

# Massachusetts Immigrant Entrepreneurs

Engines for Economic Growth, Wealth and Job Creation



## About The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) and The ILC Public Education Program

The ILC is a not-for-profit adult learning center located in Malden, Massachusetts. Founded in 1992, the mission of The ILC is to provide foreign-born adults with the English proficiency necessary to lead productive lives in the United States. As a way of continuing to help ILC students and all immigrants become successful workers, parents and community members, the school expanded its mission to include promoting immigrants as assets to America. This expanded mission is known as the Public Education Program.

The Public Education Program has five major initiatives to support the goal of promoting immigrants as contributors to America's economic, social and cultural vibrancy.

- Business Sector Studies to examine the impact of immigrants as entrepreneurs, workers and consumers
- A super website that informs people concerned with immigrants and immigration including researchers, academics and policy makers
- Professional Development for K-12 teachers on teaching immigration across the curriculum
- Briefing books with researched statistics on immigrant issues such as immigrants and taxes, immigrants and jobs and immigrant entrepreneurship
- The Immigrant Theater Group

Diane Portnoy is the co-founder and CEO of The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. and has been in the adult education profession for over 30 years as a certified teacher. Ms. Portnoy has received considerable recognition locally and nationally for her visionary leadership. The ILC has been cited as a model adult education program in Massachusetts.

The Public Education Program is under the direction of Marcia Drew Hohn who holds a doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems and has over 20 years of experience in adult learning and systems development. Dr. Hohn has published extensively about organizational systems in adult basic education and developing health literacy among low-literate populations.

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## Preface

In 2003, The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) launched a public education initiative to raise the visibility of immigrants as assets to America. Spurred by certain anti-immigrant sentiments that were increasingly voiced after September 11, The ILC set forth to credibly document current economic and social contributions. Central to this effort are ILC-sponsored research studies about immigrants as entrepreneurs.

To provide thoughtful and substantive evidence that immigrant entrepreneurs are vital contributors, The ILC commissioned teams of university researchers to examine their contributions in industries across the state and to present those contributions within larger economic and social frameworks. To date, five studies have been completed with four already published. These studies include:

- Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Neighborhood Revitalization (2005)
- Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Massachusetts Biotechnology Industry (2007)
- The Rise of Asian-Owned Businesses in Massachusetts (2007)
- Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Workers in the New England Hospitality Industry (2010)
- Children of Immigrant Entrepreneurs (2011)

These studies show that Massachusetts immigrant entrepreneurs come from all corners of the globe and span businesses from neighborhood storefronts to science and technology. They bring talent, energy and often billions of dollars worth of education and training to benefit America. They all bring willingness to take risks and indomitable spirit.

The economic and social contributions of Massachusetts immigrant entrepreneurs are well documented in the research studies cited above. Immigrants established 25.7 percent of biotechnology firms in the Commonwealth that generated 4,000 jobs and \$7.6 billion in revenue in 2006 alone. Asian-owned businesses grew an astounding 44 percent in the last economic census. From nail salons to hotel ownership to science, Asian Americans, who are mostly immigrants, created 18,801 companies that paid over 37,000 employees with an annual payroll of \$1.2 billion. These firms include leisure and hospitality businesses where immigrants command 33 percent of ownership in restaurants and accommodations. In economically depressed neighborhoods of Massachusetts, immigrant storefront businesses have revived commerce by providing goods and services for both ethnic groups and outside consumers; stimulated other business growth and made the neighborhoods brighter, safer and more attractive.

Immigrant entrepreneurship is an old story in America but an enduring one. But we are in a new world now. As global business continues to soar, these entrepreneurs provide models, connections and cultural know-how for doing business internationally. They create pathways for new ways to conduct business that move beyond traditional thinking about place and connection and can truly take us into the global marketplace.

