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## Business Briefing: SF program assists leather, kink entrepreneurs

by Matthew S. Bajko, Assistant Editor Wednesday January 10, 2024



Licensed marriage and family therapist David Khalili sits in his office at Rouse Relational Wellness in San Francisco's LGBTQ Castro neighborhood. Photo: Rick Gerharter

<https://www.ebar.com/story.php?ch=news&sc=business&id=330783>

Licensed marriage and family therapist David Khalili opened his Rouse Relational Wellness in San Francisco's LGBTQ Castro district three years ago and now employs seven practitioners. The name is a play on the word arousal, as the practice focuses on sex

therapy and has a particular focus on individuals and couples who are members of the leather and kink communities.

With an eye toward expanding his therapy practice with a second location in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood, Khalili was looking for some assistance with his business plans. It led him to apply for an entrepreneur training program offered by the city's Leather & LGBTQ Cultural District based in western SOMA.

"I trained as a therapist and went to a great school but had very little training about running a business," said Khalili, who authored the "Mental Health Workbook for Men: Exercises to Improve Your Emotional, Psychological, and Social Well-Being" published by Rockridge Press last year.

Khalili, 42, who is queer and lives in Daly City, was accepted and took part in the entrepreneur program's third cohort last summer. While he plans to maintain the location at 4124 18th Street, Khalili's goal is to find a second office within the boundaries of the leather district.

Uncertain of the timeline to do so, he said the entrepreneur program provided him with a roadmap for how to expand his business.

"It helped me look at parts of my business I didn't know to look at or was avoiding. I feel a lot more equipped in like my passion for the future of my business because of that," said Khalili. "It also helped to really validate the work that I am doing and the path I am on."

He had previously participated in other programs for business owners, yet Khalili told the Bay Area Reporter that he didn't find them to be very welcoming because of the focus of his therapy practice.

"I found myself surrounded by people who weren't in sexual wellness or weren't sex-positive or weren't in the kink community," said Khalili, who is a member of the leather and kink scene. "I didn't feel comfortable sharing things we were working on. I sought out the leather district program because I knew it would be a place I could be understood and fit in with my goal and mission to reduce anxiety and shame around sex and one's sexual identity."

That was the goal when the leather district launched in 2022 its business incubator program for entrepreneurs serving the San Francisco leather and kink communities. It is planning to host a fifth cohort of applicants this July and is looking for funding to add a sixth in 2024.

"We are quite happy with the success. We think it is a good thing for our community," said Bob Goldfarb, a gay man who is the leather district's executive director. "The breathing heart of the leather district really centers around our businesses and all venues that comprise our spaces to gather and meet."

Ideally, the program graduates will open brick-and-mortar locations within the leather district's boundaries, said Goldfarb. But planning to open ventures within its boundaries is not a prerequisite for those applying for the training.

"We are optimistic the graduates from the program will help keep the leather district and SOMA vital and a great place to visit and to play," he said.

The leather district plans to lease a commercial space within its boundaries later this year to be used as a pop-up location for businesses. It would mirror how it showcases leather-focused merchants at its monthly Second Saturday market events but be accessible on a daily basis.

"We would have one location and have several pop-up businesses in a single location," said Goldfarb, who hopes to have it up and running in six months.

Sausalito resident Neri Cafri signed up for the entrepreneur program to get help with his plan to open a consignment store for leather and kink gear "ideally" in SOMA by the summer. Seeing a friend have a ton of gear in his closet, some of which no longer fit him, as they dressed for the annual Folsom Street fetish event in 2022 sparked his business concept.

Cafri, 49, who is gay, asked that its name not be disclosed since he is in the process of registering it with the state and wants to protect it for the time being. He did say it would pay homage to the defunct Worn Out West consignment store that closed its Castro location in 2018, which he learned about after talking to people about his store plans.

"I felt there is an opportunity here," recalled Cafri, who works for a local bakery.

In discussing his business plans with former B.A.R. leather columnist Race Bannon, he learned about the leather district's business coaching classes and decided to apply last year. He took part in last fall's cohort.

"I started the course with very little expectations and I was pleasantly surprised," said Cafri. "It was a really, really good experience. Without a doubt I would recommend anyone to take it if thinking about starting a business."

The leather district has been allocating funds from its operating budget for the entrepreneur program, which costs about \$25,000 per cohort. It so far has not been able to find outside funding for it.

The city's Transgender District for years has had a program aimed at assisting business owners who are trans, nonbinary, or gender-nonconforming, several of whom have been previously profiled in the B.A.R.'s business column. It partially inspired the leather district launching its own such program, said Goldfarb.

"There are a number of programs that help beginning entrepreneurs. But a lot of those are not perhaps as familiar or as open to the types of products or businesses that our community might have," he noted. "I think a number of people in our program went to a traditional program and either their class or instructors might have been uncomfortable with the types of businesses they are pursuing, which is why I think ours is so essential for the district and for our community."

Business coach Eddie Tang, 51, who is gay, has taught all of the program's cohorts and created the course materials for them. The first began in July 2022, and each lasts nine weeks.

