

Prize winner cooks up tasty idea for 6th St.

Skid row culinary school suggestion wins business plan contest

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

IN a town where food is king and restaurants outnumber grocery stores, what better business to start than one that trains people in food service? And how about one on Sixth Street where trainees could serve the meals they whip up and others could learn to wait tables?

Urban Solutions thought the business idea was a good one, too. It awarded first prize — \$250 — in its Sixth Street Business Idea Contest to Joseph Thomas for his idea to create a skid row culinary academy and restaurant.

Thomas was one of 13 SoMa and TL residents who presented their brainstormers at the Sept. 9 contest and dinner held at the Gene Friend Rec Center at Sixth and Folsom. Contest entrants didn't need a business plan or any real experience operating the businesses they suggested, just the barest outline of how locals might benefit. Thomas is head of ad sales for The Extra, and has had this idea for a long time.

"This is our first annual contest," Urban Solutions Executive Director Roger Gordon told the audience of about 30 people. "We have the money to spend to help revitalize Sixth Street, but we want to hear from you — the people who know about the street and what it really needs."

"The money" is part of Urban Solutions' multiyear economic revitalization program called Six on Sixth, which uses funds from a variety of sources to improve housing, renovate facades, launch new businesses and breathe new life into moribund ones. A \$750,000 grant from the Redevelopment Agency supports the business component. When The Extra covered the business climate on Sixth Street in May, Urban Solutions had approved about \$670,000 for loans, and applications from 15 property and business owners.

Each contest applicant was given just a few minutes to present the ideas and answer questions. Some spoke from notes, others ad-libbed.

The winners were decided by a three-judge panel: Rebecca Dorman, TL resident and staff member at Tenderloin Housing Clinic; Wilbert Lee, small-business consultant at Urban Solutions; and Tracy Gumina, business banking officer at California Bank and Trust, who lives in SoMa and works with Urban Solutions' business clients. Her bank also is an Urban Solutions funder.

Drum roll. . . and the winners:

Fifth prize — a Cuisinart sandwich grill — went to Dennis Perry, a tenant at the Rose Hotel on Sixth, who suggested an Internet café. Patrons would have free access, paying only for beverages and printouts. "We really need this," he said, "so Sixth Street residents don't have to go all the way to the library to get online."

Community activist Joeflin Roh won fourth prize, a warm throw blanket, for his idea of a nonprofit open-air recycling center just off Sixth Street, making it easier for shopping-cart recyclers. Right now, he said, the nearest recycling center that pays cash is at the Market and Church Safeway.

Third-prize winner Ernest Edwards, who had two ideas — a grocery shop "where we can get decent food" and a beauty salon for little girls called "Our Kind of Family" — was awarded a Hamilton Beach electric griddle.

Billie Cooper, who lives at the Midori Hotel in the TL, snagged second prize with his idea for a reasonably priced flower shop where people can also "learn about horticulture," as he did, he said, in prison. "Too many residents are lonely, shut in,



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

and trying to stay clean and sober. This will give them the chance to learn about plants, good things that give off oxygen. I'd call it Plants and Things." His prize: a set of towels and a hair dryer.

Other ideas from the folks included a Chuck E. Cheese restaurant; a self-help center for people just entering or re-entering the job market; a recovery bookstore and café open 24 hours a day where sober

cate to Chico's Pizza on Sixth near Minna.

The Extra later caught up with Laura Horsfall, Urban Solutions' program coordinator, and asked what was really likely to happen post-contest.

"We know that some people were very serious about their contest ideas, so we'll report on the outcome of the contest at the next Redevelopment meeting, but I don't think it will be a huge presentation,"

Joseph Thomas

(above right) receives his first-place award from Roger Gordon of Urban Solutions. Other winners are (from left) Billie Cooper, second place; Ernest Edwards, third place; Joeflin Roh, fourth place; and Dennis Perry, fifth place.



people could "hang" and get help with computer skills; a supermarket; and a 24-hour shelter that provides basic services, arts and crafts, and a place to clean up.

Roger Gordon had two ideas, too, which he threw into the ring after the awards were made: a bazaar in a leased storefront that sells residents' crafts, and a natural medicine shop/harm-reduction center that sells homeopathic remedies and other natural products.

Again, food being king, Urban Solutions served up huge platters of chicken and turkey, bright green beans, mashed potatoes, cornbread and biscuits, with coolers of soft drinks, nicely iced.

Gordon promised the winners that he'd pass on their ideas to Redevelopment and seriously consider their viability.

Oh, yes, and every contest winner got a \$5 gift certi-

ficate. "We see the contest as more of a stepping-stone to business development. I see us continuing to have more gatherings where residents tell us what they want on the street, and maybe even more contests." ■

Loaves & Fishes: the winning idea

JOSEPH Thomas has been thinking about operating a culinary institute and restaurant in a poverty part of town for many years.

After he won the Sixth Street Business Idea Contest, he explained his plan in more detail.

Thomas wants to hire and train people on public assistance in the culinary arts of cooking and baking, in a building on or near Sixth Street, and cater to low-income residents, offering fresh, quality meals at affordable prices.

Institute grads would receive certification from the National Restaurant Association and Serv-Safe, qualifying them for jobs anywhere.

"Ideally, the school and the restaurant would be in the same building," Thomas said. "Because

bakeries have special building requirements and generate a lot of heat, that might have to be in a separate building."

The menu would take advantage of seasonal offerings. "Initially, we would contract with vendors at the farmers' markets," Thomas said. "Grains, potatoes, bread and legumes would be the foundation of all meals. Fish would be the preferred entree, followed by poultry and red meat."

Roger Gordon, Urban Solutions' executive director, says there's probably no money for it in this year's Six on Sixth budget, but "we're going to suggest that Redevelopment put money into it because we know what it takes to start an enterprise."

— Geoff Link