



2008 San Francisco Neighborhood Business Awards

Making a connection with the community

San Francisco-based nonprofit Urban Solutions aims to boost The City's small-business community by helping entrepreneurs obtain loans, make plans and perform other tasks necessary to thrive. Every year, the organization honors retail businesses that benefit their neighborhoods. **STORIES BY EXAMINER STAFF WRITER MIKE ALDAX.**

Pie shop offers kids a sweet education

At Mission Pie bakery and cafe, co-owners Karen Heisler and Krystin Rubin have based a successful business venture and a powerful educational tool for teens on pies made from locally grown ingredients.

The bakery is the outgrowth of a farm-education program that began at Pie Ranch, a nonprofit farm Heisler co-founded in San Mateo County. The ranch cultivates sustainable crops and invites students from urban high school students to learn about organic farming.

"Teachers joined in developing educational programs for students, bringing them to the ranch to learn about farming," Rubin said. "It's great to have the science teachers there so they can teach about solar-powered electric fences behind the chicken coop or about biofuels and so on."

Pie Ranch became an instant success, but carting students out to San Mateo County wasn't always ideal, Rubin said. She and Heisler created Mission Pie as a way to bring the learning farm closer to students.

The pie shop, which employs students in the kitchen and behind the counter, is booming — living proof that the slow-food movement is not just an ideal but an economic engine. Mission Pie, which uses ingredients grown on Pie Ranch, including local varieties of wheat, has been featured



ROCIO RUSSO/SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

in The New York Times and received a business leadership award from Jewish Vocational Services for its educational programs.

Although the ties between Mission Pie and Pie Ranch are close, the two are run as separate entities learning how to cohabitate.

"We [Mission Pie and Pie Ranch] are constantly in conversation about the expenses of running a business and trying to pay a fair price for crops, pay fair wages to employees and how to get creative while still keeping the business lean," Rubin said.



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Hard work for the neighborhood

Starting a business that can last 100 years is rather simple, said Robert Sakai.

"My father would always say, 'There's no secret to it, just work hard,'" he said.

That's been the principle behind Japantown grocery store Uoki K. Sakai Co. since 1906, when it was established on Geary Boulevard by Sakai's grandfather, Kitaichi Sakai.

But it's hardly been an easy road through the years, Sakai said. The grocery store, which is known for selling impeccably fresh fish and unique sakes, had to close its doors for a three-year stretch starting in 1942, when the Sakai family was interned in a detention camp in Utah at the onset of World War II. The family moved all its possessions, including its truck, into the store and boarded up the front.

When the family returned to The City after being released from internment in 1945, Sakai said, they were fortunate to find their store still intact.

From changing demographics to urban development, however, the store has survived as a testament to hard work and adaptation.

"We've had to keep changing over the years," Sakai said. "It's a hard business."

He said his loyal customers and participation in the community are why the store presses on.

"You just try to keep doing the best you can and put out the best products," Sakai said.

Sakai serves on the Better Neighborhood Plan Steering Committee and is a director of the Japanese Cultural and Community Center in Northern California.

Mornings with sunny side up

After working 12 years as a waitress in the Mission district, Alba Guerra dreamed of starting her own restaurant in the neighborhood. But it wasn't going to be just any restaurant. It had to be one that served everyone living in the vastly diverse community. She felt people of all backgrounds could relate once they considered each other neighbors, according to Guerra's 27-year-old niece, Maria Costa.

"My auntie wanted it to be family oriented," Costa said. "We've lived in the neighborhood for 15 years. We know the people and wanted to include everyone."

Four years ago, Guerra came up with the money to open SunRise restaurant at Folsom and 24th streets. The restaurant serves home-style Salvadoran cuisine along with

American dishes, and it features local art on its walls.

As its name suggests, SunRise is an oasis for early risers searching for a hearty breakfast. The restaurant is also considered a community gathering place. It holds events for local elementary schools, features local musicians during dinner and works with projects and organizations such as the Mission Arts and Performance Project, a bimonthly neighborhood event featuring visual artists, musicians, poets and performers at local venues and businesses.

Costa said Guerra's family has done a lot to make the restaurant feel like home for locals.

"Our family has been together working with [Guerra] since before it opened," Costa said. "We are all there to help her."



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THIRD PLACE

SunRise

3126 24th St.

Owner: Alba Guerra

GREEN BUSINESS AWARD



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Keetsa Mattress

271 Ninth St.

Owners: Joe Alexander, above,

DanNie Lee and Andy Kim

The SoMa company has developed greener technologies for manufacturing, shipping and delivering. Its mattresses are packaged in a box that customers can fit in the back of a Prius — or on BART.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT AWARD



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Sheba Piano Lounge

1419 Fillmore St.

Owners: Netsanet, above, and Israel Alemayehu

Sheba Piano Lounge in the Fillmore offers live jazz in a cozy setting. The owners, sisters Netsanet and Israel Alemayehu, open the lounge for local events and are described as spirited community leaders.

Making a difference:
In days of greed, some businesses still work for good **PAGE 15**

