

Healthy nut company gets second chance with new Twin Cities home, social mission

Isadore Nut Co. discovered the solution to its cost problem in the kitchen of a Golden Valley apartment building.

By [Jim Buchta](#) Star Tribune

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Owner Tasya Kelen, center, helped employees Missy Walk and Jeremie Mercer as they produced a batch of Zesty Lemon Rosemary blend cashews.

During a visit to a farmers market in south Minneapolis six years ago, Tasya Kelen was struck by the lack of healthy snacks, so she started making them for herself and as gifts for friends.

Kelen adhered to the food-as-medicine belief of her grandfather, Isadore Rosenfeld, that holds the source of the food is as important as how it's prepared. She used only organic and premium nuts, and packaged them in glass jars that could be reused.

Word spread about those snack-packed jars, so she moved Isadore Nut Co. into a rented space in a shared commercial kitchen near her house in south Minneapolis and started selling them at farmers markets, fairs and co-ops. Buyers lined up, especially for her zesty lemon rosemary cashews.

“I was led by my heart, not by a business degree,” said Kelen, an English major in college and a stay-at-home mom for several years.

Kelen's business thrived, but the price of those snacks didn't keep pace with the rising cost of production, especially the cost of the highest-quality ingredients.

As she ramped up production, she struggled to increase prices that had been set to compete with nut snacks brought to market by much larger companies with more buying power and bigger distribution networks. Suddenly, the business that started as a “passion project” was becoming a financial and emotional burden.



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Isadore Nut Co. works out of the kitchen of Cornerstone Creek, an apartment for people with disabilities in Golden Valley.

Kelen faced a dilemma: Compromise the values that inspired her to launch the business in order to expand it, or close it down and cut her losses.

She asked herself a simple question: “Can I follow my passion and still make a difference in this world?”

The answer came in August during a visit to Cornerstone Creek, an apartment building in Golden Valley for people with disabilities, where a commercial kitchen had just been built by a Minnetonka-based nonprofit called Jewish Housing and Programming (J-HAP).

During a tour of the kitchen, which was being used just a couple nights a week to prepare meals for residents, Nicole Rabinowitz, J-HAP’s kitchen director, said that in addition to renting the space, there was also an opportunity to employ some of the residents, and the possibility they could help her grow rosemary and other ingredients in a sweeping garden plot out back.

“It was like the heavens opened up,” Kelen said. “All of a sudden, the flood gates opened in my brain and I thought, ‘We can do anything.’”

Suddenly, Kelen’s Isadore Nuts had a new home, a built-in workforce and a new opportunity to satisfy the most important element of her business plan: to make a difference in the world. Kelen moved into that new space a few weeks ago and has been getting settled, training employees and filling holiday orders.

Rabinowitz said that in just a couple of months Isadore is already having a major impact.

“Isadore Nuts is a role model for other employers to make accommodations based on an individual’s interests and skills to benefit the tasks in a business,” she said. “Giving more people opportunities to be included in the workforce is a win-win for all.”

Kelen’s commitment to a mission-based business plan is not unlike the motivation behind Linda Bialick’s initial vision for the 45-unit Cornerstone Creek, a one-of-a-kind, apartment building that opened in early 2017.

After Bialick daughter’s was born with Down syndrome, she realized that children with developmental disabilities didn’t have the same educational, social and recreational opportunities as other children.

So when her daughter became an adult, she started researching ways adult children are able to live independently safely after their parents are unable to care for them. She launched the effort to build Cornerstone.

And now, with its commercial kitchen and a new home for Isadore, the building has created another opportunity for residents.

For Isadore, Kelen said the move to Cornerstone has made her believe anything is now possible.

“I want to have our product in Starbucks,” she said. “I want to see it get national distribution because that will mean we can work with that many more people as an inclusionary employer.”

Kelen is exploring other ways of bringing in other members of the disability community who are looking for employment.

She’s also talking with a variety of agencies, about how the project might expand to outside of the residence, perhaps with support from the city of Golden Valley.

She’s also talking with members of the local foods community about starting a training program aimed at helping residents and others tend the Cornerstone garden where they will grow herbs.

“It’s a really magical place,” Kelen said of Cornerstone. “And it’s a good-for-you-snack — we source ethically, but now it can be doing good for the people who are helping make it.”

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