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SUSAN RUHE



Written by Leigh Buchanan
Inmates to Entrepreneurs

Inmates to Entrepreneurs' free video course "Starter U: How to Start, Run, and Grow a Business" is available online and on GTL and Edovo tablets in correctional facilities across the U.S.

For more info about Inmates to Entrepreneurs:

www.inmatestoentrepreneurs.org

info@inmatestoentrepreneurs.org

(910) 460-1880

Susan Ruhe learned cooking from her grandmother and polished those skills in chef school, hoping to take over the family's Thanksgiving feasts and someday open a restaurant.

Outside the kitchen, Ruhe worked for a Fortune 500 company where she committed a white collar crime. She left the company in 2013, confessed to an attorney, and made full restitution. In 2018 Ruhe was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison. To support herself during the five years she waited for the company to decide if they would prosecute, Ruhe began baking Butter Thumbprint cookies at home and selling them wholesale to local markets.

After sentencing, Ruhe served 15 months in a federal prison camp. "In prison, I met talented women who knitted, crocheted, drew and made jewelry," commented Ruhe. "I thought, 'wouldn't it be great to open up a bakery where I could hire people coming out of prison and teach them about baking?' I could also sell items made by inmates to help them support their families while incarcerated."

Instead of starting with a brick-and mortar storefront, Ruhe revived her former wholesale business. She formed an LLC while in prison and, upon release in 2019, launched Sweet Angels Pastries. She bakes—for free—in the kitchen of a café owned by BLOC Ministries and from her own home, producing 5,000 cookies and 60 pies and cheesecakes each week.

Startup costs were around \$500 including \$200 for licenses that allowed her to sell food prepared at home, and one that allowed her to work farmer's markets and other events. She bought ingredients, a mixer, packaging materials, and rolls of customized stickers online. Ruhe used commercial-grade equipment at the café, including two large freezers and her family and friends helped provide supplemental labor.

To establish relationships with potential customers, Ruhe called the owners of specialty food stores and asked if she could visit with samples. She showed up wearing a chef's coat and bearing baskets, purchased at the Dollar Store, and piled with baked goods. Her largest wholesale customer, "said what sold her was my packaging," says Ruhe. "It wasn't expensive — all the breads were individually wrapped with a ribbon."

Having outgrown BLOC Ministries' kitchen, Ruhe is hunting for a larger, affordable alternative that will accommodate online orders after her website launches. Her sales might also escalate with exposure — a TV station has approached her about a morning cooking segment.

Ruhe aims to have a storefront soon, so she can sell her products, along with the crafts of other inmates she admired during her incarceration. "People feel like you have to have this big idea that is going to make you a millionaire," she says. "My plan was, when I get out I am going to start with a 40-cent cookie and see what happens."