

## Starting a business right out of school

Kate Williamson, The Examiner  
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(Jason Steinberg/Special to The Examiner)

Tori Poor owns and operates Little Fish Boutique in the West Portal neighborhood, filling the need for a children's clothing store in the area.

**SAN FRANCISCO** - Tori Poor started her West Portal children's clothing shop Little Fish Boutique in the classic way. She saw a market need and put her money where her mind was.

"There's nothing like this in this neighborhood," Poor, 28, said Friday. "It's kind of something I've had in the back of my head that I want to do."

A frequent commuter through the West Portal on her way between the Sunset and San Francisco State University, where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in child development in May, Poor saw that the neighborhood was filled with wealthy young parents pushing high-end strollers and seniors with no place to buy presents for the grandchildren. Poor, a former preschool teacher who enjoys sewing and art, had always wanted to run a store. So she got to work fast, contacting a landlord with a vacant storefront within a month after her graduation.

He wanted a business plan, so she drafted one within a week.

But she still needed help securing capital, despite putting more than \$20,000 of her own money into the venture. She called Urban Solutions, a San Francisco nonprofit that helps entrepreneurs find loans.

"I discovered that she needed to do some development and refinement of the business plan, and also the documents that are required to submit a request for a loan," said Helen Branham, Urban Solutions director of Small Business Services. "We needed to have her do some more research on her target market. She also needed to further refine the competitive analysis

section, and to clearly define ... the business. Those were the things we started working on immediately.”

Because Poor was already in landlord negotiation, Branham said they also discussed the terms of the three-year lease she eventually signed, and helped define a startup amount needed to put down a deposit and pay for tenant upgrades and inventory, so she could start making sales quickly. Urban Solutions helped her obtain a \$10,000 fast startup loan with Citibank.

“It had to happen really fast,” Poor said. “Months later, I got a second loan.”

That second \$35,000 loan with Wells Fargo Bank was important because it allowed her to pay back the first loan, which had a higher interest rate, Poor said. Banks considered her a good risk, Branham said, because she had all of the important factors in her favor: willingness to risk her own money as well as a bank’s, good credit and a tenacious character.

“She had started the business plan. She’d also started creating the financials ... ‘how many baby coats do I need to sell? How many dresses? How many booties?’ She was already thinking like a businessperson,” Branham said. “Whatever I suggested that she do she was willing to do. She stayed in touch with me ... That’s the kind of follow-through and commitment.”

Urban Solutions counseled more than 150 would-be entrepreneurs in the 2005-06 fiscal year, of whom approximately 50 percent were able to start businesses immediately, Branham said; some are advised to take time to save more money before beginning. Its advising pool for that year was 42 percent female, 70 percent minority and 69 percent low-income, Branham said.

There are a lot of organizations that try to help small businesses, but Urban Solutions is simply more responsive and helpful, said Paula Mattison Sierra, the owner of the Maximum Mama maternity store, also in the West Portal neighborhood. She tried several other organizations before working with Urban Solutions, who helped her make her business more attractive to lenders and secure a loan.

“The help that I received is tremendous,” Mattison Sierra said. “They get the urgency of completing a sale because you’re in competition with other businesses of the same nature.”

Urban Solutions touts the benefits of small business, from the employees it hires to the money it spends on other local businesses and the taxes it provides the city. Small business also provides intangibles — such as livelier neighborhoods and role models for other entrepreneurs, Branham said.

Poor didn't initially intend to focus on local clothing, but Little Fish has ended up featuring Bay Area-produced children's, men's and women's clothing, such as Sacramento's Stellarocco Designs T-shirts and San Francisco's Skipping Hippos baby ponchos. About 75 percent of her stock is locally produced, Poor said.

As such, the wares are not bargain basics. Customer Elaine Wallace said she tends to use it for special-occasion purchases, such as a dress for her 19-month-old daughter Lana.

"It's a really beautiful shop when you go inside," Wallace said, adding that she enjoys the unusual goods and play area for kids, which lets her shop more peacefully. "It's very easy to browse."

Poor also leases out a room in the back of the store for yoga classes, another new offering in the West Portal, Wallace said. Poor also uses it as a sewing room for her own creations; she also drew the store's sign and some T-shirt designs.

Now, Poor said, her next steps are re-examining her numbers to reflect changes in her pre-startup estimations against practice, and launching Internet sales.

Urban Solutions, Examiner host awards

Urban Solutions and The Examiner will host an awards night honoring neighborhood businesses at 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Thursday. The businesses were all nominated by customers or other community members and graded on how many local employees they have, how many years they've been in business and how they partner with the community, such as letting community groups use the business space. They need not have been helped by Urban Solutions to win an award.

Urban Solutions partners with The Examiner to grant the awards, which will be presented at 111 Minna Gallery, 111 Minna St., San Francisco. Tickets are \$20, and can be purchased at: [www.urbansolutionsf.org/tickets](http://www.urbansolutionsf.org/tickets) or dial (415) 346-0199.

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