



La Placita - Emilia Otero

Through an unlikely combination of entrepreneurship and community activism, Emilia Otero is creating a vibrant, wholesome mobile food culture in Oakland.

➤ DEEP ROOTS

Emilia Otero's roots in the mobile food business go 20 years deep, back to her first pilot project to improve community nutrition options in Oakland, by organizing local food vendors into what she calls "the new food industry on wheels."

"I wanted bring nutrition to my community," she said. "I wanted to teach kids about healthy eating."

It wasn't easy, and there were plenty of setbacks along the way. But there is no giving up in Emilia Otero.

She saw the potential impact of organizing the vendors to provide fresh food, but she had to work to legalize them first—at that time, mobile food businesses were not permitted in many cities, Oakland among them. Eventually, with the support of the community and the vendors, she was able to open her first commissary in 2008 with a \$75,000 grant from the city of Oakland.

➤ REBUILDING A DREAM

Unfortunately, that amount didn't cover the necessary start-up costs, and despite doing a good business initially, she couldn't get a bank loan because of her lack of equity. Her struggle to find funding led her to Opportunity Fund and loan consultant Gerardo Campos who secured her a loan in 2010. But two years later, another setback: the building hosting her commercial kitchen went into foreclosure, and Otero's business almost went under.

"I didn't have credit to buy the building. I lost everything, including my credit," she said

Otero was down, but not out. She rebuilt her dream in Oakland's Fruitvale district, by renovating a building no one else wanted, with volunteers and friends doing painting, cleaning, and plumbing. Another grant from the city helped rebuild the façade, but the hoods for the ovens and stoves—essential upgrades for passing city inspections—required fast financing.

Again, Campos at Opportunity Fund stepped in. "Gerardo saved my business," she said. "He can see potential in the people looking for the opportunity that I had," she said. Finally, her commercial kitchen, La Placita, was born, thanks to Otero's rich and varied background of creativity, activism, and love for her community.

And we think those are all good things worth investing in.