

CLEMENTINA'S MILLION DOLLAR SMILE



Remembering her first encounter with a WAGES co-op ten years ago, long time worker-owner Clementina says: "I had never heard about cooperatives.... I fell into an entirely different world."

Clementina worked the night shift cleaning offices before she joined Emma's Eco-Clean, the Redwood City cooperative WAGES launched in 1999. The products she used at her janitorial job gave her headaches, and she feared for her safety working alone in the empty offices at night. But she had no alternative: "I am a single mother of four children. I had to put food on the table," she says.

Working hard every night, she still could not make ends meet and, in her search for a second job, she came across Emma's, which had opened a year before.

At that time, Emma's founders were still trying to secure a full schedule, "Like every new business, Emma's didn't have much

work for its members initially," explains Clementina. So as a newer member, Clementina sometimes worked only three hours per week. Within two years, however, the co-op had reached full capacity, and Clementina shut the door on her old job for the last time.

"I feel the most guilty about those two years. I spent my life working for my kids, but I often wonder if I gave them enough of

the care they needed," Clementina reflects. She feels her limited time contributed to her oldest sons' decision to drop out of school.

"My two youngest are still in high school though. And my 23-year-old son is thinking about going back to school. He has my support," says Clementina. "I have made it through, thanks to my job at Emma's. At the moment, my personal goal is to help my children succeed."

Clementina's success as a worker-owner may be her best asset toward that goal, "My kids feel proud of me. My 21-year old son often tells his friends that I was able to make it, raising four kids on my own. At these times, I feel really good."

While nurturing the goals she's set for her family, Clementina continues to advance professionally. Her ten years' experience makes her a resource to others in the co-op. Wanting to do more, Clementina is taking

a finance course to strengthen her leadership in guiding policy decisions for the co-op's growth. She also uses her expertise in WAGES' trademarked Eco-Friendly Cleaning Technique to serve as Emma's main trainer of new worker-owners.

Ultimately, though, Clementina believes that the greatest benefit to her decade at Emma's is that she was able to support her family by working regular hours at just one job. "Things are so different now. I always have work, and despite the current economy, my job has not been affected."

Clementina says she's developed a strong belief in the cooperative model and enjoys the opportunity to promote it. "WAGES has always recognized my efforts, and they always invite me to the community events. I have even accompanied Hilary to fundraising meetings. For me, it is an honor."

Being part of a co-op is a source of pleasure and pride, "I always get a smile on my face when we recruit new members for Emma's. These are women that come from difficult situations. I like hearing them talk about the products we use and the cooperatives. We all like the business model." That passion helped Emma's surpass the million dollar mark in annual sales for 2009.

With the combined membership of Emma's and its four sister cooperatives now 90-women-strong, it looks like there will be many more opportunities to see that smile spread. ■

SAVE THE DATE: October 28, 2010
for WAGES' 15th anniversary celebration

BEYOND PEOPLE VS. PLANET:

a conversation with Ann Blake and Hilary Abell on the fact that it's all connected



Ann Blake (left), co-chair of WAGES' board of directors, consults with governments and occupational health, public health and environmental advocates on alternatives to toxic manufacturing and consumer chemicals.

Hilary Abell (right), WAGES' executive director, has led the organization for seven years, spanning the launch of three co-ops and a co-op network that is currently 90-women strong.

How did you get involved with WAGES?

ANN: I grew up in Southeast Asia in the 1970s when countries were establishing “free trade zones” where young women were doing the subcomponent assembly. Assisting my mother’s sociological research, I saw the impact of bringing people to a place for economic reasons and how it affected the environment and the social fabric, and how all these aspects need to be considered holistically. My mission to create economic systems that are fair for all people and healthy for the planet grew out of this early experience.

HILARY: I first experienced the power of cooperatives in my 20’s as a worker-owner at Equal Exchange. Working with small farmers on fair trade, and later on environmental health issues, taught me that it’s all connected. We can’t separate the environment from our individual and global well-being, and we can’t separate one person’s well-being from others’. WAGES com-

bins my passion for environmental stewardship and individual and collective empowerment.

What challenges have you overcome?

ANN: One of my challenges has a flip positive side. Growing up a child of mixed race was challenging. I didn’t fit anywhere and encountered a lot of prejudice. It’s both a challenge and an opportunity—to float in different worlds. It’s an experience that informs my dual role in and out of science, policy and advocacy.

HILARY: My sister had late stage breast cancer when she was only 37. Fortunately, she got great care and is thriving 11 years later. My challenge was learning just to be there and to give up control, as I accompanied her, and my two nieces and brother-in-law, through the ordeal. I gained insight and resolve to help others access health insurance and reduce their exposure to cancer-causing chemicals. While I can’t control my family history, which puts me at high risk for cancer, I can work to eliminate toxins in my life and in our communities.

What are your dreams for the future?

ANN: I believe we can live and thrive on this planet as individuals and communities without causing harm—and live more satisfying lives in the process. To me, it’s about thriving: to have less stuff and treasure it more. That means treasuring our relationships more. And our communities more.

