

CAMEO SHORTS – Stories that testify to the great work that CAMEO members do

Shooting Star Community Supported Agriculture, Suisun Valley



Matt McCue served in Iraq from 2003-2004. “I prefer to think of Iraq as the place where I discovered the key to my freedom. I prefer to remember the trucks full of watermelons and pomegranates that would pass through our checkpoints. I felt strangely human as I waved cars by with pomegranate seeds stuck to my Kevlar vest.”

After Matt’s tour in Iraq, he attended the Center for Agro-ecology and Sustainable Food Systems at UC Santa Cruz, where he met Lily Schneider. When he finished his program in Santa Cruz, Matt volunteered for the Peace Corps and worked as an agricultural extension agent in Niger, West Africa. He then spent a year growing gourmet vegetables in Sebastopol. Now Lily lives and farms with Matt in the Suisun Valley where there is good soil, clean water and a supportive community.

Together Matt and Lily are the owners and operators of Shooting Star Community Supported Agriculture, a new eight-acre, organic, diversified vegetable farm. Working side-by-side, they grow over 35 different crops including strawberries, heirloom tomatoes, sweet peppers, potatoes, melons, basil, cucumbers and sugar snap peas.

Shooting star is part of the **Farmer-Veteran Coalition**, whose mission is to mobilize our food and farming community to create healthy and viable futures for America’s veterans.

Sweet Treats, San Diego



Chris Saint was recovering from spinal cord surgery. When it became clear that he couldn’t return to being a private investigator, he needed to find another career. After reminiscing about ice cream trucks at a party, Chris and his wife Jennifer drew up plans for a ‘pimped out’ truck with pinstriping and a rockin’ stereo system. They took their plan to a regular bank, but didn’t get very far. In fact, the bank didn’t get it and told the Saints that they were too much of a risk.

They were referred to **ACCION – San Diego** by a friend who had worked with ACCION. The greatest thing was when Jennifer and Chris presented their idea to ACCION – they got it and loaned the Saints \$35,000. “They didn’t laugh,” said Jennifer. “And they went all the way with us which was so cool. During the first year, we called our rep. ‘We are struggling, we don’t know what to do and they were always supportive. We wouldn’t still be here without ACCION in that first year.’”

The Sweet Treats truck mainly caters to corporate events with a menu that includes *Häagen Dazs*, Ben & Jerry’s, Snow Cones and dog ice cream. They became so successful that they went to **CDC Small Business Finance** for a bigger loan to pay off ACCION and buy another truck. They now have three trucks and are looking at a fourth, have two employees besides themselves and hire lots of independent contractors.

Semper Fi Security, Costa Mesa



Jason T. is a former Marine who served in the first Gulf War. After leaving the military in 1997, he held a number of odd and ends retail jobs including the first male salesperson on the floor of a Victoria Secrets – the one in South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa. He left that job because he earned his boss enough bonus money to buy a BMW and she wouldn't promote him.

Afterwards, he ended up in boating company where he worked 80 hours a week with the understanding that the owner was going to sell him the business. He took the company from \$365,000 to \$2.5 million in sales in four years. One day, he came home from a vacation to a termination letter. After a conversation with his wife Cassandra, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

He enrolled in the Future Business Owners class at **Goodwill in Orange County** where he learned how to write a business plan. He started Semper Fi Security, a company that employs 9 veterans, mostly new guys who just got out of the service and are in school. His goal is to move from doing event security to private security and bodyguard work for diplomats.

Miss Saigon, San Francisco



Miss Saigon owner Chi Van Vo had implemented a number of excellent sustainable practices at his restaurant located on the corner of Sixth and Mission. The restaurant featured energy efficient windows, energy efficient appliances, afternoon curtains, CFL lights, and staff familiar with basic conservation practices, but Chi wanted to find even more efficiency opportunities and brought on **Urban Solutions** to conduct a comprehensive energy, water, and waste evaluation.

As a result of the audit and implementation Miss Saigon is saving \$5,000 a year on energy, over \$6,000 a year in water, and another \$6,000 a year in waste pickup bills – in addition to the efficiencies Chi had already implemented. Urban Solutions also worked with Miss Saigon's current vendors to initiate the conversation about sourcing organic and local food as well as using non-toxic pest control management. With guidance from Urban Solutions sustainability consultants and commitment from Miss Saigon they can expect to become a certified SF Green Business by end of 2010 and *save over \$17,000/year*.