Diane Portnoy, Co-Founder and CEO/President

Marcia Drew Hohn, Director, Public Education

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## Sridhar Iyengar and Sonny Vu Co-Founders, AgaMatrix

In 2006, AgaMatrix began to distribute what its co-founders Sonny Vu and Dr. Sridhar Iyengar call the “next generation” of blood glucose monitoring products for diabetes. They were instrumental in developing these products and are now manufacturing them in Salem, New Hampshire. The origins of their company can be traced to a summer science program sponsored by the Department of Energy more than 15 years ago.

Sonny and Sridhar didn’t meet at the summer science program camp. That would have to wait until both young men matriculated at the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana the following year. But, as Sridhar recalls, a boyhood friend had attended the same camp as Sonny and later told his friend about a really bright and hardworking Vietnamese kid he’d met in Oregon. Sridhar, a child of Indian immigrants, filed the information away. He’d grown up in Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority. Sonny, himself an immigrant, had lived in Oklahoma after arriving with his parents and many other “boat people” who fled North Vietnam in the late

1970s. Their chance meeting at a party and subsequent friendship eventually led to the creation of AgaMatrix more than a decade later.

They took separate paths after undergraduate school. Sonny stopped working on his doctorate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in order to start a software company. Sridhar, in the meantime, had attended Cambridge University and finished his research on biosensors. He joined Sonny’s company for a year before it was sold. Following the sale of that company, instead of returning to finish his doctorate, Sonny decided to work on a biosensor product line and the company that Sridhar had in mind. This is the company that eventually became AgaMatrix.

Founded in 2001, both men described it as a particularly difficult time to be a start-up but, ironically, a great time to begin a start-up. That’s because raising a second wave of investment capital back then was a lot harder than raising the initial capital. In their case, much of that early financing came from contacts Sridhar had made while studying in England and from one of the persons that had invested in Sonny’s software venture. Furthermore, with so many existing start-ups tanking, there were many good people looking for work who were willing to take less pay than they’d been accustomed to earning. With their complementary skills, Sonny handles the business development side of AgaMatrix and Sridhar the science and product side. With the discipline born of an immigrant upbringing, AgaMatrix began to take shape.

Of course, the early shape was fashioned or confined by the fact that both men set up shop and lived out of a cramped Somerville, Massachusetts, apartment. You don’t splurge on fancy gadgetry, the newest equipment and spacious offices when your daily lunch budget is \$1.25. But the very Spartan-like character of their operation impressed would be investors who saw that these young men knew how to work and wouldn’t waste their money.

Being in Boston and connected to MIT was a huge early advantage for their fledgling company. Close to sources of student interns, investment money and

with serious academic credentials in their own right, Sonny and Sridhar developed a smart team, worked cheaply and had a product with a large potential market both in the United States and internationally. By the time they were ready to test out their ideas in a more formal setting, they couldn't afford the lab space. Potential institutional backers wanted too much equity in their company to suit them. They were forced to find lab space in Australia for six months where they made a couple of big scientific advances in what would become their product line. They also found another collaborator.

Two years worth of "getting by" convinced them that they should manufacture and distribute their product rather than sell it off to a larger and more established company. With their final investment capital lined up, their last stop before taking their company over the border to New Hampshire was a small lab in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Sonny and Sridhar are convinced that their immigrant backgrounds made the five years it took them to move from having a good idea to creating a product line bearable, if not easy. The backing of their families (although more emotional than financial); the immigrant's desire to "make it" and start his or her own business; and the ability to find other like-minded young men and women to work with (a great many of them immigrants or the children of immigrants) greatly aided them in the struggle to start their business. It's a different kind of immigrant success story but not a new one.

