

ACCION ACADEMY IGNITES SMALL BUSINESSES

Giving entrepreneurs a boost up the success ladder

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ANDREW DYER



Manuel Basabe, owner of boutique Mesheeka, completed the Accion Academy for Entrepreneurial Success, an eight-week crash course in business management.

Manuel Basabe begins his work day like many small shop owners — he places a hand-chalked sign on the sidewalk outside his storefront, carries out racks of clothes for passers-by to peruse and sits down at his laptop inside his small boutique Mesheeka on Logan Avenue.

Vibrant paintings adorn the walls, their motifs reproduced on some of the t-shirts for sale. Basabe began his clothing line in 2009 and settled into his brick-and-mortar location in November 2015.

A few doors south on Logan Avenue, sisters Elizabeth Rodriguez and Danielle Cisneros also operate a small sidewalk business, the Chicana Boutique. The sisters have sold their hand-made and repurposed items throughout San Diego at farmer's markets and festivals, but only opened their Logan Heights sidewalk stall in the summer of 2016.

Both business owners credit their recent expansions to their involvement with Accion San Diego, a non-profit micro-lender. Accion serves San Diego, Imperial, San Bernardino and Riverside counties. Accion's goal, said CEO Elizabeth Schott, is to provide resources for businesses and start-ups that do not qualify for capital loans from traditional banks. Borrowers can qualify for up to a \$75,000 loan.

"Our goal is to work with

entrepreneurs that have some type of barrier with accessing financing," Schott said. "We also offer different types of workshops and training."

Basabe and Rodriguez both completed the Accion Academy for Entrepreneurial Success, an eight-week crash course in business management.

"It's basically from A-Z everything you need to know to start a business," Schott said. "From (creating) a business plan, financial projections, permitting and licensing issues to digital and social marketing."

Graduates also have access to up to a \$5,000 loan to start their businesses. Schott said Accion clients were 65 to 70 percent low to moderate income and 50 percent women, and ran the gamut in ages, from college graduates to retirees.

The academy is not just for traditional brick-and-mortar shops.

Chrisi Hard said she has always loved baking. When a divorce and a daughter with special needs kept her at home, she began taking orders from friends.

"Daycare was not an option and I needed to be with her," she said. "Friends just started calling and ordering baked goods. I know how to bake, but did not know the business side so well."

It was about 15 years later Hard found out about the academy at



The Mesheeka boutique operated by Manuel Basabe.

Accion, and she credits the course with changing the way she approaches her business.

"I am more efficient," she said. "I have mentors I can call when I have questions about things."

Hard said the loan from Accion has also been helpful.

"It helped me buy supplies in bulk and upgrade my brochures and business cards. My website is also getting upgraded right now," she said. "I can't say enough good about my experience with (Accion)."

People with poor to no credit can be susceptible to predatory lending practices, and Schott said Accion is aware of the issue.

"We helped spearhead the borrower's bill of rights (to) make sure that pricing, fees and interest rates are transparent," she said. "We're always educating our clients that sometimes the quickest loans are not the best structured loans."

Schott said some clients come to Accion already paying off bad loans.

"In some cases we've been able to refinance them out with our loan program," she said.

Accion is funded by a menagerie of government and private entities, including federal and local grants as well as banking partnerships. A grant from Wells Fargo launched the entrepreneur's academy three years

ago and continues to fund it today.

"Small businesses in San Diego comprise over 90 percent of all businesses so they're powerful in our local economy, creating jobs and contributing to our tax base," Schott said. "We see a lot of people looking to donate to our organization because of the impact we're making on the economy."

Basabe said the academy changed his approach to business, especially his bookkeeping.

"I would just throw it in a box," he said. "I had a bookkeeping box. Now I have a ledger, a file and everything is super organized."

As an artist, he said he struggled at first with the numbers part of the business.

"That's not the fun part of having a business," Basabe said. "The fun part is making money, meeting people and talking and laughing. That's the fun part."

He also took out a loan upon graduation in order to fund the next phase of Mesheeka: ice cream.

