

COMPANY TREATS EMPLOYEES LIKE FAMILY



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A Liberty City company that once struggled to stay afloat has become one of the most successful health-food growers, manufacturers and processors in the southeast, turning its success to helping the community.

Leasa Industries employees produce bean and alfalfa sprouts, snow peas and other vegetables; such Chinese food items as egg roll and won ton wraps, fortune cookies and tofu; and stir fry soup mixes. Clients include Publix, Winn-Dixie, Wal-Mart, Sedanos, Sysco Food Service, among others.

Not bad for a company founded in 1977 with \$15,000 in money borrowed from friends and family by a man who emigrated from Jamaica with his now deceased wife Einez, three children and \$50 in his pocket only a year earlier.

Today, Leasa founder George Yap repays the opportunities he enjoyed by reaching out to the community. The 65-or-so employees at Leasa's 30,000-square-foot plant in the Poinciana Industrial Park, who mostly hail from Liberty City, Little Haiti and Overtown, include ex-convicts, high school dropouts and mothers dependent on government aid.

One recent hire was an ex-con who spent 20 years in prison, Yap says.

"I was rich in Jamaica, but I lost everything so we came here for a better life. I was jobless, and my wife had to work two jobs to support the family," Yap says. "Everyone makes mistakes, but everyone deserves a second chance. I got a second chance when I came to this country."

The Yaps' community commitment does not go unnoticed,

"I have known about Leasa Industries for 18 years and George Yap has always been very sensitive to the community in ensuring that the people that work for his organization are successful," says Elaine Black, president the Liberty City Trust. "He has grown his business and has allowed for his employees to grow with it."

Leasa – the company name comes from the first initials of the family's first names: L. George, wife Einez, and children Andrew, Sean and Allison – has been recognized by the Florida Regional Minority Business Council, Inc. Magazine, Harvard Business School and the U.S. Department of Commerce, among others.

Employees say the fact the Yaps respect their workers is part of their success. Employees, for example are allowed to take time off if they need to take their children to the doctor or have a court appearance, as long they arrange the time off in advance.

One of those employees is Charles Mims, a Liberty City resident and U.S. Air Force veteran who's been with the company for about 17 years and supervises the vegetable department.

"They treat everyone the same way here. They give people opportunities that most people don't give," says Mims, recalling a time when the Yaps loaned him \$1,500 when he needed to tend to family matters in Georgia, imposing no repayment schedule.

Mims says the Yaps' emphasis on discipline and worth ethic helped him, as well.

"I have learned to be patient," he says. "I like to teach people, and show them how to do the work."

Sabrina Williams, who makes sure every stage of production – planting, growing and packaging goes smoothly recalls how the Yaps gave her a job - even after they fired her. Williams, who also lives in Liberty City, worked for the company in the early '90s, but was let go after an

altercation with another employee. She returned in 2008 and asked for her job back. Two years later she's a supervisor.

"They understand that everyone deserves a second chance. I love my job, and I don't plan on letting it go," says Williams.

Joyce Missick, an 11-year veteran, simply calls the Yaps family.

"They try to help you out and keep you out of trouble. Mrs. Yap was like everybody's mother, Mr. Yap is the dad, and that's my big brother," Missick says, pointing to Andrew Yap, who became company president five years ago after the same year his mother died.

The younger Yap, also an adjunct professor of business and marketing at Florida International University, carries on his parents' values.

"We are bringing economic diversity into Liberty City," he says. "The only thing some have here is a bicycle or a bus. We do what we can to help them out."

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