## DID YOU KNOW?

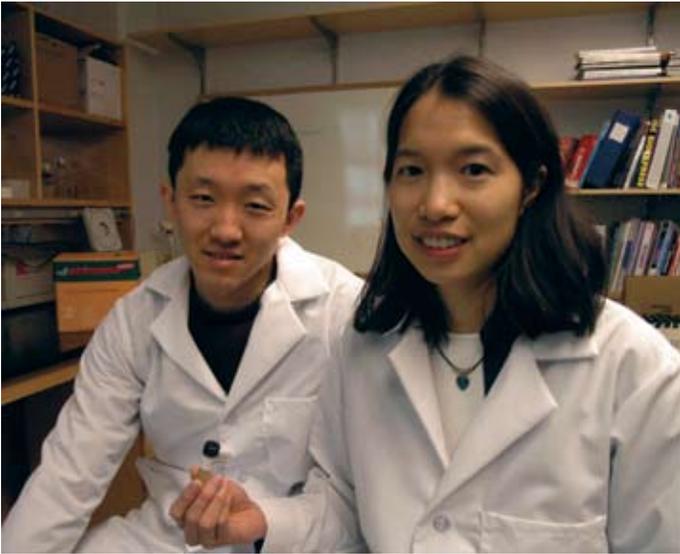
### Facts about Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Massachusetts Biotechnology Industry

- Immigrants in Massachusetts are around 14 percent of the population but have been founders in 25.7 percent of biotechnology firms in the state.
- These firms produced over \$7.6 billion in sales and employed over 4,000 workers in 2006.
- Like the nationwide results for immigrant entrepreneurs in the biosciences, the founders of biotechnology firms come from nations across the globe.
- Foreign-born founders of biotechnology firms in Massachusetts, like high technology immigrant entrepreneurs nationwide, are more likely to come from Europe, Canada or Asia.
- About 12 percent of founders of Massachusetts biotechnology firms are women.
- Immigrant-founded biotechnology firms in Massachusetts are focused in Human Therapeutics and Genomics/Proteomics. Human Therapeutics are treatments of disease. Genomics/Proteomics study the “map” of the human genome, which is our gene sequence, and the proteins that constitute genes to look for health applications.
- Immigrant entrepreneurs specialize in the most complex, risky, life science-intensive aspects of biotechnology to seek knowledge directly applicable to human health.
- This evidence strongly suggests that immigrants have been key contributors to the creation of new businesses and intellectual capital in the Massachusetts biotechnology industry and the economic growth of the Commonwealth.

Source:

Monti, D., Smith-Doerr, L., McQuaid, J. (2007). **Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Massachusetts Biotechnology Industry**. Malden, MA: The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.





## Melina Fan and Benjie Chen Co-Founders, Addgene

Melina Fan and Benjie Chen are graduates of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Melina, whose Chinese roots run four generations deep in Boston, and Benjie, who immigrated with his family after Tiananmen Square, met at MIT and were married several years later. These days they divide their attention between taking care of their house and promoting Addgene, the non-profit corporation they founded.

Addgene was founded to help scientists share plasmids which are valuable DNA-based materials used for biomedical research. When a scientist makes a new discovery about a gene, other scientists will want to build on those findings. They will write to the original scientist and ask the scientist to send them a plasmid containing the gene. Scientists share these tools with their colleagues in order to find life-saving cures. Every laboratory has its own area of expertise, and progress is made through working together.

However, the old system of plasmid sharing placed a tremendous burden on the laboratories that make ground-breaking discoveries. The time spent fulfilling the many requests took time away from research. Oftentimes, they were simply too busy to respond to requests and, therefore, the plasmids were sent several months later or were never sent. This slowed the progress of research.

The idea for Addgene grew from Melina's thesis work on a protein involved in diabetes. In her initial experiment, she found 20 proteins that interacted with her protein of interest and were potentially important for diabetes. When she wrote to other scientists to request the plasmids encoding these proteins, only half of the scientists sent the materials. Spurred by this negative experience, Melina decided to start an organization to help scientists share their materials more efficiently.

Benjie appreciated Melina's problem. As a budding computer scientist, he saw it as an opportunity to put his computer work to good use in the service of biology. Melina's brother joined them to handle the business side of the operation.

They started Addgene in 2004 although this service has been needed for 20 years. Cutbacks in federal support for this kind of work stalled their progress. They used money from a fund established by Melina's grandmother for everyday expenses and lived in her mother's house for a year. Some timely donations got their operation up and running. Harvard University gave them good rates on lab space and manages all the facilities. The Massachusetts Biotechnology Council helped them and friends from their undergraduate days are working with them as well.

