

City Fresh Caters to Community Needs

By Howard Manly
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Say this about Glen Lloyd: He is a community guy.

For the last 20 years, he has driven through Roxbury and Dorchester preaching the gospel of minority-owned businesses.

“I’ve always bought into the idea that we need to be our own bosses,” Lloyd says. “I’ve always believed that we needed to create our own jobs.”

These days, Lloyd can use his own company as a textbook example of how to start and grow a successful business while maintaining a strong community commitment. And he practices what he preaches.

At City Fresh, Lloyd explains on his website, “Our mission is to create jobs in the economically distressed neighborhoods of Boston, and to create opportunities for equity and local control.”

Started in 1994, City Fresh Foods Inc. has grown from a small catering company specializing in ethnic food to an estimated \$5 million a year business with 65 employees.

Most important, Lloyd has seen his number of deliveries skyrocket to a staggering 8,000 meals a day, a far cry from when a handful of workers jammed into a small kitchen on Dudley Street and struggled to get out about 500 meals.

Indeed, doing good has been good business for Lloyd and his brother Sheldon, a partner and the company’s vice president of business development.

It wasn’t always this way.

Lloyd grew up in Sharon and graduated from Boston University with a degree in economics. He worked as a teacher in Louisiana for a while before returning to Boston to teach at the Log School Settlement House in Dorchester.

Quite naturally, Lloyd did far more than teach his students the requirements for passing high school equivalency tests. He talked business.



Glenn and Sheldon Lloyd are brothers and partners in City Fresh Inc., a community-based catering business that prides itself on quality business and community development.

In fact, he advised one group of teenagers on how to operate a fruit stand, including lessons on bookkeeping, inventory, profit margins, revenue sharing and balanced budgets.

“We’re not teaching these kids how to work a cash register or how to flip burgers,” Lloyd said at the time. “We’re getting them out there into the business world and letting them get their feet wet.”

But it was also time for Lloyd to get his own feet wet.

The idea at first was at once simple and complicated. Lloyd wanted to serve appropriate meals to Latin and African American senior citizens. But he had virtually no staff, a barely reliable transportation system, and when he finally found a storefront to cook the food, the roof of the building caved in.

“It took us about three years to break even,” Lloyd says. “It was a struggle for a while.”

The first big break occurred in 1998 when the fledgling company received \$190,000 from the Boston Community Venture Fund, a subsidiary of the Boston Community Loan Fund. Unlike the Loan Fund, whose goal was supporting affording housing, the Venture Fund’s aim was to promote entrepreneurship as a way to create jobs for underemployed inner-city residents.

It was a perfect match. With just about \$500,000 in revenues, City Fresh needed new money to buy better equipment and move into a larger space. They had tried to borrow money from conventional banks to no avail.

“We had the capacity to do much more business,” Lloyd said at the time. “If we had more space we could quadruple our production.”

Because of his passionate belief, Lloyd attracted an impressive list of supporters. With Boston Mayor Thomas Menino at the podium at City Fresh’s Roxbury site to announce the \$190,000 loan stood U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin as well as U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II and U.S. Senator John Kerry.

Lloyd was right. Eight years later, City Fresh was doing about \$2 million a year. And still Lloyd thought he could do more. Another break came in 2004 when Lloyd was accepted into the Inner City Entrepreneurs, a program founded by Boston University professor Dan Monti and Andrew Wolk, a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Calling the nine-month program “a streetwise MBA,” the ICE afforded Lloyd the chance to attend MBA-level classes at Boston University, meet with corporate mentors, venture capitalists and other business leaders.

The program worked. The next year, armed with a new contract serving meals to Dimock Community Health Center’s Head Start program, City Fresh’s annual revenues were up to \$4 million a year.

Lloyd still believes he can do more business. But as it is now, he has enough to worry. In addition to Caribbean and Latin meals, City Fresh now offers Russian, Italian, and, of course, soul food. To that end, Lloyd recently hired Lee Shepard, one of Boston’s best soul food chefs to work with City Fresh’s catering business. In fact, it’s called City Fresh Catering with Chef Lee.

It is the food business after all, and taste matters, especially to children, no easy judges. Serving children hot, nutritional breakfasts every day that they actually eat is no easy task, especially considering federal and state dietary regulations.

“I’d like to believe that we are pushing the envelope on everything we do,” Lloyd says.

And that’s true. Not too long ago, he discovered that some children were not impressed with his pizza. Lloyd said he thought about hiring an outside company but then one of his employees, Jose Tavares, boasted that he could make the best pizza, if not in the world, then certainly in Boston.

Sure enough, Lloyd decided to have an in-house competition — and Tavares won.

Of all the exciting things that have happened over the years, including most recently moving into a 12,000 square foot facility in Dorchester, complete with two loading docks and all sorts of fancy kitchen equipment, Lloyd said seeing Tavares win the competition was among the most gratifying.

Though still working with Lloyd as a logistics manager, Tavares has started his own company supplying City Fresh with pizzas and, more important, “is keeping \$85,000 worth of business in the community,” Lloyd says.

And that’s the point. It’s not good enough that City Fresh does well. Lloyd said he wants the community to do even better.