

Business Highlight

In honor of National Women's Small Business Month, we are shining a light on Iracema Camargo, owner of Green & Fair Janitorial and Maintenance in San Pablo. The business has been in Contra Costa County since 2007.



Q: What goods/services does your business sell?

A: What is unique about Green & Fair is that we provide environmentally conscious commercial cleaning services, as well as maintenance services. We're an all-in-one that allows for thorough cleaning without the aggressive chemical smells, which is especially important for your sensitive employees. In addition to commercial janitorial, we also do lot sweeping and specialized cleaning and maintenance services for malls, plazas and community spaces. It's an important aspect of curb appeal for commercial corridors and helps retain business tenants.

Q: How long has your business been open?

A: We have been operating since 2007. However, like many small businesses, the pandemic impacted our business tremendously. I laid off most of my employees. We very nearly went out of business, but as the economy picks up, we are cautiously rebuilding. We will be working to pivot our business model, so that we'll be able to better weather shutdowns in the future. We pay people a living wage and invest in their training; it's truly painful to have to let your employees go, and we want to be around for the long-term!

Q: What prompted you to open your business?

A: I was inspired to open my business because I needed to support my family financially and find a way to reach my educational goals. I'm a minority woman entrepreneur who needed a career without the benefit of an advanced degree or key connections. So, I created my own opportunity, determined to teach my employees how to start a business of their own if they wanted and to pay them a living wage for the work they do. My business then helped me pursue my education.

Q: October is National Women's Small Business Month. What does this day of observation mean to you?

A: It means recognition of the hard work, sacrifice, and nearly impossible balancing that women do to keep our economy going. It is an excellent opportunity to pay tribute to women who accomplish their business goals and financially support their community, families, and employees. It also brings much-needed awareness. Women-owned businesses face limited resources and poorer access to capital; the data are worse for women of color. We have so much to overcome just to get started. Therefore, there is a need to build and nurture collaboration to support the small businesses of women like me.

Q: Have you engaged with the Workforce Development Board of Contra Costa County? If so, how did you engage with the WDBCCC and what was your experience like?

A: The WDBCCC has partnered with the San Pablo EDC to sponsor business education mixers and San Pablo Small Business of the Year. I recently reached out to get support getting certified as a minority-owned business. It was a convenient experience that I did online. Balancing kids in school, reopening my business, my education and this made me grateful that the certification was accessible.

Indirectly, I have tremendous support from a member and advocate of the WDBCCC, Leslay Choy. She has been my mentor, my guide, and my inspiration. She brought all her expertise to help my business, and thanks to her, I got excellent contracts when my business started. It would be almost impossible to achieve what I did without her help. San Pablo EDC has been such a vital resource for everything I have needed in my business. Now that we are working on getting contracts, San Pablo EDC is helping me design my website and build a strategy to get new clientele. It is such a comfort to have that kind of support.

Q: What would you like to share about being a small business owner in Contra Costa County?

A: Being a small business owner is a rewarding but tough job. It is rewarding because it gives me independence and control over my business. It also allows me to pursue my passion, which is the willingness to educate my community about problems that are ignored, especially regarding janitorial workers. I know the WDBCCC sometimes talks about the unseen and uncounted in the economy; that's exactly what I wanted to responsibly take head-on.

In the beginning, I opened my business only to help my family financially and to achieve educational goals, but after finishing school, I found a solid reason to keep it going. A janitorial company is essential, and women can benefit from it as I did. Being a janitor allowed me to work at night with my crew while my husband cared for my children and allowed me to attend school during the day. After graduating from Haas at UC Berkeley, I got a job in the audit department at Ernst & Young; it is such an outstanding achievement that my business made possible. My husband and I talked about the importance of my business and how it can help women who work for us to contribute to their families financially. I can also be a mentor for them and help them to achieve educational goals. Although I accepted the offer at Ernst & Young, I decided to keep the business because it is an opportunity to give back to my community.

I have the moral responsibility to help janitorial workers and bring awareness to clients. Janitors are not fairly compensated, and they are exposed to products that are detrimental to their health. Being a small business owner allows me to have a voice and advocate for them, and I will do it using my business acumen and experience.

My motto: "Make the change that your community needs by contracting fair companies."