

It's Up to Us to Rebuild Main Street

AUGUST 31, 2009

Recently my fellow "Mod Squad on Main" members and I parked ourselves in a Main Street mom-and-pop coffee house and shared our ideas and our struggles with other real-world entrepreneurs (and met some future ones to boot).

On a recent Tuesday morning I woke up at 4:30 a.m. after only four hours of sleep and headed 60 miles up the freeway to Santa Monica, a beautiful beachside city in Los Angeles County. There I was joined by two of my good friends, Jennifer Kushell, founder of YSN, and Jane Pak, who heads up NAWBO-LA (that's the National Association of Women Business Owners-L.A.). For four hours we set up shop at a table in Amelia's Espresso & Panini, a mom-and-pop coffee shop (though to call it that doesn't nearly do it justice) and answered questions about small business.

Amelia's Espresso & Panini is owned and operated by Amelia herself, her husband Ralph, and their son Gianni, and is literally located on Main Street. Just six weeks ago the three of us were there for our monthly breakfast gabfest and spontaneously decided we needed to volunteer some time to help rebuild America's small businesses, one Main Street at a time. And so Mod Squad on Main was born.

A diverse group of entrepreneurs stopped by our table, including Lorraine and Jessica, two high school students enrolled in a Biz Camp run by the L.A. chapter of the Urban League. These young girls were focused on their futures as entrepreneurs; Lorraine wants to start a law firm and Jessica plans on opening up a healthy bakery. Another teenager came to our table with one idea in mind, but after talking with us, left even more energized with a different, more viable plan.

Many already successful business owners stopped by as well, including a realtor with a still successful business (unlike many in the hard-hit southern California real estate market), a handbag manufacturer, and a video streaming entrepreneur. One startup founder, who opens the doors to her new business in three weeks, was making deals while waiting in line. These business owners gave as good as they got, which is always the best basis for an interesting conversation.

The "high" that Jen, Jane, and I got from talking to these entrepreneurs is so indefinable I cannot adequately put it into words. So instead let me suggest some proactive actions you can take yourself:

Shop small. As entrepreneurs we should patronize our fellow business owners whenever possible.

That's one reason we picked Amelia's as our first venue, instead of a chain coffee house. I know shopping small is not always possible or affordable, but if even a small percentage of all 27 million of America's small business owners made the effort to "shop small," it would make a difference.

Speak up. Contact your elected representatives. Whether it's at the local, state, or federal level, we need to demand that entrepreneurs are represented in any and all economic recovery plans. I was so wound up after talking to some of the entrepreneurs about the cost of health care insurance, once I got back to my computer I wrote to my Congressman and told him to stop wasting his time and my taxpaying dollars worrying about silly stuff and get back to work on the things that matter.

Join a group. Consider joining a group or association to help combine and strengthen your voices. Every entrepreneur should be a member of his or her industry's trade association. They're the voice of your industry and have a lot to offer: member benefits often include access to discounted health insurance, networking opportunities, and forums in which to share success tips and best practices. In addition to your trade association, I recommend joining at least one other association. It could be your local Chamber of Commerce, or groups that represent your specific interests (like NAWBO for women business owners). I am a new member of NAWBO-LA and have already benefited from the women I've met and the seminars and workshops I've attended.

Talk to a kid. I mean no disrespect here. When you're having a down day or feeling defeated, nothing can pick you up quicker than talking to a teenager whose goal is to be a successful business owner. Sure, they might be a bit naive and a little unfocused, but their energy and enthusiasm is contagious. They simply believe they will succeed. Some days we all need to be reminded of the power of positive thinking.

Recessions don't go away by themselves, and getting past this one will take all of our combined efforts. We cannot afford to wait it out. As General George S. Patton said, "Opportunities do not come to those who wait. They are captured by those who attack." It's past time we entrepreneurs went on the attack, helping one another and demanding what we deserve and need.