

IN THE NEWS**MACOMB DAILY**

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by **Gina Joseph**

Ongoing wave of entrepreneurship continues to grow in Michigan

Mario Kiezi remembers as a boy when Oakland Mall in Troy was like New York City, especially during the holidays and special events, and it's that spirited and jovial environment that he plans to redevelop as its new owner

"It's very sentimental to me," said Kiezi, a Macomb native who bought the Oakland Mall earlier this year for an undisclosed sum — adding to the property the young entrepreneur already owns including the former Sears stores at Lakeside Mall, Oakland Mall and Macomb Mall, which he purchased a few months ago.

"My family owned an ice cream shop in the mall. We had 52 flavors," he said, proudly recalling the business operated by his parents, who lived in Tel Keppe, Iraq before immigrating to Michigan in 1979. "They came here to escape the war and pursue a better life."

They left thinking not only of themselves but the family they hoped to have in the future.

Three boys and one girl later, they were living the American dream as parents and small business owners.

"I had an entrepreneurial childhood working side by side with my father and my family," said the president and founder of MKiezi Investments, during an interview from his offices overlooking a business corridor in Troy. "My father always told us to work hard and work smart, meaning for yourself."

His father launched several businesses including a liquor store and delicatessen while residing in Detroit and Oak Park, before settling in Sterling Heights, where Kiezi was born and raised. As with many Chaldeans and other immigrants in their community given the freedom to pursue their goals, the family thrived. After graduating from Sterling Heights High School, Kiezi followed his father's lead in opening up several liquor stores in Ohio, and it's the sale of these stores and licenses that provided him with the capital to fund a strip mall development and, eventually, larger acquisitions like Oakland Mall.

Kiezi's father died a few years ago, but his entrepreneurial spirit remains an inspiration to Kiezi, 32, who is an example of the confident young entrepreneurs creating exciting new business models.

Numbers show a rise

New data shows that small businesses in the state are experiencing tremendous growth and expansion.

In the first three quarters of 2021 alone, small businesses with fewer than 50 employees created almost 170,000 jobs, the fastest start to small business growth in 23 years, according to the Michigan Bureau of Labor Market Information.

The state also saw an explosion of entrepreneurs and business owners beginning new ventures in 2021, with 150,000 new small business applications filed to start businesses, which is 59% more than in 2019.

“Small businesses form the backbone of Michigan’s economy and are the anchors of communities across the state,” Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said in a news release. “Recent data shows that entrepreneurs are fired up, starting tens of thousands of businesses.”

Whitmer added while the numbers are encouraging, investments must be made to build on the momentum by retaining and recruiting more workers, expanding operations and attracting additional investment.

As it stands, Michigan is home to 902,000 small businesses, with 1.9 million small business employees, representing 48.3% of state workers. In fact, 99.6% of Michigan businesses are defined as small businesses with fewer than 500 employees.

“The entrepreneurial spirit is thriving in Michigan,” said J.D. Collins, CEO of Michigan Small Business Development Center, a statewide resource for small businesses. “Our consultants are experiencing a record number of startup ventures and businesses in generational transition.”

Unique businesses

Brett Sussman said it’s never been easier to open a business but also never harder to maintain it.

Last year, there were more than a million new businesses established but at the same time more than 100,000 closed.

“I think we’re seeing a fundamental shift in how customers are purchasing their products,” said Sussman, vice-president of Kabbage, an online company acquired by American Express that provides funding to small businesses and consumers through an automated lending platform. “It really requires you to have an online approach, which cuts across all businesses.”

A website and social media will also increase traffic to a brick and mortar business, which is why many companies are investing in digital marketing campaigns that generate interest in a product online.

Business owners also use the internet for networking and support.

Balloon Hype founder Leah Yacoub of Macomb Township has always had a passion for balloon decor. When she decided to turn that passion into a business she joined a national networking group of balloon artists. They meet several times a month on Zoom for support and training. Zoom also helped keep many small businesses in touch with their employees, vendors and even customers.

