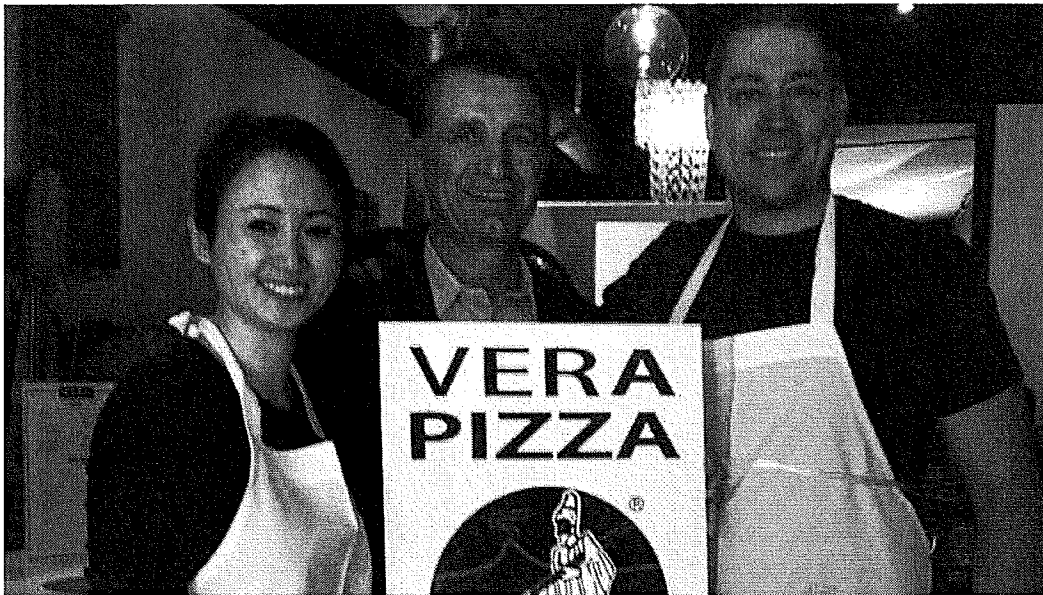


Entrepreneurs who are deaf overcome obstacles to own businesses

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.18.15

Word Count **752**



Melody (left) and Russ (right) Stein are the owners of Mozzarella restaurant. They are also deaf and have run their San Francisco restaurant since 2011. Pictured here, they are receiving a certification from a representative of Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana that endorsed Mozzarella's pizza. Photo: Mozzarella via Facebook

NEW YORK, N.Y. — Soon after customers arrive at Mozzarella restaurant, they notice something different. Nearly every worker is deaf.

Owners Russ and Melody Stein are also deaf, and have run their San Francisco restaurant since 2011. The business is thriving because customers love the food. Also the Steins have overcome obstacles deaf people can face when they become small business owners. They have had to deal with prejudice, and other problems that hearing business owners do not experience.

"We have the same skills as a hearing individual," Russ Stein said.

Running Mozzarella comes naturally to Melody Stein, whose family is in the restaurant business.

"It's something I've always wanted to do," she said.

Growing Interest In Owning A Business

Deaf people have the same ambition and ability to own their own businesses as those who hear, said Tom Baldrige. He is the director of the business program at Gallaudet University, the largest school serving deaf and hard of hearing students. There's a growing interest among Gallaudet students to learn how to start their own businesses, something business schools all over the country are seeing.

The hearing world is still catching up to the idea of deaf business owners, and the Steins have been treated unfairly.

The couple has had problems when they asked for help at local government offices. For example, they had a hard time getting permits to open the restaurant.

"We have had our rough moments," Russ Stein said. There were times when he had to ask for sign-language interpreters, "and I was made fun of. I was looked down upon."

Most Suppliers Have Adapted

Business owners who can hear are often startled or feel awkward when they first meet the couple. Some have assumed that because the Steins are deaf, they didn't know what they were doing, Russ Stein said. Some have been impatient about writing down what they want to say, or have said offensive or inappropriate things.

"People ask, 'how do you drive?'" Stein said.

But most of the restaurant's suppliers adapt to working with the Steins. Mozzarella's wine seller has even helped them learn more about the restaurant business.

And their hearing customers seem happy to write their questions about items on the menu. Some seem awkward when they first come in, but they soon relax and enjoy their meals.

"They learn to overcome their fear," Melody Stein said.

Many Have Faced Prejudice

Many deaf owners have dealt with prejudice. Hearing people have told them that the best careers for deaf people are teaching or counseling other deaf people.

Mara Ladines owns By Mara, a clothing manufacturer and store in New York. She wanted a career in fashion design. Some advisers in college tried to steer her toward a job that would require less communication with others.

"They believed a deaf individual can't get a job in the fashion industry," she said.

Ladines insisted on taking design courses and got jobs with different clothing companies. In 2008, she began designing T-shirts and other clothes with the American Sign Language sign for "I love you." Her business has grown to the point where she could open the store last spring. Many of the people who walk in are hearing, and Ladines is able to communicate with them and sell her clothes.

Ladines wants to keep building her business, but she feels frustrated.

"It seems that most hearing individuals don't understand that a deaf individual can own a business," she said. "I feel I was born as a natural business owner."

Internet Could Be More Helpful

Deaf owners communicate with suppliers, bankers, customers and government offices by email. Free services allow deaf people to communicate in sign language with an interpreter. The person then speaks to a hearing person by phone.

The Small Business Administration (SBA) is a government agency that helps small businesses. It started a videophone service this year that lets deaf owners communicate by sign language with SBA employees. It makes it easier for deaf business owners to get help and information about loans and other services.

But owners say the Internet could be much more helpful. Few videos and online seminars for small business owners have a sign language interpreter. It means that deaf people cannot understand them. The situation is frustrating to Melissa Greenlee, who runs deaffriendly.com. The website helps deaf people find services and companies that accommodate their needs.

She said that technology has been wonderful for the deaf community. However, "it also has been my biggest barrier to advancement," she said.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Most Suppliers Have Adapted." Why did the author explain that some people question Stein's ability to drive?
- (A) It shows some of the prejudices deaf people face.
 - (B) It shows that deaf people have the same skills as hearing people.
 - (C) It shows that a person does not need to drive to own a business.
 - (D) It shows that hearing people and deaf people both have difficulties.
- 2 Read the section "Internet Could Be More Helpful." According to the article, how could the Internet be MORE helpful to deaf business owners?
- (A) by providing some services for deaf people for free
 - (B) by providing more videos with sign language interpreters
 - (C) by providing a website that helps deaf people find services
 - (D) by providing videophone services that allow deaf people to communicate by sign language
- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

"We have the same skills as a hearing individual," Russ Stein said.

Which sentence below uses "individual" in the SAME way as the sentence above?

- (A) He bought an individual slice of pizza.
- (B) People have individual beliefs about religion.
- (C) She was an individual who worked very hard.
- (D) The students at the school have individual lockers.

4 Read the sentence from the article.

Some have been impatient about writing down what they want to say, or have said offensive or inappropriate things.

Which of the following words, if it replaced the word "offensive" in the sentence above, would CHANGE the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) hurtful
- (B) disrespectful
- (C) surprising
- (D) rude