

Sweet Success for Tampa Chocolatier: HBIF Plays Pivotal Role in Business Meeting 5-Year Milestone

By Hispanic Business Initiative Fund

Dated: Feb 21, 2008

The road to success was not without challenges. “The first year of our business was horrible.” That’s when The Hispanic Business Initiative Fund - West Coast (HBIF) stepped in.

Tampa (FL)--Of businesses that fail, 85% do so in the first five years. It’s all the more reason that the owners of Schokolad Chocolate Factory in south Tampa are happy to celebrate their fifth anniversary this year, a success due in large part to assistance from HBIFTampa (The Hispanic Business Fund Initiative West Coast).

Created in Hillsborough County in 1991 to provide bilingual and bicultural technical assistance to budding Hispanic entrepreneurs and businesses, HBIF is considered the leading Hispanic business development organization in Florida and considered a model for other cities across the state and the country.

In the case of the owners of Schokolad Chocolate Factory, the economic downturn in months following September 11, 2001 led cousins Jacqueline Salcedo and Valentina Ludert to lose their jobs early in 2002. Salcedo’s employer moved to California, and Ludert’s employer downsized.

Salcedo, with twenty years’ experience in customer service, and Ludert, adept at computers and finance, faced uncertain times, but they were certain about two things: they were convinced that Tampa would remain their home, and they knew that they never again wanted someone else to be their boss.

“I was not going to move to California,” says Salcedo. “My mother always made us feel comfortable around the kitchen, ever since we were children in Venezuela, and when Valentina and I found out about the franchise ‘Schokolad,’ we thought the name was beautiful. We knew we’d found the business we wanted to do.”

The road to success was not without challenges. “The first year of our business was horrible—we found a perfect place on S. Howard Ave., but it really has no foot traffic, and the second year we started wondering whether to stay open or close.”

That’s when The Hispanic Business Initiative Fund - West Coast (HBIF) stepped in. HBIF offers management training programs, professional services, and specialized technical assistance for the Hispanic entrepreneur to improve opportunities for Hispanic businesses.

For Salcedo and Ludert, that meant mentoring by HBIF staff and volunteers in how to stay in business, fine-tuning business plans, improving their business systems, and preparing financially for the inevitable slow times between holidays when chocolate sales are at their peaks. “Just wanting to do something isn’t enough. You have to be able to do it,” says Ludert.

“The economic development concept of HBIF has been so successful in the Tampa Bay Area that it is being expanded to other cities in Florida,” says Yanina Rosario, President, HBIF West Coast, Inc.

Although in the movie Forrest Gump, the Tom Hanks character says “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you gonna get,” Salcedo and Ludert say their customers know exactly what they are getting at Schokolad: fresh chocolates, handmade daily with no preservatives.

“The look of satisfaction on customers’ faces when they try Schakolad chocolates the first time is the greatest reward,” says Salcedo.

“We don’t aim to make millions,” says Salcedo. “We just want to live comfortable and be our own boss. We want to be a part of the world, not own the world.”

“For us success comes in many different ways,” says Rosario. “Some of the HBIF clients we have today include a one-man manufacturing business that we are helping with financing, a small restaurant we helped with licenses and now with insurance, and a client who, after evaluating the business plan we helped to prepare, discovered that the business she wanted to buy was not a good investment. Success for us indeed comes in many different ways.”

What advice does this winning team have for others wanting to start their own business? “Make sure that it is the one thing you really want to do in your life. If you have any doubts, don’t do it,” says Salcedo.

Ludert adds, “You’ll get tired before you even start. But if you take your time, follow your heart, and seek advice from people who know better, you can make it.”

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