

Uphill Battles

Determination and a helping hand set pattern for seamstress

By ROBERT CELASCHI

Vera Samusenko once sewed 700 children's dresses in a 10-day stretch. When a job pays only about \$5 per dress and that's your family's only source of income, you go for speed and volume.

"But I was sewing from early morning until maybe 11 late at night, without a break," she says. "I was working at home all day and I started thinking, 'I have to do something, because I can't live all the time like this.'"

What she did was make a dramatic leap from pieceworker to entrepreneur, opening the Old Country Tailor shop.

Samusenko came to the United States from Russia in 1990 with her husband, Victor, and their three children. For a year and a half, they survived on welfare as they grappled with learning a new language. Victor couldn't hold down a full-time job because of health problems.

They attended First Baptist Church in midtown, where they met a member who also was a dress designer. When the designer learned that Vera was a seamstress, she began offering piecework jobs at \$2 to \$7 per item. The first designer recommended Vera to others. And the church loaned the Samusenkos money to buy an overlock sewing machine, which simultaneously trims and finishes seams.

Vera also met Anne Neumann, a law student at the University of California at Davis who doubled as an English tutor at First Baptist. As they talked, Neumann learned how Vera hoped to break free of piecework.

Neumann took it upon herself to help Vera head out on her own.

The two women started their homework by tapping into the free help of the Greater Sacramento Small Business Development Center, where they spent much of 1994 working on a plan with business management consultant Bev Stehll.

Work for dress designers would con-



Photo by Dennis McCoy

Vera Samusenko, seated, explains some of her work to Anne Neumann

tinue to form a revenue base, but the Old Country Tailor shop would feature alterations and custom dressmaking as well. With the right breaks, the shop would enter the black in about a year.

"I trusted Anne's evaluation of Vera's talent," Stehll says. "And I had owned a clothing store that had an alterations department, so I was able to draw on that experience."

They took the business plan to First Baptist, which has a special loan fund for

small businesses. But the church turned down their request for \$15,000, citing concerns over cash flow. The Samusenkos had been able to buy eight sewing machines with Vera's piecework profits, but had only \$4,000 in savings.

"But I happen to have a friend who just happens to be independently wealthy," Neumann

says. And so Vera ended up with a \$15,000 private loan.

Neumann then sent Vera to San Luis

Obispo for a week.

"I know a woman who came to this country 25 years ago and has had a shop all these years," Neumann explains. By working in the San Luis Obispo tailor shop, Vera got a firsthand understanding of pricing and customer service.

The Samusenkos and Neumann scouted out their competition and decided the shop stood the best chance of success on a busy stretch of Folsom Boulevard in East Sacramento next to a popular bakery. Victor used his construction skills to build the shop's counters, mirror frames and huge cutting table.

Neumann then designed a marketing campaign, creating a poster-coloring contest that featured a drawing of the shop. Neumann and the Samusenkos distributed about 800 of the posters to neighborhood doorsteps.

Neumann's legwork for Old Country Tailor paid off in another way. As a project for one of her law classes, she took her newfound business knowledge and put together a 55-page booklet — Learning The Laws Of A New Land — to help other immigrants learn the ropes.

"I saw so many mistakes being made by other immigrants," Neumann says, such as trying to do without insurance, or not checking laws about zoning and signs. The Small Business Center hopes to publish Neumann's guide in several foreign languages. It's also a good resource for anyone who can read English, Stehll adds.

"I didn't ever expect I would have a business in a couple of years," says Vera, thinking back to her piecework beginnings. "When I came to San Luis Obispo, I thought 'I'll never start it. I can't do it.' That was January, and I started the business March 4."

Vera still spends long hours at the sewing machine and doesn't get to see much of her family. But at least her long hours are now spent working for herself.

CHALLENGE:

Turn a marketable skill into a self-owned business.