With thousands of labs in the United States and many more overseas, there's certainly a need for the service that Addgene provides. The idea of sharing and collaboration is at the heart of the scientific enterprise. However, getting started was not easy. Fortunately for them, the number of labs at Harvard University and the Boston area provided them with a good foundation upon which to build.

After six years, the organization has grown significantly and has sent over 100,000 plasmids to laboratories working in fields as diverse as Developmental Neuroscience to Yeast Genetics. An Addgene Challenge award was established that asks receiving scientists to share their use of the plasmids sent and any new discoveries that came as a result. It is Addgene's way of giving back to the research community!



## Anna Voronova

### Life Science Consultant and Entrepreneur

When the opportunity arose to come to the United States as a refugee in 1982, Anna Voronova jumped at the chance. Already highly trained in science, she wanted to leave oppressive political and social systems and be in a country where she could speak her mind and focus on cutting edge science. When she started a doctoral program at the University of California at San Diego, she found she was well ahead of classmates academically, bringing years of education and training to benefit the U.S. However, she found herself thrown into a society and systems that were completely new to her and necessitated learning elementary skills such as opening a bank account. Fortunately, the university helped her at every step.

After a post-doctoral program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Anna turned her energy to working as a scientist for a variety of pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies specializing in such areas as cancer biology and immunology. Her experiences motivated her to think about how organizations and processes could be improved. In 2006, she decided to strike out on her own. She established AV Consulting, LLC to do consulting for biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies. She was greatly helped by taking classes at the “Center for Women and Enterprise” where she was introduced to business planning and venture capital. The consulting experience sparked Anna’s incentive to further share her experience and she began volunteering at MIT. I “got the bug” says Anna who now leads business and scientific teams, is a grant reviewer and catalyst for the Deshpande Center for Technological Innovation and a mentor at the Boston University Kindle Mentoring Program.

Anna remains grateful to the United States that gave her opportunities as a woman, a scientist and a citizen that she could never have gotten in the former Soviet Union. But it is clear that she has given back to this country ten-fold with her education, skills and energy.

# DID YOU KNOW?

## Facts about Asian-Owned Businesses in Massachusetts

- In the last economic census of 2002, Asian-owned businesses in Massachusetts rose 44 percent compared with a five percent growth rate of all firms.
- Sales and receipts were up 186 percent.
- These firms numbered around 18,000 employing 37,193 workers with an annual payroll of \$1.2 billion.
- The five industries with the largest annual payrolls for Asian-owned businesses in Massachusetts included:
  - Professional, scientific and technical services
  - Accommodation and food services
  - Health care and social assistance
  - Retail trade
  - Manufacturing
- While Chinese own the largest number of businesses in Massachusetts, Asian Indians lead all Asian ethnic groups in aggregate revenues. These two groups combined account for over three-fourths of the total sales and receipts of Asian-owned businesses.
- Their growth eclipses national growth of Asian-owned businesses.
- They are a growing force in the state's economy and need to be recognized and supported as vital economic contributors.

Source:

Watanabe, P. & Liu, M. (2007). **The Rise of Asian-Owned Businesses in Massachusetts**. Malden, MA: The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.



## Jill Cheng

### Publisher, Cheng & Tsui Company, Inc.

“My friends thought I was out of my mind when I left a high paying job in a successful publishing company. But I wanted to do something meaningful, something that would bring cultures together and something that would utilize my international background.”

Jill Cheng had the good fortune of being exposed to the publishing world starting with a part-time job in college. “I was born in China, grew up in Tokyo and came to college in the U.S. I was on scholarship but needed to earn more money.” So Jill applied for a part-time job with a local publisher and began her adventure in the publishing world.

“After I got my Master’s degree, I went to work full-time for the same firm. I was fascinated by the business side of publishing. The owner was wonderful to me, mentoring and supporting me in learning the business.” Jill quickly became Executive Vice President of the company earning

a good salary. But there was a nagging sense that she needed to do something that had personal meaning for her. With her husband busy with his research, she used nights and weekends to develop ideas for a new business.

