

Oakland nonprofit bowls \$1M South Bay expansion

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by Sarah Duxbury

A \$1 million grant from Cadence Design Systems will allow **Women's Initiative for Self Employment** to get to work in San Jose.

The Oakland nonprofit, which provides microloans and business training to poor Bay Area women, has been looking for ways to enter San Jose for several years. Now it can, and on a larger scale than originally planned.

The San Jose location will be bigger than the other **Women's Initiative** sites because there is so much need there. The nonprofit is also planning a new model that will include streetfront retail space to incubate new businesses started by the program's graduates.

San Jose-based Cadence makes a single organization the beneficiary of its annual Stars & Strikes bowling fundraiser, an unusual move, but one that allows it to have a transformative impact on an organization.

It's been a catalyst for **Women's Initiative's** South Bay play, said Julie Abrams, executive director of **Women's Initiative**. "It's had this spiral effect and gotten the (San Jose) Redevelopment Agency interested."

Possible matching grant



Najib Joe Hakim

Julie Abrams (right).

The Agency is now considering matching Cadence's \$1 million grant and helping **Women's Initiative** find a space to buy. It is looking at two locations around 10,000 square feet, one on Story Road past 101 and the other on Santa Clara Street south of downtown. The ideal spot will be in a high-traffic retail area so that **Women's Initiative** can truly incubate fledgling retail businesses. The site will also provide child care.

Abrams expects the San Jose site to graduate 750 in its first two years, working up to 2,000 graduates a year. Last year, the nonprofit graduated just 250 women in San Francisco and about the same number in Oakland.

"There's just more need in San Jose," Abrams said of why the site will be so much larger. "There's more poverty and fewer nonprofits in the realm of what we do. ... We've got women traveling all the way up to San Francisco and Oakland just to take classes."

Abrams said that the heart of the organization will not move south when **Women's Initiative** opens its ambitious building there. **Women's Initiative** will open a small site in Fruitvale next month in a rented space, and it also offers classes in San Rafael, Concord and Richmond. The nonprofit's annual budget for 2007 is \$2.5 million.

Cadence ropes in everyone from customers to competitors to the 49ers to participate in its annual benefit. The San Francisco 49ers Foundation has partnered with Cadence for Stars & Strikes for the past three years, fielding players and coaches on the bowling lanes.

"We really have to look for a project that has wide appeal, so the heart-strings factor is huge," said Kathy Wheeler, senior manager of global community involvement at Cadence. "All the projects we pick are helping people get a leg up."

Other donors offer to help

Cadence received close to 30 proposals this year, and **Women's Initiative** was among four finalists. The company had never heard of **Women's Initiative**, and wasn't sure the group was really ready for that funding. Abrams proved them wrong when she shared two-years' exploratory work on how to enter San Jose.

Since **Women's Initiative** won the Cadence money, San Jose's Chamber of Commerce has offered them temporary office space and

the Redevelopment Agency, Kresge Foundation and Comerica Bank have decided to support the move, Wheeler said. Other companies now talking to **Women's Initiative** and considering support include Cisco, Google, Adobe, Ebay and IBM, among others.

Past Stars & Strikes beneficiaries include the Bill Wilson Center, which was spared eviction by the grant, InnVision and the Palo Alto V.A. Hospital.

In its 19 years, **Women's Initiative** has created 1,555 new Bay Area businesses and 70 percent of graduates start companies within a year of finishing training. Within two years of graduating, average household income of participants rises from \$14,000 to \$37,000.

Without the Cadence grant, "We would not have been able to go (into San Jose) this way," Abrams said. "It would have taken forever."

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