

SURVIVING AND THRIVING

Family network in Mexico finds the finest

By Ilana DeBare



The Wal-Marts and Amazon.coms of the world get a lot of attention, but every city has plenty of neighborhood merchants. On these pages, Chronicle small-business reporter Ilana DeBare profiles six neighborhood businesses that have carved out unique niches and are surviving, thriving and meeting the needs of local residents.

The hand-carved wooden tulips are made by Connie Rivera's cousin Luis. The chokers of tiny glass beads are made by her cousins Luciano and Raul.

It may look as if Rivera and her husband, Ricardo Pena, are the force behind Mixcoatl Arts & Crafts, a new Mission District store specializing in indigenous Latin American jewelry and crafts.

But Rivera actually has a network of about a dozen family members in Mexico tracking down or creating merchandise for her. "This store is not only me, it is my family and friends," she said.

Mixcoatl is an Aztec word for the Milky Way. Rivera chose the name because the idea of many stars blended in one galaxy fit the vision for her business: many indigenous cultures coming together in one store.

"I started with Mexico, but now I have Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, and I will also have other parts of South America one day," she said. "I want to share and show my cultures in this beautiful neighborhood."

Rivera came to San Francisco 18 years ago as a teenager and spent more than a decade doing child care and house cleaning. Along the way, she started informally importing crafts from her hometown of Toluca near Mexico City and selling them to friends.

Then she found out about a nonprofit agency called **Women's Initiative for Self Employment**, which provides business training in both English and Spanish to low-income women. The skills and support from **Women's Initiative** gave her the confidence to start a store.

"Before knowing them, I was scared," she said. "Then I met this program and all these wonderful women, and I thought, 'I can do this.'"

After one year, Mixcoatl is breaking even. The sunny, yellow-walled store is filled with display cases that Rivera bought used from other Bay Area stores. Items range from \$4 wooden pennywhistles to a \$1,200 beaded jaguar.

Getting the funds to buy inventory has been the biggest challenge for Rivera. Close behind has been the time required to get Mixcoatl going. Operating the store for 11 hours a day, seven days a week, makes it hard for her to spend time with her 6-year-old daughter.

"She asks me, 'Mama, why are you always working, why can't you close one day to make my birthday party?' " Rivera said. "I promised her next year we would do a party. And we are doing this for her. The payback for this sacrifice will come later."

Mixcoatl Arts & Crafts is at 3201 24th St., San Francisco, (415) 341-4191, www.mixcoatlartsandcrafts.com.