**East Side Enterprise Center—Community Connector**

Kevin J. Franken

[fz2751fb@metrostate.edu](mailto:fz2751fb@metrostate.edu)

East Side Enterprise Center (ESEC) is a non-profit organization that provides a variety of community services to St. Paul’s east side. Groups such as Dayton’s Bluff Community Council (DBCC), Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC), and East Side Area Business Association (ESABA) were already active in the community. While these non-profits were serving immigrants and minorities in such areas as housing and business development, they were, for the most part, doing so autonomously. This was the catalyst for founding ESEC.

At a DBCC meeting, board member (and now president) Tong Thao recalled an idea he proposed, “All of these non-profits essentially do the same work, why don’t they all work together?” Spurred on by this, Deanna Abbott-Foster, DBCC’s executive director, developed a relationship with LEDC and Mario Hernandez, its chief operating officer. Foster and Hernandez spearheaded the efforts for the creation of ESEC, which opened its doors at 804 Margaret Street in November of 2014. This put groups such as DBCC, LEDC, ESABA and the Local Food Incubator all under one roof. The following March, Thao came on board as facilities coordinator for ESEC.

Seeing the development along Payne and Arcade, and the lack thereof along 7th Street, a gradual alliance was formed among these groups; along with others such as the Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA) and African Economic Development Solutions (AEDS). “They saw this as an opportunity to really build up the profile of the east side,” Thao said. “Part of DBCC’s plan is to build up the business corridor along Seventh Street, since this is the only corridor in Dayton’s Bluff; and it’s also the gateway to the east side,” he added.

ESEC also provides working space and storage of produce for local farmers. One of these is Cala Farm, by Turtle Lake, Wisconsin. Cala Farm is part of Shared Ground Cooperative, a group of local (mostly) Latino farmers from Minnesota and western Wisconsin who provide meats, cheeses, and produce for Twin Cities restaurants, schools, co-ops and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture). The farmers bring their goods to ESEC, which has washing stations for prepping the produce and an industrial-sized refrigerator for storage.

Another of these local farmers is HAFA (Hmong American Farmers Association)—which LEDC was instrumental in bringing to fruition—formed in 2011 by a group of Hmong American farmers. This led to the purchase of 155 acres outside of Hastings, Minnesota, and the creation of HAFA Farm. Growing a variety of herbs, vegetables and flowers, HAFA’s produce provides for metro co-ops, CSAs and farmers’ markets.

(Both HAFA and Shared Ground offer CSAs, with local drop-offs—including Mississippi Market—and deliveries to some businesses. More information can be found at the following websites: hmongfarmers.com/csa; sharedgroundcoop.com.)

ESEC also accommodates for Twin Cities Mobile Market (TCMM), a retro-fitted bus that caters to under-resourced neighborhoods, bringing fresh produce to those who might not otherwise have access to it. Overnight, the bus is parked inside ESEC and, each weekday morning, TCMM workers load it with goods for its daily routes. “We love it here,” said Talia, as she prepares stock for loading. “We’re very lucky to be able to have this space [at ESEC] to use for our needs,” she added.

Another organization under ESEC’s roof is the Local Food Incubator, which has three arms to its operation: Shared Ground covers production and marketing; TCMM takes care of distribution; and Urban Oasis handles education about food and healthy eating. Part of this educational focus includes cooking classes, which Urban Oasis offers at Kitchen on the Bluff. Located locally at 3rd Street and Bates Avenue, this converted bakery is now “a commercial incubator kitchen,” as Thao put it. “HAFA uses the kitchen to teach cooking classes, because some of the foods grown aren’t what people traditionally eat, so this gives them the opportunity to actually learn how to prepare some things they’re not familiar with,” he added. Kitchen on the Bluff also offers training and a starting space for entrepreneurs trying to get their food businesses off the ground.

Another unique facet offered by Urban Oasis is called “incredible edible streetscapes.” Lined along 7th Street, these outdoor planters are filled with herbs and vegetables—such as cilantro, onions, tomatoes, and peppers. Free to the public, any passersby can help themselves to whatever they wish from this sidewalk food fare.

ESEC also has several rooms with adequate seating, allowing for a number of classes and seminars—mostly in the evening hours—in such areas as business, education and the arts. One event is called “Face to Face with the Experts,” or, as Thao jokingly put it, “consultation speed-dating.” This gives established and prospective business owners the chance to sit down with representatives from various government entities—such as the IRS, OSHA, and DSI (Department of Safety and Inspection)—seated at different tables. As they move around, the local business owners get about 15 minutes at each table to ask questions about such things as taxes, hiring and training processes, and safety and cleanliness standards.

ESEC is also involved in helping people find work and, preferably, finding it locally instead of having to commute elsewhere. As Thao said, “What we’re trying to do is bring people back here, so they can live and work here.” One successful example of this is ESEC’s role during hiring when the Mississippi Market opened in Dayton’s Bluff. Working with other organizations, ESEC held a three-day event, which included help with resumes and mock interviews. The third day was the actual hiring fair, with Mississippi Market staff coming to ESEC to conduct the interviews. Out of about 70 local people that showed up, around 30 were hired. “That’s an example of how we can change how businesses hire people; this way is much more engaging,” Thao said. ESEC plans to do the same with McQueen Manufacturing, another local business that will be opening soon.

ESEC also supports local artists, giving them both floor space for exhibits and wall space to display, and sell, their work. ESEC works closely with InProgress, an arts movement for immigrant and minority youth and young adults.

ESEC was also involved in the creation of a local radio station (WEQY—104.7); and, on August 13, will host “7th Street. Live.” Taking place from noon to 8:00 p.m. in a closed-off section of 7th Street, the event will have local music and vendors. “It’s a kind of celebration to bring people together to build that sense of community identity,” Thao said, tying in with his intentions, “That’s part of my goal with East Side Enterprise Center, to use it to connect people and to be a catalyst for change,” he added.

ESEC is increasingly becoming just that, and more. And with its commitment to what Thao calls “asset-based community development,” it is also emerging as a vital and vibrant part of Dayton’s Bluff, and the Twin Cities.