

IN THE NEWS

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How a laid-off autoworker found a village to launch his honey business



It may not take a village to raise a beehive, but it sure helps, says Jason Bey, owner of a

Flint-based honey company called My Bees Nest LLC.

With the aid of a wide range of entrepreneurial support groups in Flint, Bey has made the transition from working in an auto factory to making and selling honey. He has 20 hives in the yard at his house in northern Flint, six on the property of his late father's house in northern Flint and two hives at Jenny B's Garden Party Nursery in Clio.

Bey sells his honey at weekend festivals and online and will soon be selling out of a stall in the Shops on Saginaw on the ground floor of the Dryden Building in downtown Flint, when it reopens Aug. 22 as part of the revamped 100K Ideas incubator program.

In 2017, Bey suffered a back injury on the job at Attentive Industries Inc., a Flint-based tier 1 automotive supplier of sheet metal products. He said he needed some time off to heal but was a new hire on provisional status and was laid off.

"That layoff felt like a crushing defeat because I was at a place in my life where I finally felt like things were coming together," he said. "I had a very decent job, a car, just moved into a house and got a dog."

Unable to return to the job and trying to figure out what to do next, Bey came up with an idea that surprised even him and caused his family to wonder if he had lost his mind: raising bees and selling honey.

There is hardly a tradition of beekeeping in the neighborhoods of northern Flint, where Bey lives and most of his hives are now thriving.

"I was always a fan of honey, but didn't know where it came from. There was no way anyone in the city could do beekeeping. But my finances were down, I couldn't do manual labor. I had to reinvent myself," Bey said.

"Bees and honey just came to mind, and I began researching it. I said, 'Hey, I can do this.' Ohmigod! You should have heard my mom, screaming at the top of her lungs. 'ARE YOU CRAZY?' I was getting it from everybody. I kept getting laughed at, kept getting scolded. They tried to discourage me, but I was fascinated by it and laughed back at them.

"Beekeeping kept coming to mind, and it stuck. I was so much more than working in a factory and collecting a check every week."

Bey said he got by for a bit on workers' compensation, but by 2019 was serious about bees and making a real business of it and got some crucial feedback and incentive from the owners of the S&L Honey Farm LLC in Flushing.

He went to the farmers market in Flint one day and saw a woman selling honey. "I saw a honeycomb and her honey, and I was amazed," Bey said.

"So, you can be a beekeeper in Michigan?" he recounted saying to her.

"You sure can," she said. I was so excited. She gave me a card and said to call her husband. Two weeks later, I gave him a call and he invited me out and started showing me all the tools I would need," Bey said. "He was so down to earth. I was so excited."

And the business was officially launched in his mind.

Bey said he had heard there might be grants or other funding available through the Flint and Genesee Group, the city and county's chamber of commerce.

IN THE NEWS

He was referred to Tracy Joseph, the chamber's business support manager. She emailed Bey a list of local resources, including pitch events that offer financial support for startups, possible grants and low- and no-interest loans.

More important, she also sent him a list of area organizations that offer a wide range of support services for entrepreneurs. Some of those Bey followed up with and got help from include Flint SOUP, Factory Two, 100K Ideas, the Small Business Development Center at Kettering University and the small-business development team at the city of Flint.

In addition to eventually getting him space in the Dryden Building to sell his honey, 100K Ideas found him a mentor for counseling, advice and pats on the back in La'Asia Johnson. She came through the 100K Ideas incubator program herself as she launched her skin-care company, Elle Jae Essentials.

Bey also won \$1,000 for finishing third at a pitch event at 100K Ideas in January 2022 and won \$1,000 at another event there in February 2022.

"He utilized as many of our resources as he could. Jason is a strong example of how small businesses can take advantages of the opportunities here in Flint," Joseph said.

"Tracy explained herself and her job role, and gave me links to other agencies to apply for grants and seek assistance," Bey said. "Tracy connected me with Adrian and James at Flint SOUP, and I took off from there."

