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Entrepreneurship One Option During Tough Economic Times

By Jennifer Wake



Lafayette technologist Robert Riebs discusses computer plans with Bobby and Navid Mazaheri at Town Hall Theatre Photo Jennifer Wake

technologist/educator who owns MyTechnologist in Lafayette and has been in the technological business for over 25 years. "We started talking about iPhones, and exchanged business cards," he said. "I told him I was having issues, and he said, 'Work with me. If you help me out, I'll help you out.'"

In addition to servicing his regular clients, Navid now works with Riebs as an apprentice. "He's given me advice about how to work with clients, how to access client computers remotely, how to stay focused."

"These guys can go into Twitter and other technologies without blinking," Riebs said. "Different generations start in different places. So I ask: What do I know? What does he know? How can we help each other?"

After a flood devastated the Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette, Riebs was contracted to re-create the entire technological infrastructure from the ground up. Navid (and his brother, Bobby) are helping out.

"All the wiring was destroyed in the flood," Navid said. "Robert and I started ripping everything out, ran wires inside, set up the phone and Internet, and then brought all the computers back." For Navid, it was a wonderful experience. "I'd never done anything start to finish before."

Moraga resident Annette Paczocha, 24, decided to join the ranks of entrepreneurs last December when she started Eastbay Spanish, a learning program for children ages 6 to 10. After teaching Spanish in an after-school program at Del Rey Elementary, she saw a need for students to keep up the work during the summer so they wouldn't have to relearn everything in the fall.

She created brochures and a Web site, but found she was limited by how she could distribute her information at school sites. She began bringing flyers to every outlet she could think of. "It doesn't matter where you go," she said. "Nail supply, Kinko's." She began to get calls, but scheduling was difficult and by the time summer started, she didn't have enough kids to make it worthwhile.

She's undeterred, however. "I'm going to start earlier next year. Persistence is key, and not being afraid to approach people to talk about what you're doing," she said.

As owner of Successful Solutions - a project management firm - Caryl Morrison of Orinda understands the importance of people. Morrison says the more people you can talk to, the better.

Two years ago she changed the direction of her business and relocated to Orinda. Looking for ways to connect with new business people, she joined the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce and regularly attends its Entrepreneur Club, which meets the third Thursday of every month.

With unemployment at around 11 percent in California, more people are considering striking out on their own. But what does it take to succeed as an entrepreneur? And what should you know before venturing out?

Lafayette resident Bobby Mazaheri, a recent graduate from UC Davis in Computer Arts, started X-Gaming Academy to teach 10-17 year olds how to create video games, but has added Web design to his repertoire lately due to an increase in demand.

"I'm seeing a lot more people going out on their own lately," he said.

One of those people is Bobby's brother Navid Mazaheri, 22. After completing a bachelor's degree in computer engineering at San Jose State University, last summer he decided to start his own business - SF Bay Area PC Repair - in Orinda, offering technology solutions.

Navid focused on his few clients, knowing that if he did a great job, and had reasonable prices, word would spread. He also wasn't afraid to talk to people about what he did and seek out help from other professionals.

While at a wedding, Navid spoke with Robert Riebs, a

"My business is extremely relationship-based," she said. "Joining the Chamber was what works for me and for my business. There was nobody at the Chamber that I knew and it was a great opportunity for me to meet new people, build new relationships and use members as resources."

Caroline McCormick, who owns Association Communications, Inc., in Lafayette was able to retain clients from her previous company when she started her business. While she was good at her job, she said she had no idea how to run a company.

She advises anyone considering starting a business to learn about HR, Finance, Marketing, and put together a good team to service the organization including an attorney, CPA and insurance broker.

Other entrepreneurs suggest starting small while you're still employed. Orinda resident Matthew Leutza started a tutoring business, Lamorinda Tutoring, three years ago as a supplement to his college and K-12 teaching schedule while pursuing his master's degree. "The extra income was nice since teaching salaries are low," he said. "After a while, I established a strong clientele through referrals and limited advertising."

Like most entrepreneurs, Leutza really enjoys being his own boss. "If you have a skill that is in demand, you must be willing to work hard and meet the needs of your clients," he said. "Punctuality, flexibility, reliability, and integrity are simple keys to success."

"I think you work harder when you work for yourself, than you might when working for someone else," added McCormick, "but the rewards are wonderful."

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