



Stephen Cohen

Taking Care of (small) Business

BY MARY S. GILBERT



Rebecca Harris

TWO EAST ENDERS ARE WORKING TO HELP SMALL BUSINESSES SUCCEED.

To support himself while attending graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, Stephen Cohen drove a cab. His first passenger asked for a ride from a hotel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a mere five minutes away.

With map in hand (before the age of GPS), Cohen drove for 40 minutes until he found his destination. The irate passenger refused to pay his fare. An episode that felt humiliating at the time taught Cohen a valuable business lesson he never forgot—"Learn what's really important about your job."

It's a lesson the Squirrel Hill resident continues to embrace and share with others as the owner of the successful marketing firm Keystone by Design Inc. and as a volunteer for the Pittsburgh chapter of SCORE, a national nonprofit organization that provides counselors to small businesses.

And it's a lesson that Rebecca Harris of Point Breeze also teaches her students and clients as director of Chatham University's Center for Women's Entrepreneurship.

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) Pittsburgh District Office recently honored both Cohen and Harris for their advocacy work for small businesses and their contributions to the community. Cohen was named the SCORE Volunteer of the Year, while Harris was selected as the SBA Region III and Western Pennsylvania Women in Business Champion of the Year.

According to Carl Knoblock, Pittsburgh SBA district director, the awards for these two East End residents are well deserved. "Stephen and Rebecca have a passion and commitment for small business and are game-changers," Knoblock says.

Indeed, the backgrounds of these award-winners read like case studies in ingenuity, perseverance, and a single-minded determination to share their knowledge to help fellow small business owners and entrepreneurs make a difference for the long run.

Cohen, who grew up in New York City, established his career with a variety of sales and marketing positions for government departments, universities, and corporations in the Northeast. He was successful, yet he also experienced company closures, divestitures, and high stress.

In 1998, he left corporate America and started Keystone By Design in his Squirrel Hill home; the company's tagline is "We help your businesses grow!" One of Cohen's first steps when he established his business was to attend SCORE's workshop on small business basics. He then volunteered for the organization doing pro bono graphic design work and later joined the chapter, became vice chair and then chair.

As a volunteer today, he is responsible for the organization's information technology, teaches a marketing seminar, and offers counsel to small business owners and managers in all stages of their companies' life cycles.

"There are technical aspects of a business that most people don't have an inkling about," Cohen explains. "You need outside advisors to help you think about the consequences of what you're doing, and SCORE helped me understand that. I've faced and overcome many problems, and as a counselor, I help others see opportunities and solutions."

Harris, on the other hand, is a serial entrepreneur who created multiple compa-

nies to meet unique market niches. She began honing her innovation skills at an early age trying to construct an ice skating rink in the yard of her childhood home in St. Louis. As an adult, she came up with Becky's No Cholesterol Delights when a major supermarket baker she queried refused to make heart-healthy desserts. She then designed a netting device to enable jellyfish-free swimming in the Chesapeake Bay area.

As a new mother in Toledo, Ohio, she and a partner formed several newspapers and magazines. She eventually sold her share of the million-dollar publishing company and started a strategic planning and marketing consulting service.

Upon moving to Pittsburgh in 2008, she realized that Chatham offered a fertile outlet for her talents. Her focus is devising programs that promote sustainability, build networks, and empower women entrepreneurs to assume leadership roles in driving the region's economy. She launched CWE Connect, an online membership business development and mentoring community, enhanced the Think Big Forum, her center's signature event, and founded the monthly Women Business Leaders Breakfast Series.

Economic development in our local community, as well as the greater region, is paramount to Cohen and Harris, not just from a business standpoint but also as a determinant of our quality of life. "Owning a small business is hard, but it's the ultimate test of independence," Cohen asserts. "There are tremendous supports for entrepreneurs, such as SCORE and government-funded low-cost financing."

Harris believes that neighborhood businesses, like those so prevalent throughout the East End, Fox Chapel area, and Oakmont, help make up the character of our community. "We'd have a city of nothing [without small businesses]," she says. "I certainly don't want my favorite pizza guy to go out of business."

Many of those businesses have benefited from her expertise and that of Cohen. For instance, Michele Petrucci, owner of Petrucci Strategic Marketing Consulting in Shadyside, sought advice from Harris when she established her home-based business two years ago and effusively praises her mentor.

"Rebecca gave me areas to focus on, people to meet, and basic criteria," Petrucci recalls. "She is phenomenal, the most connected person. She exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit and is a great asset to the region."

And so, for their advocacy for small businesses and their contributions to the community, the SBA lauded Harris and Cohen at its recent Western Pennsylvania SBA's Awards Luncheon at the Sheraton Station Square Hotel. The event is held annually in conjunction with National Small Business Week.

"Small business growth comes from the region's growth," Knoblock says. "Like the SBA and others who are making an impact, they're part of the support mechanism to create economic development for the good fortune of the region. With people like [Harris and Cohen] on the team, the only way you can go is upward."

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