HILARY: I want to see a world where people do not have to make impossible choices between health and work, between their home communities and their ability to make a living, or between self-care and survival. Co-ops give more people the opportunity to develop their personal potential and to leave those impossible choices behind. Our dream at WAGES is to provide this opportunity to women and communities across the country. ■



A better living. A better life.

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408-778-8445

PENINSULA
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CONCORD
Green and Clean
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Home Green Home
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OPENING OPPORTUNITY:

the start-up years, as remembered by WAGES founders Gayle Haberman and Anna Olsen and early co-op member Ivette Meléndez

Unable to communicate in English, lacking a steady income or even a bank account, and struggling to make a living while caring for their families, immigrant women such as Ivette Meléndez face formidable challenges. Newly arrived to Redwood City in 1995, Ivette sought help, and remembers finding free food and clothing, and assistance with utility bills. But without solving the problem of financial security, Ivette recounts, women in her situation find themselves returning to the food bank lines.

Just across town, Gayle Haberman was managing a successful housecleaning cooperative in the early 90's. When the non-profit sponsor decided to close the co-op, Gayle tried to get other groups to take on the ready-made program, but found no takers.

It was the absence of a sponsor, and her feminism, that inspired Gayle to found a non-profit whose very mission would become the organization's name, Women's Action to Gain Economic Security.

Seeking partners, Gayle turned to Anna Olsen, a social worker at the same non-profit. Gayle and Anna shared a vision for low-income and immigrant women, borne of their own experience in the women's rights movement: it was a vision that all women would experience the dignity of pursuing their dreams. Their goal was to multiply opportunity through the transformative nature of co-ops.

They raised their first grant of \$50,000 from Sun Microsystems and hosted board meetings in Anna's bedroom in Palo Alto. Thinking the hard part was behind them, Anna and Gayle began recruiting co-op members.

The duo remembers showing up at Friday night prayer groups, distributing fliers door-to-door, and appearing on Spanish-language



Anna Olsen and Ivette Meléndez

newscasts and late-night cable shows. "We were asking women to commit to an unpaid nine month program two nights a week," Gayle says. Despite the promise of economic security, it was a tough sell.

Finally, the first group of women came together but concluded from their feasibility study they would not start a business. At almost the same time, Gayle and Anna met an emerging group called *Mujeres en Progreso* (Women in Progress) headed by Ivette Meléndez and others who also went on to join WAGES. The women confronted a chasm between their circumstances and the opportunities they sought.

Ivette faced an additional barrier: what she heard from Anna and Gayle was contradicted by the voices around her. "People said having someone support you to create your dreams was too good to be true. They thought offering my time for free wasn't right. For me, what made the difference was that no matter how many times I asked my questions, I always received honest answers, building trust and transparency."

Ivette and others from her *Mujeres* group were persuaded. Ivette remembers feeling that someday she'd like to be the one open-



Gayle and Lena Haberman

ing the door of opportunity for others, "I thought, I want to be like them. I want to explain to other ones how beautiful life is going to be when we follow our dreams."

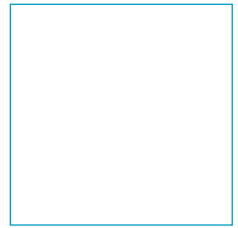
A year later, however, Ivette had to close her unprofitable cooperative party supply store. But the story doesn't end there. Building on her experience, Ivette joined WAGES' team and learned to train other women. This February marked twelve years in that role for Ivette, who went on to serve on WAGES' board, trained upwards of 1,000 women and today doubles as a spokesperson. Her commitment to the founding ideals has inspired WAGES' partners at Seventh Generation to feature her as their inspiration in this year's Earth Month campaign.

Fifteen years later, Anna is still moved by the real-life consequences of their commitment to building opportunity, "One of the most striking things is to see former co-op members whose kids are now excelling at Stanford."

"These were entrepreneurial women in their soul," says Gayle. Today, with eight co-ops launched and millions of dollars generated, the same can be said for WAGES' founders as well! ■



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Worker-owners and supporters came together at an Oakland night-spot, raising the call, "Si Se Verde... yes we can create good green jobs!" Here, Veronica of Natural Home Cleaning and Ivette of Home Green Home testify to the benefits.

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DEFYING THE TOUGH ECONOMY,

the women in our Co-op Network have maintained their jobs

Here are some highlights:

Our new San Francisco co-op, HOME GREEN HOME, launched at the height of the recession in early 2009 and **grew 30% faster** than ANY previous WAGES start-up.

The number of low-income women with **GREEN JOBS** in WAGES' co-ops has **increased by 45%** over the last two years.

The mission of WAGES (Women's Action to Gain Economic Security) is to build worker-owned, green businesses that create healthy, dignified jobs for low-income women.

Our recent impact study confirms that our **NATURAL HOME CLEANING** co-op continues its stellar performance: **members are doubling their earnings and INCREASING their family incomes by 72%**.

We provided **FORMATIVE SUPPORT** to emerging co-ops in **Colorado, North Carolina and other states.**

If you're in the **Bay Area**, we encourage you to try out the **great service** from **our co-ops:**

ecocleaningnetwork.com/estimate