

Testimony by Cheryl Besenjak
on behalf of
Growing Healthy People NFP and Grow Well Farms LLC
December 11, 2017



GROWING
HEALTHY
PEOPLE

Grow
Well
Farms

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning about my entrepreneurial experiences at the field event, “Bridging the Entrepreneurial Gap: Addressing Barriers to Small Business Formation and Growth.” I hope what I and the others on the panel share and discuss will be a benefit to the committee and future entrepreneurs.

My name is Cheryl Besenjak and I am currently the Executive Director of Growing Healthy People NFP (an Illinois not-for-profit corporation) and a managing partner of the for-profit enterprise Grow Well Farms LLC.

I have always had an entrepreneurial spirit – asking questions like what if, why not and how can I find a way to meet a particular need? For example, in 1990 when I decided to leave my job in educational publishing to stay home to raise my newborn daughter, I sent out 40 resumes outlining my experience and offering my services as a copyright and permissions consultant to publishers around the country. From this one mailing, The Permissions Group (TPG) was launched. Started around my dining room table, TPG met a need for publishers. Quickly I started adding “staff”, mostly stay-at-home moms who wanted to work while their children were in school. This met another need in the workforce. I am proud to say that TPG is still serving publishers today. And one of my first staff members bought TPG in 2005 when I wanted to move on to other ventures.

Fast forward to 2013. For nearly a decade I had been developing my latest passion – growing food for those in need, installing gardens around the food desert in south Waukegan and teaching students of all ages how to grow food. I was thrilled to bring harvests to food pantries and a free farmers market in Waukegan. And I loved sharing my passion with others. I thought a natural next step was to find ways to create jobs. When I read an article titled “A Battle Worth Fighting” in one of my favorite magazines, *Organic Gardening*. I knew I had found my next calling. The article explained that according to the USDA there was a need for a million new farmers over the next ten years as our country’s farmers were aging out. Then it said that veterans returning from war could be the answer – they had the skills and desire for a new mission and creating food could be healing for those who have seen and experienced death and destruction. I am a Vietnam Era Air Force veteran and I love to grow food and I want to grow farmers. Seemed like a

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perfect match. The author of the article Dulanie Ellis was also the producer of the award-winning documentary – *Ground Operations: Battlefields to Farmfields*. Several of us involved in the Waukegan project decided to see what we could do with this new mission and Growing Healthy People NFP was launched. One of the new members of our group was Kevin Westing, a remodeler/construction guy with knowledge of plants and gardening and a passion for raising fish. It wasn't long before Kevin and I became Growing Healthy People and then started our partnership, Grow Well Farms.

Kevin and I were particularly interested in indoor farming – growing year round, using alternative growing methods like hydroponics and aquaponics which combines hydroponics with aquaculture, the raising of fish.

Both entities have had their challenges. Naively we thought it would be easy to find grant money to help veterans. But as with any venture – be it not-for-profit or for-profit – a track record is needed. Enthusiasm and expertise alone is not enough to get funding. Self-funding and a few family loans were the path we chose. There were many times along the way when we wanted to call it quits.

Challenges – for every entrepreneur the biggest challenges are funding, space, time and help. In the case of TPG I was able to start in my home and work around my daughter's schedule. I did take out a small loan from my parents to pay for equipment and start-up costs. With Growing Healthy People and Grow Well Farms, it hasn't been as simple. We needed a space to create into an indoor farm and where the public could come visit and see the possibilities for year round food production which would provide healthy food and jobs in the local food industry.

We rented a 1600 square foot space in Grayslake, but quickly found that the rent and utilities were more than our founding not-for-profit could afford and quickly ran out of our start-up funding we had secured. Kevin and I then formed Grow Well Farms LLC and started growing microgreens to sell to restaurants and at farmers markets to generate sales/income.

We have found creative ways to grow our not-for-profit and business – networking, using social media and through collaboration. Making connections and always accepting every opportunity to share our vision and missions have been key. For example - An Executive MBA team from Loyola University wrote a business plan for Grow Well Farms' microgreen business as their final project. An Eagle Scout contacted Growing Healthy People to see if there was a project he could do for veterans. Kevin taught him how to build aquaponics systems out of IBC totes. Scouts under his leadership built three systems for us. Through this relationship, we found a home for the systems and Grow

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Well Farms' business in a greenhouse at the Lake Forest Country Day School which we lease for 3 years for \$1. In exchange, we offer educational opportunities to their students and grow healthy microgreens for their snack program.

This year we have been awarded a significant grant from the Abbott Fund to build a nutrition hub in two greenhouses they previously donated to two middle schools in Waukegan and North Chicago. We installed aquaponics, aeroponic towers and hydroponics systems. It is exciting to see the students who may eat a can of frosting for breakfast or dumpster dive for meals, now eating nutritious organic microgreens grown in their new systems or growing lettuces to donate to food pantries or community houses in their neighborhood all while learning technologies and how to grow food.

We have just been awarded a grant from the Grainger Foundation to refurbish a greenhouse at Bowen Park in Waukegan. This greenhouse will be turned into an Urban Ag Lab with the Waukegan Parks and Recreation team programming classes around growing and cooking healthy food.

We also received a grant from the Liberty Prairie Foundation to fund a veteran intern for 120 hours @ \$15 who we hope to hire for the Bowen Park project.

In addition, Grow Well Farms is partnering with JAMEKS Farm in Wadsworth for a 2018 SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) Farmer/Rancher Grant to develop two quackaponics systems – using pond water from JAMEKS Farm ducks to create nutrients to grow produce using the same technology as aquaponics.

It is all a start and this year Kevin and I have actually received some income for all the many hours we have put in to Growing Healthy People and Grow Well Farms.

The future? Kevin and I believe in urban agriculture and that growing food using alternative growing methods is the future. Healthy, local food can be grown almost anywhere and urban agriculture is a multi-million dollar industry. Jobs can be created in food production. For Growing Healthy People we would like to add greenhouse projects and continue to grow Grow Well Farms. We want to find ways to train veterans on local food production and alternative growing methods. We believe there are other collaborations we can develop. We would like to find a space where we can create a headquarters and educational center. We know there are old buildings or warehouses available in low income areas that could be used for this purpose. We want to find a way make this happen – whether through partnerships, grants or loans. Additionally, we are looking for a place to set up a greenhouse I purchased with a \$5,000 grant I was awarded from the Farmer Veteran Coalition. We have been trying to locate a place to set this up

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and while we have gotten close – be it at a school or other property – thus far we have not found the location.

When I accepted the opportunity to be a part of this field event, I was asked to think about ways Congress could help entrepreneurs. I have looked at the Small Business Administration website and found it to be a great resource for entrepreneurs. I know there are opportunities through the USDA. Why haven't I pursued opportunities? The only reason I can think of is that I thought I wouldn't qualify for any loans or grants. When you are starting out, you may not have income to support a loan. Interestingly, I made sure that I owned 51% of my business entities so they would qualify as both woman-owned and veteran-owned – just in case I would go for a loan. In addition, I suspect that government agencies like the SBA and USDA seem too large, too intimidating for an entrepreneur to navigate. Perhaps these are my own misconceptions. That is one reason I am delighted to be here for this conversation. I'm interested to share my experiences, hear from others and find ways for entrepreneurs to tap into governmental opportunities that exist or can be developed to spur on small business. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.

Cheryl Besenjak
Managing Partner
Grow Well Farms
1450 Cameron Court
Hoffman Estates IL 60010
847-609-3228
cheryl@growwellfarms.com