“Balloon Hype had a great year of serving a wide range of corporate and social clients,” said Yacoub, who creates

works of art, sculptures even, out of balloons for special events requiring out-of-the-box decor like a 30-foot archway or 8-foot flower bouquet. "I am not afraid to showcase a new design or sculpture and I love to wow my clients and corporate employees," said Yacoub.

For April Cobb, founder of Tender Moments, the internet that's led to a brick and mortar store.

Always a crafty person, Cobb found herself making Christmas wreaths and home decor to relieve the stress as a graduate student at Wayne State University, working on her master's and doctorate degrees in industrial organizational psychology.

Most of what she made went to family and friends, but with every gift she gave away people told her she should profit off her creativity. She never took them seriously until she graduated and, after making her first diaper wreath gift set, she realized the gifts she loved to make were quite special.

"Finally, in 2008 I took the plunge and decided to turn my hobby into a business and Tender Moments, LLC was officially born," said Cobb, who is currently a professor of psychology at Macomb Community College.

Since then she has been building her online business — as the mother of three boys would say — one baby step at a time.

A decade later the demand online has created a need for a showroom so customers can purchase what they want, when they want it. The grand opening of her brick and mortar shop will be held Feb. 10 from 2 to 6 p.m.

"After being a home based business since our inception, we are finally opening a permanent store," Cobb said, of TM Showplace and Design Studio at 26803 Harper Ave., in St. Clair Shores.

Supporting small business

Among the small businesses that have failed to grow but are needed to support the growing number of small business owners are childcare and daycare centers.

Hoping to help turn the tide, Michigan's LARA-Child Care Licensing Bureau hosted a child care access fair to provide information and resources for Michiganders who might wish to start their own child care business.

"I think this is something we're going to see more of moving forward with the governor's plan," said Kelley Lovati, president of Macomb County Chamber of Commerce.

MI New Economy is a \$21 billion plan to grow Michigan's middle class, support small businesses and invest in communities.

Lovati said the fair will help with the labor issues but also the industry itself, which is in need of more businesses.

"That's such an important part of what's going on in our economy," Lovati said. "There are women who want to work (or start their careers and their own businesses) but they can't find a daycare center."

A couple other initiatives in the plan include:

- \$500 million to help build up Michigan's main street communities, which offers grants to restaurants, place-based businesses and microenterprises with further dollars to attract more startups

- A bipartisan tax cut for small businesses, enabling them to grow and create jobs
- A Buy Michigan executive directive to increase state procurement and contracts with small and geographically disadvantaged businesses.
- Increasing apprenticeship programs: Federal grants will help Michigan create more than 6,000 new apprentices over the next few years

"I think once word gets out of the programs and opportunities being made available we'll see more businesses participating and growing even further," said Lovati.

As for what will happen with Oakland Mall and the other property owned by Kiezi?

"We're being patient. Purchasing a mall is new to me and I want to make sure I take my time in making any decisions," said Kiezi, while looking over a pamphlet illustrating some of the ideas being proposed by his team.

What he does envision is a family destination, a city within a city featuring all of the amenities one might need for a fun day or evening away from home. That includes a garden park on the roof of the Sears building (which was actually designed to be a three-story building rather than the two erected) and a concert venue in the parking lot with seating and a stage. Kiezi also owns a building on Hall Road that will host spaces for makers, as in those who create brand exclusive, handmade or hard-to-find products. "The Maker" as the stores within a store will also feature space for artist galleries, corporate events, family parties or DIY workshops.

"He is definitely an exciting developer," said Martin Manna, president of the Chaldean American Chamber of Commerce and Chaldean Community Foundation referring to Kiezi, who's been known to use social media to create a buzz around his development projects. "I think it's this unique form of thinking that will make a difference in the projects he's developing."