

An Inspiring Tale of Food Intolerance and Granola

By Sophie Braccini



Bielawski and her children with the Giddy Up & Go granola she created for them.

Photo Todd Bielawski

In her Lafayette office off Mt. Diablo Boulevard, Jennifer Bielawski juggles tons of organic oats, organic corn flakes, agave nectar and seeds of all kinds. She sets up appointments with decision makers in the retail food industry and keeps an eye on her granola factory near Sacramento. The mother of two

young children has become a granola diva and successful CEO in the span of two short years. What was born from the suffering of her family has become a very successful endeavor, and it is only the beginning.

It all started when Bielawski's two children became ill, with no diagnosis or treatment in sight. "Kyle

had a sinus infection that lasted for a year; he was on antibiotics and prednisone every other month. He was very prone to pneumonia and frequently ended up in the hospital as a result," remembers Bielawski. In the meantime Kyle's older sister started developing sensory issues and was becoming more and more withdrawn and lethargic. There were still no answers after seeing many different specialists until Bielawski herself got sick and was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. She researched her symptoms and the causes and found the link with her children's condition: multiple food intolerance.

Acupuncturist Michael Shpak explained to her how food intolerances created a vicious cycle that culminated with all the symptoms. The family changed its diet dramatically, eliminating all grain, starch, lactose and sucrose. "I opened my pantry and there was nothing there I could

use anymore," she remembers. "I called my friends and asked them to take everything away."

Then Bielawski started cooking, because she could not find anything already made in stores that could feed her family. "Very quickly I wanted to produce commercial food for those who are lactose and gluten intolerant," she says, "and I started with granola." She created Thoughtful Food, the company that produces Giddy Up & Go Granola.

One of the first difficulties was finding an organic gluten free oat producer. "To be certified gluten free, the oat has to be processed with equipment that never touches something containing gluten." She struggled to find a producer that was also organic. She finally found one in Montana; he was harvesting his first crop that year and she was one of his first customers.

At first Bielawski rented a professional kitchen and did everything herself, including the packaging and applying labels to her bags. With a background in sales, she started presenting her products to local grocers. "Connie Collier at Diablo Foods was one of the first ones to buy my product and put it on her shelves exactly two years ago," she says. Then came Lunardi's and Whole Foods.

"Then in May I got an order from Sysco Food – the distributor – for a whole pallet of granola, 50 cases. It took me five days with my mom who had come to help, to bake it and bag it. At that point I knew we needed a professional facility and we hired some people from the food industry," she said. She and her husband invested their own money in the project, they found well-off friends who were interested and wanted to invest, and they raised \$1 million.

"What made a really big difference for us is the contract with Safeway," she says. The company is developing its organic offering in select stores and chose her granola. She sold 65,000 pounds of granola in 2012 and expects to sell 10 times that amount in 2013. "There is no competition for what we do," she says. "We keep our margin very low so the product stays affordable. And since people love it, retailers order more."

Along the way Bielawski enrolled her sister, who has an MBA, to be the CFO and her nephew manages the production. She has learned everything about certification, both organic and allergen free. "We do not process any peanut at any time," she says. "We are very close to our product and everything is numbered and recorded. If you show me one bag, with its number I can immediately trace where each of its components comes from." Bielawski understands food intolerance and its negative effects; she stresses that she will stay on top of what she gives to others.

Today her children are free of symptoms, stick to the non-dairy, non-gluten diet and live a happy, full life. Bielawski is thinking about expanding her food line, maybe with pizza rolls, chicken pot pies, stuffing, or fauxghetti (spaghetti). "I think everything happens for a reason," she says. "I feel there is a higher calling for what I am doing."

For more information on food intolerance Bielawski recommends Elaine Gottschall's book, "Breaking the Vicious Cycle." Giddy Up & Go Granola can be found in most local grocery stores. For more information, visit www.thoughtfulfood.net.

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business briefs

New Senior Discount Card Supported by Nearly Three Dozen Merchants
1550 Viader Drive, Moraga
(925) 376-9900



Al and Annie Hyman of Orinda recently used their senior discount card at Table 24. Photo Victor Ivry

More than 3,000 free 2013-14 Lamorinda Senior Discount Cards from Senior Helpers of Contra Costa are being distributed to seniors through local senior centers, senior organizations and senior living facilities, and will be available at all participating merchants. The cards entitle local seniors to discounts of 10-20 percent at 35 select restaurants, hair salons, auto repair shops and other Lamorinda and Walnut Creek businesses, including Elite Hair & Skin, Minuteman Press, Back to the Table Cooking School, The Nut Factory, New Delhi Bistro, Michael's Ristorante Italiano, Moraga Jewelers, Mountain Mike's Pizza, Table 24, Shelby's Restaurant, Orinda Motors Inc., and Hilton House. The cards are also available at the Senior Helpers offices at 1550 Viader Drive in Moraga. For more information, contact Kevin Reneau at (925) 376-9900. The card is sponsored by Senior Helpers, an in-home care provider for seniors which allows the elderly to remain independent and safe in their homes.

January Employee of the Month



From left: Frank May, Grant Shoef, Brandy Ford, Frank Melon
Photo Kevin Reneau

Brandy Ford, a customer service officer for Mechanics Bank for the past six years, has been named the January Moraga Employee of the Month, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Moraga and the Chamber of Commerce. Ford has developed a large group of dedicated clients who enjoy her bright smile and positive attitude. She also manages the

branch tellers and serves as the office operations manager when manager Grant Shoef is away. In addition to her work duties, she volunteers with the Moraga Park Foundation, the Hacienda Foundation and is a member of the Moraga Kiwanis. The Rotary and Chamber awarded Ford a \$50 gift card to Safeway as well as a \$50 gift certificate to Terzetto Cuisine in Moraga.

New Addition to CM Commercial
3575 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Suite 212, Lafayette
(925) 235-1140

CM Commercial Real Estate announced the newest addition to the CM Commercial Team, Arabella Ablaza, who specializes in leasing office property exclusively on behalf of institutional, corporations and private owners in the East Bay market. Prior to CM Commercial, Ablaza held a position as a leasing agent for a commercial property management company.

News from the three Chambers of Commerce Lafayette

Dinner for the 2013 Business Person of the Year, Colleen McCormick of Lamorinda Music, and State of the City Address & Celebration at 6 p.m. Friday, Feb. 1, Lafayette Park Hotel & Spa, 3287 Mt. Diablo Blvd. Reservations required.

Joint February Mixer with the Moraga Chamber of Commerce from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 13 at Itrim, 975 Moraga Rd., Lafayette.

Moraga

Dinner for the 2013 Business Person of the Year Bill Snider of Moraga Hardware and Across the Way at 7 p.m. Feb. 26 at the Moraga Country Club. The dinner is sponsored by Union Bank.

Orinda

This year's Orinda's Small Business Winner is Flying A Gasoline. Winners are chosen with three points of distinction: A successful small business not part of a large chain; a good emissary from the business community to the community at large; and one that displays a positive attitude toward and engages with the Chamber of Commerce.

Orinda In-Home Business Owners Reception

The first Orinda In-Home Business Owners Reception will be held from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Feb. 5 at Citibank, 37 Orinda Way in Orinda. "This is the first time we are focusing on business people who work from their home," said Sue Breedlove, former chamber president. "It is a new year and we want to involve different kinds of people, getting to know them, understand what they need and hear their ideas about moving businesses forward in Orinda." The chamber is partnering with Rotary for outreach and with Citibank to host the meeting. More information can be found on the chamber website: www.orindachamber.org.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at sophie@lamorindaweekly.com