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ANTHEM'S MELISSA BARBAKOFF MIXES UP THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS.

By Kristin Calenda
Photos by Heidi Lea Photography

“Not for one second would I be where I am today without my staff! I find it fun to teach them business skills in a hands-on setting.”

—MELISSA BARBAKOFF

What do you get when you mix one cup of determination, an equal cup of compassion, and a heaping tablespoon of love? Hot out of the oven comes The Baked Equation, a homegrown dessert company created by Anthem resident Melissa Barbakoff. Her company's extraordinary treats, ranging from cookies, brownies, cakes, cupcakes, cakedlets, and more, have become a bona fide success both locally and nationally with a fervent social media following to prove it.

Melissa relocated from Connecticut to Anthem 13 years ago to be closer to her family. At that time, her son Jude was only 6 years old and Anthem was just developing. "I was drawn to the Anthem area because you can walk to the parks and take advantage of all the community programs while still being able to drive into the city," she says.

Melissa was working as an underwriter for her husband Dann's title company, Sterling Title Agency, prior to making The Baked Equation a reality. She loved to bake and so she would bring cookies, brownies, and cupcakes into the office and tempt the staff and clients with her homemade delights.

"I started bringing brownies into the office and selling them. I made cookies for birthday parties and the profits went to supporting a charity in Sudan," says Melissa. Always one to give back to the community, she thought what better way to help others than by selling her delicious baked goods and donating the profits to charity. Her treats were a hit and before she knew it, she was a busy baker.

What started out as a fundraising effort in 2011 has since grown into a successful business model that continues to evolve. She'll be the first to tell you that success notwithstanding, there have been a few bumps along the way. When she first set out, she would charge whatever she thought people could pay for her cookies. This approach equated to The Baked Equation barely turning a profit, something her husband pointed out.

Looking back to the early days, Melissa admits she was "in the weeds just filling orders," and working long hours with very little to show for it. "At no point does Starbucks think to themselves 'what will people pay for this?' They define who their customer is and then price their products appropriately," says Melissa, who realized early on that she needed to factor in all the costs associated with producing her goods before pricing them accordingly. It's this approach that Melissa wants to impress on other female entrepreneurs—to feel empowered to ask for what they deserve.

Melissa is quick to point out that The Baked Equation wouldn't be where it is today if not for her husband's support and his pivotal advice: "Melissa, you need to run it like a business." And with that being said, she pulled out her business degree from The Master's College in Southern California, dusted it off, "and put to work everything that I knew about business." Putting Dann's advice into practice, she drafted a business plan, set her pricing appropriately, and started building a solid customer base.

By 2013 she had taken The Baked Equation to a whole new (and profitable) level, but the concept had proven so popular that she had to start turning away business. Her husband suggested she bring on extra help to fill orders. She brought on Hayley Herrington, a local graduate from Boulder Creek High School and offered her a six-month internship. Hayley was eager to help and Melissa was happy to teach her everything she knew. "Hayley is a natural born artist, but you have to