

# The Oakland Tribune

## Group helps immigrants launch startups

By Janis Mara, Business Writer

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OAKLAND - YAN LIU of Oakland came to the United States in 1995 with a dream of becoming an entrepreneur, and on Friday she opens Lireille, a jewelry and art gallery on Piedmont Avenue.

Lireille's gleaming hardwood floors and glass display cases show off goods like intricately worked sterling silver necklaces studded with amethysts created by Alameda artist Barbara Brown, as well as paintings by California artists and jewelry by Liu and her husband, Steve Robinson.

But Liu couldn't have achieved her

dream of opening her own shop without the help of AnewAmerica Community Corp., a Berkeley organization that helps immigrants open businesses. The organization was established in 1999 by a group of community leaders representing immigrants and community activists with the aim of providing job creation and asset development for low-income Bay Area immigrants. AnewAmerica has entrepreneurs from more than 40 countries throughout nine Bay Area counties.

Liu came to the United States from her native Shandong province in China to pursue an MBA at San Francisco State University. When her father, a jade collector, came to the U.S. for her graduation, he encouraged her to start a jade business. The next step: selling her jewelry at local fairs with husband Steve.

"One of the staff of AnewAmerica came to me when I was doing a festival," Liu said. "They were recruiting small-business owners."

Now Liu and Robinson are preparing for Lireille's grand opening. Robinson, a Brooklyn native whose father was a clothing designer, displays one of his creations at the store, a necklace of raw garnets with eight quarter-sized slices of deep red stone on a slender silver wire. Prices at Lireille range from \$59 to \$4,000.

AnewAmerica's program targets Bay Area immigrants who want to start or upgrade their own businesses and offers six months of three-hour weekly classes followed by two and a half years of follow-up assistance. Fees are on a sliding scale from \$450 to \$1,000 based on the applicants' income.

AnewAmerica's program helped Liu and Robinson open their shop on upscale Piedmont Avenue within a block or so of Bay Wolf restaurant, The Bee's Knees clothing boutique, Make My Day home decor store and others.

"We wrote our business plan through AnewAmerica," Robinson said. "That's a tool you need to get bank funding for a retail store, and it's a requirement for graduation (from the program). Also, we joined the program's savings incentive project to double our savings. They're supplying volunteers to help with the grand opening July 6."

Other graduates of AnewAmerica's program include Sierra Leone-born Fanta Nabay of Pinole, who launched Tbon African Home Concepts, a line of organic African textiles, and Ana Vilanova of El Salvador, who owns Spark of History Photography Services in San Francisco.

"Through our program, families grow and expand their business, purchase their first home, increase their net worth, create jobs and give back to the community by becoming volunteers, philanthropists and social activists," said Mimi Nguyen, AnewAmerica program manager.

Immigrants are a vital part of the Bay Area. Approximately 28 percent of the local population was foreign-born in 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In that year, 6.5 percent of all foreign-born people in the U.S. owned their own businesses, according to the census.

AnewAmerica is accepting applicants for a new round of classes starting Sept. 17 for Spanish speakers and Sept. 19 for English speakers.

For information, visit <http://www.anewamerica.org> or call (510) 540-7785, ext. 312.

A reception celebrating Lireille's grand opening will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday at the shop, 3980 Piedmont Ave., Oakland. Store hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week. Call (510) 547-3455 for more information.



Yan Liu and her husband, Steve Robinson, will open Lireille in Oakland on Friday. The gallery will be a joint venture that blends jewelry and painting. (Antonio Franco - Staff)