“I put out my first catalogue of books in Chinese and Japanese that was directed at academic and library audiences. I had obtained high quality pieces of literature for my husband to read and thought others might enjoy these texts also. But as soon as I could, I moved into the most exciting part of the book business, which is to publish new original works. This began the opportunity that I was looking for: to bring Asia to the world.” Thus began Cheng & Tsui Company.

When Cheng & Tsui started over thirty years ago, interest in Asia was practically non-existent except in select universities across the country. Through hard work and perseverance, she has made Cheng & Tsui the leading publisher and distributor of Asian language and culture textbooks in America.

They publish in all areas including translated literature, history, religion and culture. They have an especially strong presence in providing high-quality language textbooks for learning Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian and other Asian languages for students at all age levels. The best-selling **Integrated Chinese and Adventures in Japanese** textbook series have been recognized internationally. Cheng & Tsui’s publication, **Startup Business Chinese: An Introductory Course for Professionals**, is likely to be a hit with business people as the West focuses on China.

Riding the wave of a rapidly emerging China and the increasing importance of Asia in general, Cheng & Tsui has grown exponentially in the last decade. Even in this down economy, they are prospering and are hiring continuously for many new and rewarding jobs at all experience levels while helping to educate the future generations of global citizens. Jill is preparing for exciting opportunities ahead and feeling grateful that, as a social entrepreneur, she has been able to create a company that is doing well while doing good.

In addition to running a successful and growing business with educational impact around the world, Jill finds personal enrichment through her volunteer roles in community and educational organizations such as Boston's South Cove Community Health Center, Asian Community Development Corporation, the Town of Brookline's Finance Advisory Committee, the United Way, Primary Source, Framingham State College and Harvard University. Currently, she is Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.





## Ashish Sangani

### Owner, GIRI Hotels

Ashish Sangani moved to the United States in 1998 to live with his aunt and uncle in New England. As a student in India, Ashish had studied business and commerce with the dream of one day owning his own company. He realized that his financial situation was not ideal for going back to school for another degree so Ashish decided he needed a job. His uncle helped him get his first position at the front desk of a small hotel owned by an acquaintance.

Ashish notes Indian workers are an increasing presence in the hospitality industry in New England. He further notes that they do an outstanding job. This is a characteristic that he attributes to the fact that many Indian hotel workers hold the same vision that he did: to own their own hotel.

His early career experience in the hospitality industry only fueled his passion to succeed with the pursuit of owning a business. Strong analytical skills coupled with his natural ability to work with people matched the needs of the hospitality business. Ashish decided to try his hand at hotel ownership. Although the process was lengthy and frustrating, he got an opportunity to purchase a property owned by Eastern Nazarene

College. Finally he owned and operated his own company, a 37-room hotel called The President's City Inn.

Ashish deeply appreciates the opportunities that being in the great land of the United States has given him. He believes that these opportunities are available to everyone across the country. He also believes that having a stable family life provides a strong foundation to achieve one's dreams. These dreams are certainly being realized for him. The Sangani family now owns six hotels and manages five of them from Quincy, Massachusetts, to Augusta, Maine, through a family- and friend-owned company called GIRI.

He is proud of the work that he has done here in this country and deeply appreciates the support the staff has given him. "We are like a family. We are all different races and nationalities but support, appreciate and respect each other."

Ashish believes that immigrants are providing a great workforce to this country. They come with dreams that lead them to put their whole selves into their work. It is this strong desire and commitment that has enabled many immigrants to achieve success. When asked what is next for him, Ashish states that he has not achieved all that he can. Work is in progress and the best is yet to come.

