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Budding business really starting to cook

BY Clare Trapasso

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THE entrepreneurial spirit is bubbling up at a fledgling Long Island City small business incubator.

The Queens Economic Development Corporation recently opened the Entrepreneur's Space, a 5,500-square-foot commercial kitchen, to local entrepreneurs striving to pinch pennies while turning their culinary dreams into successful ventures.

The corporation also plans to rent out low-cost office space on the building's second floor, once renovations are completed.

"If we can help people achieve their dreams and start a new business, that's what we're about," said QEDC Executive Director Seth Bornstein. "Small businesses are driving the economy."

The graffiti-tagged, brick building had housed union job training programs and allowed local cooks to use its kitchen on weekends. But when the Consortium for Worker Education's funding dried up, Bornstein stepped in.

With the help of a \$170,000 grant from the city Economic Development Corporation, the QEDC officially took over the space last month, Bornstein said.

There are now 80 clients who rent out eight-hour-shifts in the group's state-of-the-art kitchen, said Kathrine Gregory, director of Mi Kitchen es su Kitchen, the consulting firm that runs the facility.

The kitchen is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is stocked with everything from 23-inch mixing bowls to a revolving rack oven capable of cooking 40 to 60 dozen cookies at a time. Help writing business plans and finding financing is also available.

This gives budding businesses access to the facilities and equipment they need without having to go deep into debt renting out their own spaces, Gregory said.

And the recent surge in popularity of local and gourmet foods has made now the time to launch a culinary startup, she said.

"I'm allowing people to take a leap of faith and grow their business," Gregory said.

Hector Fernandez, a business and law professor at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, said incubators that offer low-cost space and equipment allow entrepreneurs to start businesses on a shoestring budget.

"Access to capital is severely limited for a new small business owner," Fernandez said. "Having these overhead costs, which are very low, allows the individual to get started with their own funds."

Incubators also provide networking opportunities for the self-employed, he said.

Creative Concepts NYC founder Miguel Urrego, 35, of Elmwood Park, N.J., agreed.

Unable to afford his own facility, Urrego was renting a cramped space in an Ozone Park bakery - until he found out about the Long Island City kitchen.

"This is a great place to start up your own company, progress and eventually move on to bigger and greater things," Urrego said.

Today, his venture is 10 employees strong. And he plans to rent an office upstairs where he can conduct client tastings and put menus together, once the space opens next month, he said.

"If I wouldn't have this space, I wouldn't have a business," Urrego said.

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