Haiku by Sharon Eisenhauer, San Francisco



In 2000, Sharon Eisenhauer moved to the Bay Area from New York to fully pursue her passion by starting a business in sewing and design. Like many aspiring entrepreneurs, she enrolled in the **Renaissance Entrepreneurship Center**'s Business Planning class to gain the comprehensive training she would need to manage her new venture. Adoption of a baby spurred her to create baby bags, and with her training completed, she launched *Haiku by Sharon Eisenhauer* having secured a start-up loan from family.

After two and a half years working by herself, she expanded her line to outdoor industry accessories, and her functional and stylish products were picked up by REI, Title 9 and Zappos.com. Sharon was able to hire three full time and one part time employees to manage her increased volume of orders.

“I’ve been told by friends” says Sharon, “that the Renaissance program gave me more practical tools to run my business than an MBA from Columbia University”. *Haiku by Sharon Eisenhower* is now a powerhouse brand, achieving \$1.9 million in sales in 2009 and making #18 on the list of the Bay Area’s Top 100 Fastest Growing Private Companies.

Kika’s Treats, San Francisco



Cristina Beshler (or 'Kika', her family nickname) is a lifelong baker and chocolate lover. Kika grew up in Brazil, and moved to San Francisco in 1999. Passionate about making handcrafted organic baked goods with local and organic ingredients, she always had a dream of opening her own bakery. A friend introduced her to **La Cocina**, an incubator kitchen in San Francisco. It was then that she decided to carry out her goal – Kika’s Treats.

Cristina researched different microenterprise development organizations (MDOs) available in the area. She started taking business planning classes at **Women's Initiative for Self Employment**. She sold her products all over the area in specialty stores.

As her business grew, so did the need for more cash, which is when she sought out **TMC Working Solutions** for a loan and financial follow up. Business expansion also meant that she took on two part-time employees, who help Cristina with the production process. Kika's Treats are sold in over 30 stores nationwide including Williams-Sonoma and Dean & DeLuca’s.

Taqueria Lidia, Watsonville



In 1988 Lidia Mendez left her hometown of Oaxaca, Mexico and landed in the raspberry fields in Watsonville for 14 years. The long hours in the fields limited her time with her developmentally disabled son. She needed a better option. Her and her husband had saved \$20,000 by the time they discovered **El Pajaro Community Development Corporation**. The business consult advised them on how to secure a location at the Watsonville Farmers Market.

“People enjoyed the Oaxacan specialties at a reasonable price.” Lidia explains, “Customers kept asking us, where is your restaurant? And we realized that we could actually start a business.”

They returned to El Pajaro CDC for help with the application and business plans and site selection. Lidia beams with pride when she explains how her application was chosen out of 10 that were competing for the same Watsonville Metro Center location, “I was the only applicant with no prior business experience and I was told my application was the most complete, which I owe to Vinicio because he helped me fill it out.”

Taqueria Lidia continues to thrive despite the downturn in the economy and is a family affair - Lidia's daughter and son also work in the restaurant. “Taqueria Lidia” prides itself in making fresh tortillas by hand as well as regional treats such as Oaxacan mole and tlayudas.

A. Rodriguez Transport, Madera



Alicia Rodriguez received a \$50,000 grant from the San Joaquin Air Quality Control District to replace her old freight truck with a new one. Unfortunately, the grant only covered half the cost associated with a new vehicle purchase. Having been turned down by several banks, Alicia sought the assistance of Fresno CDFI partner, Fresno Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. FAHCC provided her with the necessary training and business planning support to put together a feasible loan proposal that ultimately was funded by **Fresno CDFI**. Alicia was approved for a loan that enabled

her to purchase her truck. She is now able to transport goods to and from the Port of Los Angeles.

San Joaquin Medical Transportation, Fresno



When the State of California experienced a budget impasse lasting more than two months, it threatened the livelihood of many small businesses reliant on payments from the State, including the medical transport industry. In September of 2010, **Fresno CDFI** was able to provide financing to husband and wife team Khachatur and Karine Hakobyan to bridge the gap until the budget was resolved. As a result they picked up additional clientele and thrived during a time when most businesses were being squeezed.

John, Los Angeles

John grew up in Echo Park, a neighborhood in Los Angeles that was considered the 'hood. In order to stay out of trouble, John hung around his family's barbeque pit where he was responsible for the fire. He also learned how to make the Concordia family sauce with natural cane sugars, pineapples, soy sauce, peppers, and secret spices – true to his Filipino palette.

With technical assistance from **Asian Pacific Islander Small Business Program** and money raised from family and friends and friends of friends, he bought a barbeque pit and started a catering business using his family recipes. If you search on Yelp! a message reads: "Hello Fam, due to the wonderful response, we are receiving a large volume of calls. If the main line is busy, call Oscar."

He has plans to bottle and market his first barbeque sauce.