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Facts about Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Leisure and Hospitality Businesses in Massachusetts

- In 2006, Leisure and Hospitality businesses were the fourth largest employer in Massachusetts employing 302,547 workers or 9.3% of the state's total employment.
- In the same year, Leisure and Hospitality businesses generated approximately \$6.4 billion in gross payroll.
- The entrepreneurship rate for foreign-born workers in Leisure and Hospitality businesses is higher than for native-born workers.
- Immigrant entrepreneurs are concentrated in the "Travelers Accommodations" and "Restaurant and Other Food Services" where they are well over one-third of all entrepreneurs in these sectors.
- Immigrant-owned businesses in the Hotel Accommodations sector tend to be small employing 10 or fewer individuals.
- Immigrant men own more Leisure and Hospitality businesses than immigrant women at 63 percent of the total.
- Immigrant entrepreneurs in these businesses are more likely to hold advanced degrees than the native-born.
- These immigrant entrepreneurs are making an enormous and positive impact on local economies.
- Some major challenges facing immigrant entrepreneurs include
  - Unfamiliarity with government resources and regulations
  - Lack of access to technical assistance
  - Networking opportunities and lack of family support in the United States

Source:

Jennings, J., Zordon-Zachery, J., Siqueira, C.E., Lawrence, J. & Marion, M. (2010). **Impact of Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Workers in Leisure and Hospitality Businesses: Massachusetts and New England**. Malden, MA: The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.



## Gerry Fernandez

### President, Multicultural Food Service & Hospitality Alliance

Mr. Gerry Fernandez sees great potential for ethnic entrepreneurs in the growing market for multicultural food. As President of the Multicultural Food Service & Hospitality Alliance in Rhode Island, he is dedicated to helping small ethnic businesses develop their capacity and skills to thrive in the increasingly diverse food and service industry. Gerry's own journey to his current position has provided rich and robust experience to support these budding entrepreneurs. As one of six children in a Cape Verdean family on the South Shore, he worked his way from a work-study job as a dishwasher at the culinary college, Johnston and Wales, to summer jobs in the Cape Cod area. On the island of Nantucket, he had his first real cooking job at the age of 19. After finishing school, he did further training at such places as the Waldorf Astoria in New York City. However, his meeting the Director of the National Restaurant Association altered his course.

From him he learned restaurant management and returned to Providence to open two restaurants including a "Capitol Grill." In 1992, his career took another turn when he went to work for General Mills in Minneapolis in research and development. After moving into sales at General Mills, he got the idea for his current organization, which General Mills helped launch in 1996.

Mr. Fernandez tells the story of his early love affair with food and later the food service industry. According to him, "After all this change I am still in love with food. More importantly, I still love the service side of the hospitality business. Making someone feel as though they are the most important person in the world is really satisfying to me, and my industry experience has really helped me to grow the organization."

During the last four years, the Multicultural Food Service & Hospitality Alliance (MFHA) has served as the voice for diversity and multicultural issues in the hospitality industry. The organization promotes the economic benefits of a diverse workforce and consumer base to all segments of food service and lodging and works to build the capacity and skills of ethnic businesses. In addition, the Alliance looks for ways to help improve the industry's image while educating the industry on the value of ethnic consumer marketing. Currently, the organization serves over 800 members and partners with 70 corporate entities. Mr. Fernandez says, "It's our job to find solutions and assist our members with securing information that will help grow their business."



## Klara Sotonova

### Owner, Klara's Gourmet Cookies

Klara found her calling—baking amazing, gourmet cookies deep in the mountainous Berkshires of Massachusetts. That was not always her dream. Initially, Klara's goal was to open an Eastern European restaurant in Massachusetts, but once she realized that she would need to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, she quickly amended her dream! Now she is the owner of an exclusive bakery. Klara's Gourmet Cookies are sold at festivals and high-end restaurants throughout the Berkshires. Klara and her husband were even able to move out of their makeshift, at-home bakery and into their own space. But this is the most recent news in her

voyage toward her dream. The trip began over a decade ago in Czechoslovakia.