"Adrian" is Adrian Montague and "James" is James Shuttleworth. The two co-founded Flint SOUP in 2012, patterning it after Detroit SOUP, which was founded in Detroit's Mexicantown in 2010 as an entrepreneurial support and networking organization.

Flint SOUP holds monthly pitch-event nights. For \$5, attendees get soup, salad and bread and then get to vote for the winner of the pitch event, with the winner getting all the proceeds.

(Jerry Weston Jr. won \$1,870 at July's pitch event. He owns Flint-based Jay's Mobile Collision and Restorations, whose mobile business model delivers automotive service to those who need it.)

Bey did a virtual pitch online in 2020, during COVID. He didn't win, but as a result of his pitch, he ended up getting a big hydrator from the Flint Food Hub, which allows him to process 80 gallons of honey at a time. He also caught the eye of Factory Two and Janis Mueller.

Based at Kettering University in Flint, Mueller is regional director of the I-69 Trade Corridor Region for the Michigan Small Business Development Center.

She helped Bey with financial projections and a formal business plan.

"Our mission statement is we help small businesses start, grow and thrive," she said. "The ecosystem for entrepreneurship in Flint is all coming together. We don't care where you enter the system, we are all working together. We know the resources people need to connect with to continue on their journey. We've wiped out the silos."

Mueller said Flint SOUP referred Bey to the SBDC just before COVID hit. After it hit, the SBDC and Flint SOUP partnered to put Bey through a 12-week training program.

In 2021, Bey ordered his first two hives, then quickly ordered four more and then seven more. By the end of the year, he and his bees had made 150 gallons of honey.

"I harvested honey twice that year," Bey said. "That was so much excitement."

Mueller also put Bey in contact with the Flint chamber and the city of Flint's economic development team.

"Jason is so passionate, he's amazing. He's the consummate entrepreneur, undeterred by challenges. He's one of our fan favorites. ... His bees fly all over and pollinate community gardens in northern Flint,

IN THE NEWS

which helps feed people in his community," she said.

Factory Two is a maker space in downtown Flint. Chris Bohinsky, an instructor there, began helping Bey with a range of services two years ago.

Bohinsky helped design the labels Bey eventually put on his jars of honey; got him into a wood-working class so he could build better trays for his bees to build their honeycombs; and got him into a silk-screening class so he could learn to make promotional hoodies and T-shirts.

Bey also learned some graphic design so he could make flyers and information packets.

"I just thoroughly enjoyed working with him," Bohinsky said. "He was always upbeat and willing to put the work in. And I've always appreciated the kindness and care he has for his bees, the same kindness he has for people. He's just an all-around awesome guy."

During a recent visit to his house and hives, the closer Bey got to his bees, the more he was smiling and talking.

"People ask, 'Do bees know who you are?' They do. They know their pheromones and they know mine," he said.

He had a new hive that seemed to be thriving and he was eager to see if he could find its new queen and show her off. He pulled some wooden slats out of it. In one of them surrounded by workers, was a bigger, lighter-colored bee than the workers around her.

"There she is. Look at her!" he said, holding her and the tray out to be photographed.

"I like his work ethic. I talked to him the other day and he said he'd been up till 4 a.m. the night before harvesting honey," said Diana Johnson, who does small-business development for the city of Flint.

She hired Bey to do a series of four neighborhood workshops this summer. He brings some bees and honey for sale and tells attendees about his business.

"For me, the best part is seeing Jason with the children. He'll tell them to stick their fingers in the honey on one of his honeycombs and they're 'No, I'm not doing that!' But by the end they're sticking their fingers in and licking them and saying 'Wow, it's so cool!'"

"I've visited his house a number of times to visit him and his bees and it's always so much fun."

"The Flint entrepreneurial system helped me gain insight of the integral components needed to run a successful business," Bey said.

"I was able to connect with businesses that were only a phone call away and the advice was free...I was surprised by how many resources were available to me. Once I found out that certain businesses helped individuals like me get their business started, it was like I had just won a shopping spree to my favorite clothing store, except I had all the time in the world to pick and choose what was the best fit for my business."