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LIC kitchen a slice of heaven for small businesses

By Adam Pincus

Elba Mareno knew her husband should be making cheesecakes to sell after she took three of them to an arts club event in Jackson Heights a few years ago and they were the first from an array of desserts to disappear.

"I pushed John into the business because I realized he has a passion to bake cheesecakes," she said.

One year ago this month, Moreno, 54, and John Mantione, 49, began Johnnie's Cheesecake, a micro-business they run out of their home in Maspeth.

Last Thursday they were baking about a dozen cakes at the Artisan Baking Center kitchen at the Consortium for Workers Education, 36-46 37th St. in Long Island City, where they have been renting space since March. They rent the kitchen at least once a month, though in their busier seasons they use the site more often, baking 30 to 40 cakes per week.

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The center has been an incubator for 55 small and micro businesses to bake, cook and prepare food for sale since it was founded in June 2005, said the organizer of the program, director of the Kathrine Gregory, the director of Mi Kitchen es su Kitchen said. The cheesecakes are just one of many products made there.

"One makes cookies with tea, one packages chocolates and another makes shelf-stable hummus," she said. Though the cooks are from all over the city, just a handful are from Queens.

A number of the cooks still hold on to their day jobs, while others are in the middle of a career change.

Mantione is a 22-year veteran of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, while Moreno is a beautician in Long Island.

Renting the space is far cheaper than trying to accumulate the funds to create their own kitchen, Gregory said. She has specialized since 1995 in finding underutilized space and matching it with young businesses, saving them costs that can reach \$100,000 to develop their own kitchen.

The experience of the incubator is no different from other business start-ups, which mostly end in failure. A company making dog treats is going out of business.

So far no one has graduated to their own location, but some three dozen are currently active in the program, coming at least once per month.

Gregory said the partnership with the Consortium for Worker Education began after she and the union-supported group's executive director Rebecca Lurie recognized the potential of the space.

Lurie said once cooking and baking classes are closed for the day, the equipment sat unused.

The tenants rent the spaces on nights and weekends. Besides putting money into the coffers of the Consortium for Worker Education, students and graduates to help staff the businesses.

The prices range from \$180 for the night shift from 6:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. to \$220 for Friday, Saturday and Sunday shifts from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

"If we undercut the price and make it too affordable, that doesn't help us and it doesn't help them," Lurie said.

For more information go to www.artisanbakingcenter.org

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I graduated in:



1997 ▲

1987

1977

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