Klara did not immediately dream of moving to the United States and creating a business in the Berkshires. She went to school for agriculture in her home country. In addition to agriculture, she was also interested in accounting. Upon graduating, armed with skills and knowledge in both the agriculture and accounting fields, Klara came to a realization common among future immigrants to the United States: there were no jobs for young people in her country. "Everything was still new and getting started after the revolution. People right out of school didn't have any [hope] for jobs. [There were] high unemployment rates." Even though Klara wanted to go to college, she had to leave school and start working. It was this experience that started her career in the restaurant business at the age of 14. When Klara first came to the United States, she worked at a camp during the day and used her experience in the restaurant business to get a job at night.

Klara went to work at Camp Eisner, a Jewish summer camp in Great Barrington in 1999. She applied for the position of support staff through an agency in Czechoslovakia. The agency does a background check on all applicants and sends the applications from camp to camp all over the United States. The directors of this particular camp chose from the available applicants, and Klara was lucky enough to be chosen by Louise Fordman at Camp Eisner. Klara initially came for the summer but was offered a work visa to stay on through the full year.

Klara started her business in May 2005 by accident. Klara made traditional Eastern European vanilla walnut cookies for her then fiancé and now husband. She then went to work at the restaurant and by the time she came home, he had eaten the entire box! "He said they were the best cookies he'd ever had and that I should sell them." This wasn't too far off from her dream of owning that Eastern European restaurant. Soon after, they started the new business together. Klara started doing research about licensing, food code, packing and everything else

associated with opening a food business. Their first event as a business was to do May Fest, a celebration of foods and beverages with all the proceeds going to a non-profit in the Berkshires that supports low-income family housing and transitioning women. They have done this festival ever since with greater success each year.

This success has been demonstrated through the growth in her business. Klara's Gourmet Cookies started in a 750 square-foot apartment working out of a home oven. The startup involved long days given that she could only bake two half-sheet trays at a time in her small oven. Finally, the new business owners realized that they were at their max and needed to expand. In early 2009, Klara and her husband bought an apartment building in Lee and redid the downstairs as a factory with the upstairs as their living space. The demand for her cookies has never been higher. Even in the economic downturn, Klara's sales are up by 20 percent.

For Klara, it was never a question that she would become an entrepreneur and own her own business in Massachusetts. The only question was which business would she create. "I feel like I've worked hard for so many years, and now it's really paid off. I have a successful business that is growing every year, and it feels very good when I go out and sell my product." Klara says it best when she states that it is an amazing thing that a young woman can come to the United States and achieve such success.

# DID YOU KNOW?

## Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Neighborhood Revitalization

The immigrant owners of storefront businesses contribute to the economy and quality of life of the neighborhoods they serve in a number of ways.

- Revive commerce and investment in areas that had declined
- Provide needed products and services
- Address the particular needs of distinctive ethnic niches
- Expand beyond those niches
- Incubate new businesses and, in some instances, mentoring new ethnic entrepreneurs
- Attract new customers
- Provide some employment opportunities
- Improve the physical quality and appearance of the buildings in which they operate and surrounding areas
- Enhance public safety

The impact of immigrant entrepreneurs, therefore, is a positive one. They provide needed goods and services to existing residents and attract new customers adding to the economic life of the neighborhood. They enhance the physical well-being and appearance of the areas in which they operate and, in addition, help make them safer. Although many of the businesses are small operations, they provide some jobs and, as the size and number of businesses grow, those opportunities will increase. Many of the entrepreneurs do not sit still. They look to expand, branch out and diversify. All in all, the immigrant businesses have proven to be engines of change that contribute to a feeling of stability.

Source:

Borges-Mendez, R., Lui, M. & Watanabe, P. (2005). **Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Neighborhood Revitalization: Studies of the Allston Village, East Boston and Fields Corner Neighborhood in Boston.** Malden, MA: The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.



## Saul Perlera

### Owner, Saul Perlera Real Estate

Saul Perlera never wanted to start his own business. The third child of restaurant owners, Perlera knew what it meant to be a small business owner—long hours and hard work. But he could not escape his entrepreneurial roots and today he owns a top real estate office in East Boston.

