



U.S. Small Business
Administration

NEWS RELEASE

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Montana Small Business Persons of the Year Didn't Let Disaster Define Them

Helena – Today, SBA Montana District Director, Brent Donnelly, announced Montana's 2023 Small Business Persons of the Year and other Montana Small Business award winners. "This year's Montana SBA award winners are not only a testament to the grit and resiliency of Montana small businesses," said Montana District Director Brent Donnelly, "but also an inspiration as they highlight the opportunities entrepreneurship affords to make tremendous impacts to our families and our Montana communities."

2023 Montana Award Winners:

- **Small Business Persons of the Year**
 - Neli and Dimitar Nikolov, The Corral Burger and Lodge in Gardiner, MT
- **Woman Owned Small Business Of the Year**
 - Shellie's Country Café, Inc., Helena, MT
- **Veteran Owned Small Business of the Year**
 - Willie's Distillery, Inc., Ennis, MT
- **SBA Young Entrepreneurs of the Year**
 - Asia Caluori & Dustin Anglen – Pearl Boba Tea Missoula, MT
- **Small Business Exporter of the Year & Rocky Mountain Region VIII Exporter of the Year**
 - Penta Machine Company, Bozeman, MT
- **Small Business Champion of the Year**
 - Wayne Nelson, Stockman Bank, Billings, MT

*See attachment for additional information on winners.

“Each year during National Small Business Week we celebrate the diversity and creativity of our local small business communities,” said SBA Regional Administrator Aikta Marcoulier. “More than half of all Americans either own or work for a small business, and they create nearly 70 percent of net new jobs in the U.S. each year. I congratulate each of our Small Business Week award winners for their pursuit to create equality in the workplace, advance innovation, and increase America’s global competitiveness.”

National Small Business Week will be observed April 30 – May 6, 2023. State Small Business Persons of the Year winners will be formally recognized on May 1st in Washington DC and all winners will be honored locally during the week of May 1st. Details to be announced at a later date. The event will celebrate our small businesses, provide critical resources and recognize SBA partners for their support in providing startups and small business owners with counseling and advice, skills development, disaster preparedness and recovery, as well as access to capital, government contracting, and market opportunities to start, grow and build resilient businesses.

For more information about National Small Business Week, visit www.sba.gov/NSBW.

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About the U.S. Small Business Administration

The U.S. Small Business Administration helps power the American dream of business ownership. As the only go-to resource and voice for small businesses backed by the strength of the federal government, the SBA empowers entrepreneurs and small business owners with the resources and support they need to start, grow, expand their businesses, or recover from a declared disaster. It delivers services through an extensive network of SBA field offices and partnerships with public and private organizations. To learn more, visit www.sba.gov.

***Attachment for brief additional information on winners.**

Small Business Persons of the Year:

- Neli and Dimitar Nikolov, The Corral Burger and Lodge in Gardiner, MT

The Corral Burger and Lodge is the longest standing business in Gardiner, Montana, the only year-round entrance to Yellowstone National Park. Established in 1960 and previously known as Helen's Burgers, the little burger joint has always been famous for its big juicy burgers made from a variety of meats.

Neli and Dimitar Nikolov took over ownership of the business in 2015 and grew its popularity by continuing Helen's legacy. In 2017, USA Today voted The Corral as Best ELK Burger in Montana. The Nikolovs take pride in finding the best locally raised elk, buffalo and 100% grass-fed beef, fresh produce, and great ice cream. When the pandemic interrupted the supply chain and increased prices, Neli and Dimitar pivoted and began growing their own vegetables to maintain their focus on using local products.

Operating a successful restaurant in a rural tourist town (pop. 833) presents unique challenges, especially when it comes to housing shortages and recruiting employees. To tackle this challenge, the Nikolovs expanded to provide lodging for their guests and employees. They were able to add six lodging units to an already existing house for employees and in June 2021, Corral Villas was built and opened its doors to guests for short-term rentals. Located in the heart of Gardiner, just a building down from the restaurant, Corral Villas offers the ultimate Yellowstone getaway. Open year-round, it is the perfect headquarters from where you can launch a day of rafting, fly fishing, hiking, biking, hunting, cross-country skiing, or any other endeavor that calls your name while visiting and exploring America's first National Park!

