

Honey of a Deal

On the outside, Sweet Beginnings, LLC, in the North Lawndale community of Chicago, makes an eco-friendly all-natural line of raw honey and honey-infused body-care products. But take a closer look, and you'll see it's the employees that make this company sweet.

Brenda Palms-Barber, CEO of Sweet Beginnings, was part of a community-based work program designed to equip former legal offenders with work skills. She enjoyed helping the unemployed learn skills that offer new opportunities, but got increasingly frustrated with a society that seemed unwilling to give second chances.

"We lived in a community in which 57 percent of people had criminal backgrounds," Palms-

Barber explains. "I felt that we needed to figure out how to create more entry-level job opportunities for people with [criminal] backgrounds and others with barriers to employment.

"So, I thought, 'We'll take that chance. We'll be the first employer.'"

Palms-Barber began searching for business possibilities and heard about beekeeping as a business from a friend. Palms-Barber first met with a local beekeeper, then went to the Illinois Department of Corrections for help. She soon set up an apiary and hired former offenders to learn to work with the bees.

"We were taught all about the honey, and then we would go out to farmers' markets to sell the honey. When people actually liked the honey and were very supportive, we knew we were on to something," Palms-Barber says.

Sweet Beginnings now has a professional beekeeper, and all the workers are members of the Illinois State Beekeepers Association. In addition, the staff and the workers have 60 hours of beekeeping training and are certified in beekeeping by Wilbur Wright College in Chicago.

"That's an extraordinary step. We're able to give more credibility to the art and the science of beekeeping, and our partnership with the college allows people to think they would be successful elsewhere," Palms-Barber says.

Sweet Beginnings has trained 172 formerly incarcerated people over the last two-and-a-half years. Palms-Barber says that less than 4 percent of those have returned to prison, while the rate of people who return to prison is 62 percent nationally and 55 percent in Illinois.

"It is important for people to know that, given the opportunity, people will make the right choices and decisions. I have not experienced a more dedicated, loyal, hardworking group of people, and they are producing a first-rate quality product," she says. "Collectively, we're redefining the green movement in ways we never expected."

Whole Foods, 21 local green and organic stores and boutiques, and Peapod.com, an online store in Chicago, sell Sweet Beginnings' products. The organization is bringing on a professional marketing team and hoping to expand their products nationally to help more former prisoners get a second chance at life.



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