At 16 years of age, Perlera left El Salvador for the United States arriving at his uncle's house in East Boston. Within a few months he was working three jobs: a full time factory job and two part time cleaning positions. "I didn't know a word of English when I got here," says Perlera. "But working with Italians at the factory and learning English along the way, I was soon able to speak Italian, English and Portuguese."

With East Boston's predominantly Italian landlords and largely Latino tenants, the value of Perlera's language skills was recognized by the real estate agent who rented him his first apartment. The agent offered him a job on the spot. Over the next ten years, Perlera worked in the agent's office, learning the ropes of the real estate business and eventually getting his license and becoming the top agent in the office.

Seven years ago, Perlera decided to break out on his own. "I had a vision of creating a space where brokers would want to work," says Perlera. "I wanted an office that was equipped with the tools brokers need to function well in this industry and one that showed a commitment to professionalism."

He started small, hiring three people, working out of in his living room and financing the operation with equity from his own personal investment properties. Soon, he found office space in the Meridian Street business district. He hired a designer and completely renovated the office creating an aesthetically appealing space. Perlera's strategy worked. Brokers came knocking. They wanted to work in the stylish atmosphere with its high-tech infrastructure.

Now, seven years into the business, Perlera Real Estate has become one of the top real estate firms in East Boston. The severe economic downturn hit this market particularly hard and Perlera's firm struggled. But the good news is that they are still in business and looking forward to more robust growth as the economy recovers. Perlera is also taking his vision to the neighborhood at large. He is an advocate of the East Boston Main Streets façade-improvement program helping other small business owners to enhance the look of their storefronts, and he is involved in several other organizations that are working to improve the image of Meridian Street and East Boston's other commercial districts. "Someone has to raise the standards of housing, business façades and signage in the neighborhood," says Perlera. "Someone has to take the lead in creating a neighborhood that people want to be in."



## B.J. Wang

### Owner, E. Shan Tang Herbs, Inc. & Asian Healing Arts Center

In 1982, B.J. Wang came to the United States searching for garlic. He was a young buyer for an import-export business in Japan and an expert on plants and herbs after having trained in his family's herbal remedy store in Korea. However, in the midst of his garlic expedition, he found a new calling; sushi. Deciding not to return to Japan, he began training as a sushi chef in California, a career that would take him to Chicago and eventually Boston. Attracted by the ethnic enclave of Boston's Allston Village, Wang found a job at a sushi restaurant on Harvard Avenue in the heart of the neighborhood.

A few years later, Wang's father came to live with him after selling the family business in Korea. "He was so bored at my house," recalls Wang, "I would leave every day for the restaurant and he would have nothing to do. He asked me if I would start an herbal shop with him to give him something to occupy his time."

Wang agreed and found a space near the restaurant that would allow him to manage the new business and continue working at the restaurant. The first few years were hard juggling two jobs and trying to build the business. But as customer volume grew, he was able to discontinue the restaurant job and devote himself to the next generation of his family's business.

Eighteen years later, people from all parts of the country come to Allston Village to shop in E. Shan Tang Herbs, Inc. and the store's internet business is thriving. His mother took over the original store and Wang created another herb shop and merged it with the Asian Healing Arts Center started nearby in 2005. Here, people flock for classes in Chi Gong and the Ton Ren Healing-Guinea Pig Class. The classes are free and offered as additional avenues for healing. The center also offers acupuncture and acupressure with trained therapists. Wang notes that many of the individuals seeking help from herbs, classes and other services are suffering from cancer and may be referred by doctors.

The main business continues to be herbal and Wang sees as many as 30 people a day in addition to filling prescription orders for 40 to 50 doctors around the country. "I see all kinds of people: white, black, yellow, brown. We all speak broken English to each other," says Wang. "My philosophy is to treat each customer like a god. If you are good to people and love them, they feel better faster." Wang says he can't take on more new patients. The center is already open seven days a week with extended hours on two days. He often works the full seven days and at least six days. "I hope to be able to take two days off sometime but all my regulars have become my friends and I need to take care of them."