



Former drug addict Tom Porcina: founded his Serenity Plus home renovation business thanks to grant money from Vancouver's Eastside Movement for Business and Economic Renewal Society (EMBERS)

DOMINIC SCHAEFER

EMBERS sparks entrepreneurial ventures for down-at-the-heels Vancouverites

Registered charity provides cash to kick-start businesses and reclaim lost lives

Glen Korstrom

It was a rough two years for **Tom Porcina** after he was fired from his union job as a gas pump repairman for **P.D. Maclaren Ltd.** for using crack cocaine at work. He wound up collecting bottles to feed his addiction.

His return to respectability as a business founder and owner took six years but would likely never have been possible without Vancouver's **Eastside Movement for Business and Economic Renewal Society (EMBERS)**.

The registered charity provides business and training support to enable cash-strapped Vancouver east side residents to found their own microbusinesses.

EMBERS charged Porcina a nominal amount to teach him how to write a business plan. It also provided him with a credit management course for a small fee.

Fees range on a sliding scale between \$40 and \$300 for 10 weeks of training. The investment forces aspiring entrepreneurs to invest in their own destiny.

Once Porcina finished his training and had saved money to invest in his business, EMBERS granted him three times his savings as part

of a matched-savings program.

Porcina, like most participants, forked over the maximum \$600 allowed under the program.

Vancity has donated \$18,139 to EMBERS since March and earmarked that money for the matched-savings program. Another 20 clients are currently saving for the plan.

It might sound like easy money, but there was nothing easy about it for Porcina.

Newly sober, he was living at the **Salvation Army's Harbour Light Mission**. Porcina knew that if he returned to smoking crack, he'd be back sleeping in doorways and mired in despair a world away from the income and personal pride that come from operating a business.

Aside from homeless former drug addicts, EMBERS clients include those who work part time or are at minimum wage jobs and can't risk leaving their employment to start a business.

Other clients are new immigrants, people with disabilities and single parents who have long been out of the workforce.

EMBERS also has clients who own a micro-business, but have made early mistakes and have flagging enterprises.

Porcina decided to give up crack and get his life on track when he was collecting bottles. His mother found a notice from the City of North Vancouver reprimanding Porcina for stealing bottles from other residents' blue boxes.

"It really upset my mother that I'd become a dirty rotten bottle picking bum," he said.

Porcina called himself a handyman during his years of addiction, but he usually found himself preparing midnight moves for drug dealers and taking payment in dope.

The good news was that he had a hammer and some other tools. So he spent his newfound cash buying and fixing the transmission on a "crappy" truck and founded his **Serenity Plus** home renovation business.

"The idea is to get a business plan together so you have something to take to a bank when you ask for a personal loan," Porcina said.

Instead of applying for that loan, Porcina pinned posters to community centre notice boards and soon secured enough work to survive without going into debt.

In 2005, he made \$30,000 and plowed most of that revenue back into his business. He survived

thanks to living free at Harbour Light for part of the year.

He now rents a place in North Vancouver and expects 2006 revenue to be approximately \$80,000 once all outstanding accounts are settled.

EMBERS' executive director, **Marcia Nozick**, said more than 200 people have used her registered charity's business services and training programs since 2003. That participation has generated a broad range of more than 65 new or expanded businesses.

Some entrepreneurs produce gourmet food preserves and vinaigrettes (**Hinda's Finest**), hand-made soap (**Jah-Jireh Family Soapworks**) or jewelry (**Design By Refine**).

Service businesses range from pest exterminators (**DTES Pest Control**), to junk removal experts (**Damage Rubbish Removal and Cleanup Ltd.**) and photographers (**Green Tea Photography**).

"It's amazing the changes that happen when someone is given a chance with proper supports and tools to turn their dreams into a business," Nozick said. "Confidence grows and a whole new world opens up for them."

■ gkorstrom@biv.com

BIV BACK PAGES

BUSINESS VANCOUVER

One year ago:

Nuclear summer: Security concerns over global fossil fuel supplies are helping kick-start a nuclear power renaissance that's generating multiple opportunities for B.C. uranium miners. Eager to cash in on nuclear fuel's resurgence, Vancouver mining junior **Mawson Resources Ltd.** has staked out a 5,000-hectare claim in Sweden, which it believes has a "world class" uranium deposit of about 100 million pounds.

BUSINESS VANCOUVER

Five years ago:

Seattle makeover: A B.C. company is partnering with **Microsoft Corp.** co-founder **Paul Allen** in overhauling downtown Seattle. West Vancouver real estate developer **Milliken Development Corp.** and Allen's **Vulcan Inc.** announced a \$150 million project that will involve building a 975,000-square-foot complex in Seattle's South Lake Union area. It will house the city's first downtown upscale supermarket, condos, townhouses and offices.

BUSINESS VANCOUVER

10 years ago:

Hot Hummers: Local businesses are eager to cash

in on the popularity of the Hummer. The military-style vehicles, introduced to civilians in 1992, attract attention wherever they go, and that has companies interested in using them literally as advertising vehicles. Liquor, for example, can't be advertised on B.C. billboards, but nothing prohibits companies from flashing a product name in public on a vehicle.

BUSINESS VANCOUVER

15 years ago:

Passport privatization: The Vancouver Board of

Trade thinks the federal government is offering lousy service in its Vancouver passport office and should turn its operation over to the private sector. The VBOT reviewed the passport office after receiving a number of complaints about long waiting times for interviews and telephone calls.

■ dtuchel@biv.com

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