



Union Bank awards honor Valley leaders in small businesses

By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

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Real estate company owner Larry Fortune is just as comfortable in a Santa Claus costume doling out presents as he is in his business suit helping to boost the region's economy.

To Fortune, it's a matter of stepping up and making a difference.

"It's part of being fully involved in society," he said. "It serves no good to complain about something if you are not willing to do something to help."

Fortune, owner of Fortune Associates, was recognized for his community involvement Thursday at the annual Salute to Small Business awards presented by Union Bank of California.

Along with playing Santa, Fortune serves as chairman of the Fresno County Workforce Investment Board and is involved in the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley and the Community Housing Leadership Board.

Other winners were:

- * Best Agribusiness: Harold Matthews Farming, Harold Matthews.
- * Entrepreneur of the Year: Gymnastics Beat, Sam and Diana Shima.
- * Best Minority-owned Business: AmeriGuard Security Services, Lawrence Garcia.
- * Best Nonprofit: Habitat for Humanity, Tony Miranda.
- * Best Woman-owned Business: Medcomm Medical Billing Services, Linda Collins.

"We are proud to honor this diverse group of business people who drive our economy and are leaders in our communities," said Union Bank Senior Vice President and Regional Manager Michael Girazian. "Their commitment to excellence in business and giving back to their community makes the Valley a better place for all of us to live and work."

For many of the winners, it was the first time being honored for their success.

"This is such a great feeling," said Collins of Medcomm Medical Billing Services.

Collins started her company in 1997 on a shoestring budget, providing medical billing for just a handful of physicians and clinics. Today, she provides services to more than 40 clients throughout Fresno, and her company has grown 22% to 35% every year.

"There is a lot of risk-taking when you start your business," Collins said. "But I would not have it any other way. It has been so fulfilling."

For the Shimas, owners of Gymnastics Beat, a children's gym, pulling their talents together has been the key to their success.

Both have backgrounds in gymnastics and have business management experience. Although they toyed with the idea of buying an existing gym, they decided to create their own.

"The dream of entrepreneurship is exciting," said Sam Shima. "I don't think we ever thought we would be working for other people forever. This was just the next logical step."

Diana Shima fine-tuned their business ideas by attending a nine-week entrepreneurial training course offered by the Central Valley Business Incubator. In 2003, they opened Gymnastics Beat, a 12,000-square-foot gym that has grown to 400 students.

Building houses, fulfilling dreams and involving the community has been the goal of Habitat for Humanity Fresno County. The nonprofit organization has helped build 50 homes for deserving families in Fresno County since 1985.

Relying heavily on volunteer help, executive director Miranda increased the number of helpers from 500 to 600 last year.

"This is really a hope-filled and exciting organization to be a part of," Miranda said. "We all can relate to having a stable and safe place to grow your family."

At AmeriGuard Security Services, winning awards is becoming a habit. Garcia, company president, was named the 2007 Central California Small Business Person of the Year by the U.S. Small Business Administration's Fresno office.

"I like to say our company has been very blessed," Garcia said. "It's always great for people to recognize the energy, hard work and dedication it takes to run a business."

In farming, taking risks is second nature. Farmers gamble with weather, crop prices and consumer demand. But at Harold Matthews Farming, diversifying has helped cushion the risks.

Along with farming grapes, the company has expanded into the trucking business, removing grapevines and tractor work. And they are good at it, they say.

"We don't need to advertise our services," Matthews said. "People tell others that we do a good job and that gets us more business."

Also sponsoring Thursday's event was the Central Valley Business Incubator; The Craig School of Business at California State University, Fresno; Deloitte & Touche LLP; the Fresno County Farm Bureau; K-Jewel; The Business Journal; and the U.S. Small Business Administration, Fresno District.

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