

MAKE Projects' Model Offers 'Double Bottom Line'

NONPROFITS: Org Secures Permanent Home, Opens Café to Support Programs

■ By MADISON GEERING

SAN DIEGO — At newly opened **MAKE Café**, the menu is seasonal, but the mission is not.

Operated by local nonprofit **MAKE Projects**, the café represents a long-term base for its job training programs for refugee and immigrant women. It also supports a social enterprise model that fosters organizational independence.

"This growth is a reflection of the need and community support for our concept and mission," MAKE founder **Anchi Mei** said. "Which is to empower refugee and immigrant women with the job readiness skills and confidence to achieve their dreams."

Before opening its new facilities on June 28, MAKE operated from a lot on 30th Street, where it ran a youth job training program in urban farming and women's catering kitchen in the basement of **St. Luke's Episcopal Church**.

The pandemic was a turning point for the organization, Mei said.

"Overnight, like the rest of the world, we had to figure out how we were going to move forward," she said.

MAKE launched a popup outdoor café next to the garden at its former site, creating what Mei described as a "delightful, beautiful environment" that offered "farm-to-table food with global flavors."

The popup prompted MAKE to rethink its concept and hone the vision of a symbiotic



MAKE Projects provides work experience and job training to refugee and immigrant women. Photo by Todd Prodanovich

farm and café providing valuable work training for refugee and immigrant women and youth.

In addition to its new Normal Heights café, MAKE expanded its garden to a full acre located at **San Diego State University's (SDSU)** Mission Valley campus.

In 2025, MAKE served 35 women through its job training program. This year, the organization will empower 40 trainees.

"We had this opportunity to see these adult participants — who had only been working in the kitchen — really blossom," Mei said. "There's a lot of fear and anxiety in talking to customers, but there's also a natural warmth. We also saw the need in what we've been trying to do all this time, which is build English-speaking confidence, since that's such a core job readiness skill."

Permanent Home for Expanded Programming

Since 2017, MAKE has served about 400 women from over 30 countries through its farm-to-table workforce development model, providing over \$54,581 in participant wages and tips.

Seventy-one percent of adult program participants secured post-MAKE employment, and 84% were either permanently employed or enrolled in a career credentialing program.

Each month, MAKE onboards three participants. They spend their first month receiving job training on the organization's farm, their second month training in the kitchen and their third month working front-of-house at the café.

Mei said that, in 2027, the organization is aiming to onboard four participants a month, increasing its annual program participation

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from 40 people to 52 people.

MAKE was initially launched in 2017 under the **International Rescue Committee (IRC)**. In 2021, the nonprofit split from the IRC, recognizing that to grow as a social enterprise it needed to be an independent organization.

MAKE strategized its separation and formed its housing plan with the help of **Amplified Impact Partners**, a pro bono consulting nonprofit serving other nonprofits.

Rethinking MAKE's physical footprint was always a priority.

"To really grow, scale, be sustainable and also have the social impact we want as a nonprofit organization, it was laid out in the business plan to identify and secure a permanent home," Mei said.

MAKE is leasing the 5,000-square-foot Normal Heights property housing its café. The organization prioritized location in City Heights because of its public transit infrastructure, which is used by many of its program participants.

As MAKE settles into its new footprint, Mei said she plans to emphasize the breadth of its programming. This year, the organization piloted its first year of a longer-term childcare training cohort, a project Mei hopes to expand in the future.

The program allows MAKE participants interested in childcare or education career pathways to gain work experience and training by assisting with MAKE's youth summer camp programming at its farm.

Balancing Social Enterprise Model

By definition, a social enterprise is a business that uses its operation to support a deeper social, environmental or community-centered mission.

"This social enterprise model has been core to our DNA from our inception, far before the current political economic moment that nonprofits are in," Mei said. "What we love and want to see more of is an employment social enterprise (ESE) model.

"There's hundreds of organizations across the world and the U.S. that employ it — operating a business that's competitive and in the market, but the people that you're serving



MAKE Café is led by Executive Chef Ashley McBrady, who will curate an ingredient-driven menu. Photo by Kimberly Motos

are actually working in this business environment," she continued. "They're gaining real, on-the-job skills, wages and are now a part of the business."

The more business MAKE generates, the more people it can put through its programming, Mei said.

As federal grant funding for nonprofits shrinks, organizations are increasingly turning to earned income endeavors to cover grant reliance, diversify revenue streams and support their mission.

"It's not that it's an easier way to run a nonprofit — does a social enterprise," Mei said. "I'd say it's twice as hard, but it's twice as impactful and gratifying... But it's not a shortcut to fundraising, because we still have to be as competitive as every other restaurant, café and farm out there."

A social enterprise model can produce what Mei termed a "double bottom line." There's the financial bottom line of the business, which is meant to be fully self-sustaining

with any profits supporting the organization's mission.

Then there's the social bottom line, where organizational programming is bolstered by grant funding and philanthropy.

Mei said that the ESE model also provides a unique opportunity for organizational storytelling and community outreach. Since the MAKE Café opened, she said that the local response has been incredibly reassuring.

"These are newcomers to the U.S. who want to rebuild their lives, and they are now meeting hundreds of heartwarming customers who are here for the mission too," Mei said. "That feels really great. We have created something that is also sustainable, and that, on the community-wide level, can do a lot of good." ■

SDBJ EXTRA:

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MAKE Projects



FOUNDED: 2017 pilot programs started at the IRC and 0221 as an independent organization

FOUNDER: Aroub Met

HEADQUARTERS: Normal Heights

BUSINESS: Nonprofit Organization and Café

EMPLOYEES: 8 full-time staff, 3 part-time staff with 35 participants served throughout the year in a 12-week farm-to-table job readiness program

REVENUE: Over \$633,000 in earned income (farm and café) in the last three years

WEBSITE: www.makeprojects.org

CONTACT: info@makeprojects.org

SOCIAL IMPACT: MAKE Projects creates pathways to economic independence for low-income refugees and immigrant women through paid work experience, job-readiness training and holistic support services.

NOTABLE: Since 2017, MAKE Projects has served nearly 400 women; those women also account for through its farm-to-table workforce development model.