



Article 396

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Small-Business Champion Brings Lessons From her own Business Experiences

By John Woosley, New Mexico District Director, U.S. Small Business Administration

Julianna Silva was a small-business advocate well before she joined the staff of WESST and became the Albuquerque regional manager of the nonprofit business-development organization.



After earning a bachelor's degree from the University of New Mexico's Anderson School of Management, Silva worked in marketing for various nonprofits, including the Trust for Public Land in Santa Fe. In 1996, she left that job to help her husband with his handcrafted furniture venture. "I got my MBA by building that store," she quipped.

On May 12, Silva will receive the Small Business Administration's New Mexico Women in Business Champion of the Year award in recognition of her work at WESST helping other New Mexicans start and sustain businesses of their own.

In the Trenches

Her firsthand experience as co-owner of Damian Velasquez LLC tested all the theories Silva learned in business school.



She and her husband opened a retail store in the Nob Hill neighborhood and then decided to sell Velasquez's creations from a building they bought near his studio in an industrial part of town. That planned expansion was severely impacted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which devastated retail businesses nationwide as consumer spending contracted dramatically.

The couple sold their building, closed the retail store and put all their resources into the furniture studio. While Velasquez designed and built award-winning furniture, Silva developed strategic and marketing plans, kept the books and designed a website. She discovered WESST in 2009 when she took a class in business planning.

"He's an artist and didn't have a traditional business plan," she said of her husband, "but he has a great entrepreneurial mind. From the very beginning, he kept excellent financial records."

Now the company sells its modern, architectural home furnishings nationwide through its website and high-end juried art shows. And now Silva works for the very organization that helped her develop a clearer vision for the family business.

At WESST, she teaches classes to help others take control of their financial destiny and make better business decisions using free or affordable tools and resources. “It’s about owning your numbers,” she said. “Owning a business is not for the faint of heart. People have to be willing to pivot, to be dedicated and disciplined.”

It Takes a Team

While she’s thrilled about the SBA award, Silva said her colleagues at WESST deserve equal recognition for the work they do, 90 percent of which involves training and mentoring business creators like herself.

WESST also secures loans for businesses that don’t meet the strict criteria of banks and other traditional lenders. Founded to help lower-income women and minorities improve their lives through self-employment, the organization serves a population that is overwhelmingly female, minority and economically disadvantaged.

“There are no barriers at WESST,” Silva said. “We will help you at whatever level you are, whether you’re a startup or existing business.”

The SBA awards will be presented May 12 at a luncheon at Hotel Albuquerque in Albuquerque’s Old Town, when the agency’s New Mexico district recognizes the contributions of the state’s entrepreneurs and small-business owners. The event is held in conjunction with National Small Business Week (May 4-8).

To register for the awards luncheon, call Adriene Gallegos at 505-428-1624.

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