"In five years we're going to be the ice cream king of San Diego," he said. "It's going to be culturally inspired flavors, stuff that's normally seen in Mexico. Horchata, abuelita's chocolate and spicy flavors like jalapeno and habanero."

He said he was not going to give up on his fashion line, however.



Sisters Elizabeth Rodriguez, left, and Danielle Cisneros operate Chicanista Boutique in Logan Heights.



Chicanista Boutique is the sidewalk business of sisters Elizabeth Rodriguez and Danielle Cisneros.

"There's going to be an ice cream shop but with a gift shop," Basabe said. "We're going to keep everything but it's going to be a different look, the focus is going to be on the ice cream."

Rodriguez and Cisneros have similar goals for growth for Chicanista Boutique, now located in front of ThChrch on Logan Avenue.

"We'd like to have multiple locations with carts," Cisneros said. "We want to have different workshops, like sewing and piñata-making classes."

Chicanista's first piñata-making class is scheduled for Oct. 15.

"We learned to sew from our aunts and our mom," Rodriguez said. "These are things close to our culture, and we want to continue these traditions."

Rodriguez, who graduated from Accion's Entrepreneur's Academy one year ago, said the course has helped her hone in and focus on her business.

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"Having a business counselor available who has real world experience who is not disrespectful, but honest and straightforward really changed the game," she said. "They teach you how to succeed using skills and techniques that might push you out of your comfort zone, but that's where you learn the most, and that's where you become successful."

Making the leap into entrepreneurship can be intimidating. Schott said fear and lack of preparation are common roadblocks for aspiring entrepreneurs. She said education and being familiar with one's credit were key in launching a business.

"Surround yourself with experts and find a trusted accountant," she said.

Basabe, Rodriguez and Hard all said they would recommend the Accion



Women's products display at Chicanista Boutique.

academy to anyone planning on starting a business.

"I think anyone who is just starting or considering starting a business should consider participating," Rodriguez said.

"The loan (from Accion) has helped me grow and improve my business," Basabe said. "Big banks are kind of heartless, and Accion is for the people. I'm really blessed."



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JPMorgan Chase Awards \$600,000 Grant To San Diego-Based Accion

Accion, the San Diego-based microlender, has been awarded a \$600,000 grant from JPMorgan Chase & Co. to support the continued expansion of the agency's program providing capital to entrepreneurs in Southern California.

The grant will be provided in two \$300,000 installments in 2016 and 2017 and will be used to increase lending activities to grow the loan portfolio across the organization's four-county territory, as well as help

identify corporate responsibility for JPMorgan Chase in Southern California. "Microlenders, like Accion, provide small businesses with the consulting and financing they need to grow their operations. We're very proud to partner with Accion and enhance their efforts to provide access to the capital and assistance that Southern California entrepreneurs need most."

"This grant comes at a time of expansion for our organization and

counties we serve. With these funds, we will be able to build new strategic partnerships, diversify revenue streams, hire new staff and invest in new technology and systems, so that our organization can increase the dollars we loan into the community to the entrepreneurs that need it the most."

Accion enables clients to increase their inventory, buy equipment or raw materials, and pursue new business opportunities. Accion creates access to jobs for local business owners by providing support and access to capital. On average, three jobs are created for every business funded by Accion.

The organization also helps entrepreneurs build favorable credit histories and improve their business skills through resource events, such as the Small Business Boot Camp in San Diego on Saturday, Oct. 1. All of Accion's events are specially tailored toward the needs and questions of small business owners.

Accion works strategically with local partners, such as banking institutions, and nonprofit organizations, like JPMorgan Chase, to support main street businesses, from restaurants and retail shops to home-based daycares and web-based businesses.

This grant will be instrumental in supporting the expansion of our microlending program to the new counties we serve. ELIZABETH SCHOTT, CEO OF ACCION.

to raise additional loan capital for Accion to serve more entrepreneurs.

Accion has been serving entrepreneurs in San Diego County since 1994, before expanding into Imperial County in July 2015 and Riverside and San Bernardino counties in January 2016.

