

The Ingredients for Small Business Success

Being a small business owner might seem glamorous if all you look at are perfectly curated images and videos on social media.

The reality? There are daily struggles. Setbacks. Challenges and obstacles. And the only way you can succeed is if you have two things that AI just can't generate.

Grit and perseverance.

That's a huge part of what it takes to be a small business owner. The path to becoming an entrepreneur isn't lined with thornless roses. You've got to have the mindset of, *"I'm not giving up...my dream is too big to let it go."*

You'll find Historic Folsom filled with small business owners whose stories are nothing short of incredible. And believe us, every single business owner here embodies these characteristics. They're gritty. They keep on going.

Here are some inspiring stories from Historic Folsom merchants who never gave up on their dreams.

It Can Be a Long & Windy Path

So many people think that success happens overnight. But that couldn't be further from the truth! It often takes years of dedication, honing your craft and staying the course.

Sefer Ilkay Ozdogan, owner of Fiori Italian Pizzeria, worked for the majority of his career in hospitality, managing successful hotels in Turkey. So, when he made the move to the U.S. five years ago, he completely started over.

Sefer worked his way up in the restaurant industry. He got a job with a restaurant, starting as a busboy and eventually worked nearly every position and then was running the show as manager. His dedication didn't go unnoticed. When the opportunity to become a partner and open up Fiori, the owners knew exactly whose shoulder to tap.

Sefer's. Now he's one of three partners in the group, and he's proof that hard work and perseverance pay off!

Marlene Gabris, owner of BrainyZoo Toys, and her husband immigrated to the U.S. from South Africa in 1979. She was originally a social worker so when she moved to the U.S. she had two choices – remain a social worker, but redo all of her education and training in the US or start something completely new. She chose to be bold and start new.

After becoming a new mom, Marlene searched everywhere for developmentally appropriate, educational toys for her son. What she found were very limited options. So, she forged her own path in the market, utilizing her background and knowledge in child development to work with those toymakers to distribute their toys. From selling to preschools and hosting parties for moms to buy toys, Marlene was on to something really special.

And that's when she decided she needed to go bigger and open her first brick and mortar store. Today, she's got three BrainyZoo Toy locations—Folsom Premium Outlets, Historic Folsom, and Fair Oaks Village. 43 years later, Marlene's vision is still going strong, bringing toys that spark curiosity and use the imagination to children everywhere!

It Starts with One Step Forward

Being an entrepreneur, you're bound to fail at things before you strike gold. Thomas Edison famously said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work," describing how he invented the lightbulb.

Tim Castleman, owner of Practical Cycle, admits he's had his share of failed businesses in the past. But from each he's learned great lessons that he's carried forward into Practical Cycle. It's all about finding a solution to a problem or filling a void in the market.

But what's one of the most critical lessons Tim's learned? It's never giving up on himself. Tim credits his faith and Alcoholics Anonymous for helping him stay sober for the past 30+ years. It's not been easy, but he knows his dreams and his life are worth every step forward.

While every small business owner wishes their dream happened in the blink of an eye, most occur with some bumps along the way. For father-daughter duo Charlie and Tayrn Grows (owners of Uncle Charlie's Firehouse & Brew), the realization of their dream has been 10 years in the making.

The idea to open a brewery began with Charlie and Tayrn's father-daughter bonding over beer, and their desire to create a space where those in public service (i.e., police, fire, public works, teachers, nurses, and more) could be honored.

But their path to getting started has been full of those one step forward, four steps backward moments. From tariffs and delayed shipments to all the hoops and permits and paperwork, they've seen it all. Thankfully, it's all been a labor of love. Family love.

At the end, the sweetest reward is opening their business together and being able to look back on all those steps they took and say, "We did it!"

When Life Throws You Curveballs

You can do one of two things. Swing or move out of the way. For Frankie & John Arata, owners of Plank Craft Kitchen + Bar, they chose to swing for the fences.

When their kids were young, John started a kids' trucker hat company, selling to high-end stores. It was a tremendous success, until the market came crashing down in 2008. People couldn't afford to buy luxury items anymore.

John and Frankie lost everything. But instead of giving up and letting that wild curve ball take them out, they got up, dusted themselves off, and got to work rebuilding...from the ground up.

John got a job working for a liquor distributor and Frankie took on three jobs. They hustled. They persevered. They had tenacity and kept going.

And because of that, they were able to follow their dream and own their own restaurant.

Lisa Gomez, owner of The Vine, has owned The Vine for the past 8 years and in that time, she's seen a lot. Covid was probably one of the craziest times to be a small business owner, and if you had those key ingredients of grit and perseverance, you're likely still in business.

Lisa certainly possesses both! She saw Covid as an opportunity to pivot how she did business. When the City opened up sidewalks and the parklets for dining, Lisa took full advantage of that. She and her team moved literally every piece of furniture outside every weekend so people could dine al fresco and be the required six feet apart.

That year ended up being one of her most successful years ever. All because she looked at things differently.

Now she faces another big curveball, her health. Diagnosed with cancer earlier in 2025, Lisa's focused on taking care of herself and recovery. And she's beyond grateful for her incredible team, supportive wine club community, and her own family who've been with her every step of the way.

From Side Hustle to Brick & Mortar

For many business owners, they got their start on the side...the side hustle, that is. Working for someone else while building something for themselves. And it certainly takes a lot of grit to make the switch from side hustle to full time small business owner. There's this

comfort level of having a full-time job with extra income thanks to a side hustle. But when you take that big leap of faith in yourself, that's where the rubber meets the road.

Michelle Asnicar, owner of Stone + Birch Boutique, remembers back in 2007 when she was getting ready to go back to her job in the mortgage industry after maternity leave. She got a call from her employer letting her know that they were shutting down operations. That job loss wasn't a door closing. It was Michelle's sign to create something that would provide her flexibility to be with her young children.

From side hustles of selling jeans at pop-up parties to baking and selling beautiful cookies, Michelle eventually expanded her passion for fashion and started Stone + Birch Boutique!

Matthew Rivera, owner of Vosswood Permanent Jewelry, started his jewelry business on the side. While working at Nordstrom selling women's shoes, Matthew learned the art of sales and creating an exceptional customer experience.

But in his heart, he wanted more. On the side he began making beaded jewelry, primarily selling pieces to family and friends. It enabled him to tap into his highly creative side. When he discovered the art of permanent jewelry through a TikTok video, it instantly appealed to him because he could design jewelry meant to last forever.

Nordstrom allowed him to host pop-ups at the store on his days off and that's when things really took flight. His side business grew steadily over the next six years and in 2022 he took the leap and opened his very own store!

It's All About Mindset

For these individuals, along with every other merchant here in Historic Folsom, success stems from mindset.

Owning a business requires grit, perseverance, passion, and a steadfast commitment – to yourself and your business.

So, the next time you visit these entrepreneurs, show them your support and get to know them. They love what they do, and we love what they bring to the heart of Historic Folsom!