurants.
- **Crafted by ILO** is another shop in the Central Square Mall. It sells craft items made by Itasca Life Options clients.
- On April 23, 2026, **ILO Players Production** will perform at noon and 7:00 p.m. at the Reif Theatre, 720 NW Conifer Dr., Grand Rapids. Complimentary Dragonfly treats provided after each show.



Eugene “Eugenius” D. has worked at Dragonfly Coffee since it opened in April 2022 and is up for just about anything asked of him. Here, he shows off a batch of macarons. “After putting on my black apron, I greet customers and run the till,” he says. “I can help make drinks and I bag up the cookies—my favorite is the Salted Chocolate Chip.” Eugene has been the employee of the month twice and saves all his earnings for trips to Camp Friendship. He also works one day a week at a local business called Fireplace Lifestyles with a job coach from ILO (photo courtesy of Dragonfly Coffee).



Traveling by bus from Hibbing, Leah W. works one shift each week. Her primary duties are running the till, putting labels on food boxes, and helping Dragonfly Coffee manager Sarah Slaubaugh buy groceries. Leah shares that one of her favorite days was when her family came, and she got to serve them their food. “I hope they’ll come again soon,” she says. “That was lots of fun” (photo courtesy of Dragonfly Coffee).

Hanna H. works two shifts a week at the front counter or washing dishes and hopes to work at one of the other coffee shops in town when she can. She explains, “When a customer seems to be in a bad mood, I treat them like they are a regular customer. I greet them with a smile and speak pleasantly.” Hanna grins and says, “More than half of the grumpy ones are in a better mood when they leave” (photo courtesy of Dragonfly Coffee).



Kirk J. has been with ILO since he was a young boy, and he has always enjoyed helping in the kitchen, as pictured on the right. Pictured at left, he shows two of the many varieties of Buffalo Plaid Coffee, which is the only coffee used and sold at Dragonfly Coffee. Buffalo Plaid Coffee Company is an artisan coffee roaster in Grand Rapids that specializes in sourcing and roasting the highest-quality coffee beans from all over the world (photo courtesy of Dragonfly Coffee).