Over a three-year period during peak tourist season, the number of employees grew from 15 to 40. However, the business experienced tragedy in June 2022 due to historic flooding that closed the north entrance to Yellowstone National Park, and stopped the flow of tourism through Gardiner, MT. Local businesses rely on tourism summer traffic for a bulk of their annual revenue, and budget to make it through the shoulder seasons and winter. Businesses like The Corral Burger and Lodge were forced to reduce staffing and work hard to minimize expenses. Fortunately, the most heavily damaged entrance to the park, located in Gardiner, re-opened four months later. Business has resumed in Gardiner and Yellowstone, and visitors are once again able to continue enjoying the big juicy burgers and shakes they've come to know and love.

Woman Owned Small Business Of the Year :

- Shellie's Country Café, Inc., Helena, MT

Shellie Mitchell and Aimee Myles were both raised in the town they now run their business in. In 2007, after over 30 years in the restaurant business, Shellie took a leap of faith, borrowing \$800 from her son to open a small cafe. With several family members in tow, Shellie began the painstaking process of turning a true down-home start up into an ever growing operation. Her daughter, Aimee, began working in the restaurant at age 15, and after spending over half her life helping to grow Shellie's Country Cafe, she became part owner. Their values revolve around creating a family atmosphere, being committed to their staff, and giving the community somewhere to gather with friends and family. Driving the motto "Nothing Fancy, Just Good Food!", the Shellie's Country Cafe family of dedicated members, have taken this small hometown vision and made it a staple of the community they continue to serve.

Veteran Owned Small Business of the Year :

- Willie's Distillery, Inc., Ennis, MT

Willie's Distillery started in 2010 by Willie Blazer and his late wife Robin. Willie's Distillery is a craft distillery located on the Madison River in Ennis, MT that specializes in products such as bourbon, vodka, blended whiskey, and cream liqueurs. Products are distributed to all 50 states, but the Rocky Mountain west region, primarily Montana, Idaho & Wyoming, is their most noteworthy market. What started with only 2 employees in 2010, has since grown to a team of 34 and is one of the most recognizable veteran-owned businesses in Montana. The distillery is one of the largest distilleries in Montana, is a destination and a gathering place for veterans, service members, and whiskey drinkers, and known as a place to see a friendly face, meet other service members and catch a good time in Montana.

SBA Young Entrepreneurs of the Year:

- Asia Caluori & Dustin Anglen – Pearl Boba Tea Missoula, MT

Prior to attending the University of Montana, Asia Caluori taught English in Vietnam where she discovered her love for bubble tea. After college, Asia remained in Missoula working in the tech space, but always had a dream of bringing her love of boba to Missoula. Dustin studied international business at UC Santa Barbara and became a technology instructor out of college. This job required international travel with long and frequent visits to East and South East Asia where Dustin frequently indulged in boba. After a backpacking trip in Yellowstone, he convinced Asia the pair would be able to pull off a boba farmer's market stand in Missoula. After selling 500% more than targeted, the owners quickly recognized a need in the community, hired staff, and opened a temporary location in downtown Missoula. In October 2021, the duo opened their first permanent location in the University of Montana's University Center. Eight months later, they opened their second full-time operation in downtown Missoula. In 2022, they grew to 20 employees, served 15,500+ customers and sold 53,000+ drinks in that year alone.

Small Business Exporter of the Year & Rocky Mountain Region VIII Exporter of the Year:

- Penta Machine Company, Bozeman, MT

Michelle and Matthew Hertel moved to Washington state together after college where Michelle worked as a mechanical engineer for Boeing and Matt worked as a machinist for Electroimpact. While they enjoyed living and working there, they knew they wanted to eventually return to Montana. This desire inspired them to begin designing a CNC mill together that they hoped to eventually sell. Over three years they worked evenings and weekends to develop their initial prototype before leaving their jobs and returning to Montana to launch Penta Machine Company. It took them another year and a half to bring their product to market with a successful Kickstarter Campaign in 2015. The company began focusing on exporting in 2019, and saw a 48% increase in revenues to over \$3,000,000. This has allowed them to continue developing new products in house while maintaining profitability. Penta Machine Company now sells their products nationally as well as internationally in South America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia.

Small Business Champion of the Year:

- Wayne Nelson, Stockman Bank, Billings, MT

Wayne Nelson has been an active member of the Billings community for many years. After 25 years with Stockman Bank, 15 of those years leading the Billings market as President, Nelson now serves as Senior Banking Executive.

Wayne has always played an active role in community leadership with service and economic development organizations. He has served on the Board of Directors for Big Sky Economic Development for several terms and has referred clients to many of the programs hosted by BSED including, SBA, VBOC, SBDC, the Rock 31 Entrepreneurship program and PTAC, where they received technical assistance and access to financing. His ongoing support for small business and entrepreneurship, as well as his commitment to giving back through community service, has shown him to be a champion in his field.

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