"Small business owners have identified flexible capital as a critical resource for growth, but they face a shortage of this kind of support," said Myeisha Peguero Gamino, vice pres-

ident of corporate responsibility for JPMorgan Chase in Southern California. "We look forward to empowering even more entrepreneurs with these funds, and we are thrilled that JPMorgan Chase recognizes our work in the community to help small business owners achieve their dreams, while creating true economic impact."

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Elizabeth Schott, CEO of Accion.

SBA Launches New Website for America's Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs

Certify.sba.gov will assist small firms doing business with federal government

The Small Business Administration has launched certify.sba.gov — a new website to further streamline and improve the application processes for small businesses and entrepreneurs seeking to do business with the federal government.

"SBA is committed to being as nimble and agile as the small businesses we serve. In addition to LINC, our Start Up in a Day Initiative, and Small Business Tech Coal-

ition, the launch of certify.sba.gov is another way SBA is leveraging the power of technology for Americans," said SBA Administrator Maria Contreras-Sweet. "This new website first focuses on closing market gaps for women entrepreneurs in the federal marketplace by featuring the Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) Program as we work toward breaking federal contracting goals for a second year in fiscal year 2016."

With this website, SBA's contracting application and certification process for women-owned small businesses is now completely accessible online and easier than ever to complete. Women contractors can now easily manage the certification process, including Third Party Certifications as part of the WOSB Federal Contract Program.

The new website will eventually serve additional SBA contracting

programs, including the 8(a) Business Development Program, the HUBZone Program, and others. The site will allow several forms to be filled out electronically, reducing the burden of printing, scanning, and uploading. As additional certifications like the 8(a) Business Development Program are moved into the new system, documents uploaded for one program may be reused for another.

The site also has a tool called "Am

I Eligible?" which allows a small business to answer approximately 15 questions and to determine if the Women-Owned Small Business Federal Contract Program, the HUBZone Program, and/or the 8(a) Business Development Program are a good fit for their business.

"Small businesses often get too little credit for their work as our nation's leading job-creators, generating nearly two out of three net new jobs in our economy," Contreras-Sweet added. "Last fiscal year the federal government awarded its highest percentage of contracting dollars to small businesses in the history of the United States, totaling more than \$90 billion. Those resources supported more than half a million jobs in communities across this country. When these federal dollars churn in local communities, they create a multiplier effect that strengthens the local tax base and leads to better government services and better schools. That's the promise of our work."

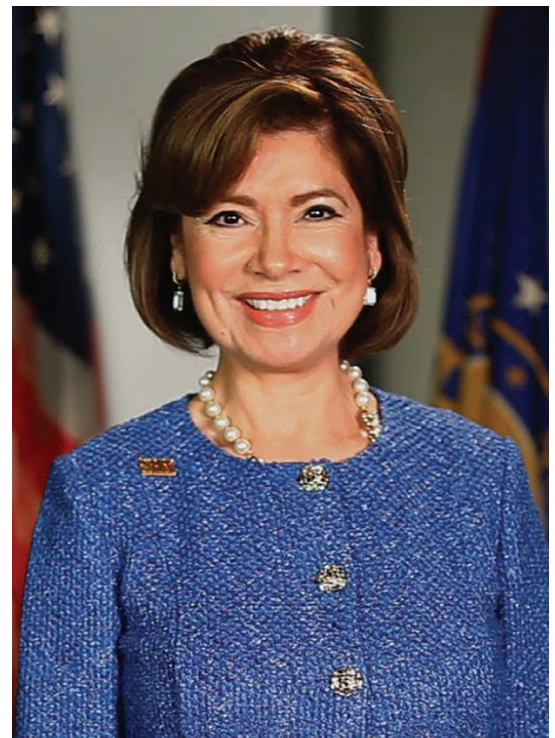
SBA is coordinating additional public announcements to amplify the system's launch. Questions about the WOSB Federal Contract Program should be directed to wosb@sba.gov.

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