He is also a coach for the San Francisco Tech Council, a nonprofit that assists people over the age of 49 who want to open a business in the city. And for nearly six years Tang has managed the small business program for the San Francisco LGBT Community Center.

It is what drew the leather district to reach out to him about helping it create its entrepreneur program. But one of the first questions Tang was asked was about his relationship to the leather and kink community.

"I personally am not in the kink and leather community, but nothing really bothers me. It doesn't make any difference to me," said Tang, who spoke to the B.A.R. last month via video chat while visiting family in China. "I always tell people, definitely, the leather district's training program is the one I enjoy most coaching. Even though I am not part of the community, I really enjoy working with this community."

The reason being, explained Tang, is that in each cohort the participants have all rallied around each other and their respective business plans. Each time he has been struck, said Tang, "by how much they love each other and support each other."

Cafri also extolled Tang's teaching and resources he provides via the course.

"Eddie is phenomenal," he said, adding that the entire leather district team was great to connect with via the program. "You get the feeling people really care about the community and want to see how we can move forward and prosper."

Because their businesses are focused on the leather and kink communities, the entrepreneurs have spoken about encountering far more challenges when trying to access governmental programs and financial support for business owners than people in the other classes he teaches, said Tang.

"They do definitely have a very specific set of challenges," said Tang, who recalled the negative encounters one owner of a sex toy business recounted. "He said, 'No one understands what I am trying to do. I don't want to talk about it anymore because I don't feel

people have any interest in what I am trying to do.' That has been a common theme."

Unlike other programs he coaches, Tang specifically doesn't record his sessions with the leather entrepreneurs. It means they can't learn from watching the recording of classes they miss, but the policy allows for more candid discussions and protects participants' privacy, noted Tang.

"For instance, people could be sex workers and don't want to be exposed, so we don't record anything," said Tang.

Maintaining her privacy due to the nature of her business is important to Flirtasia, 50, the owner of The Kinky Matchmaker & Co. The Albany resident, who is "queerish and kinky," is well known in the East Bay's leather and kink community for hosting her 10-year-old monthly Titillating Tea Party, "the fastest growing little kink party that nobody has heard about," she joked.

Aiming to be the "village matchmaker" for those wanting connections in the kink, leather, and polyamorous scenes, Flirtasia launched her business last year after being laid off from her corporate recruiter role. She has been working in that field for decades, and with the current downturn in the tech industry, decided the timing was right to start her own matchmaking service.

"I had been sitting on this idea of being a kinky matchmaker," said Flirtasia, who took part in the entrepreneur program's most recent cohort in the fall.

She views her venture as her own startup and is currently focusing on it full time. Though she is looking for a part-time position in the recruiting field, she would like to be fully devoted to working as a kinky matchmaker by 2026.

"I don't know how wide the market is, but I suspect pretty large," she said. "About 30% of Americans have tried kink and, for some of them, it stuck."

Offering her services on a sliding scale based on clients' income levels, the bare minimum cost is \$5,000 to engage her skillset. Depending on what a person is seeking in a match, they could be looking at upward of \$15,000 in fees.

"I am not cheap," noted Flirtasia, though she added, "I want this to be accessible to everybody."

Still working to launch a website for it and register the name, she said potential clients can reach her by email via [thekinkymatchmakerandco@gmail.com](mailto:thekinkymatchmakerandco@gmail.com)

Eventually, she would like to find a space in the leather district to use as a matchmaking salon, so to speak, where she can pre-interview clients and host social gatherings.

"It did take me six months to figure out how to do this. Then all of a sudden I learned about this entrepreneur program and it gave me so many of the tools I needed. I am forever thankful," said Flirtasia.

Tang encourages anyone with the idea for a leather and kink business, or owners of established ventures who want to grow their business, to apply for the entrepreneur program's next class set to begin in July. The deadline to do so will likely be in late spring.

"There is a lot of people in the Bay Area in the leather community who want to start a business and there is a lot of interest in the program," said Tang. "I think there is a lot of need for support to help them start a business. It would be really nice to run at least two cohorts a year."

Khalili told the B.A.R. being in his cohort made him feel less alone as a solo business owner.

"It helps you save time and energy by not reinventing the wheel. And you meet really wonderful people to share your experience with and give them support and receive support from them," he noted. "Eddie does a great job laying it out in a structured way. I went back to my notes two days ago from the program while filling something out for a grant."

With large corporations going after a slice of the sex industry market, such as Sephora and Target selling sex toys, said Khalili, there is no reason why smaller entrepreneurs can't have successful businesses focused on the local community.

"The fact that those products are on their shelves means smaller businesses can absolutely do that and there is a big need for it," he said. "Why not do it for smaller businesses that really connect with the community rather than these larger businesses?"

Information about the application process for the next cohort will be posted to the leather district's webpage for the entrepreneur training program [here](#).

Got a tip on LGBTQ business news? Call Matthew S. Bajko at (415) 829-8836 or email [m.bajko@ebar.com](mailto:m.bajko@ebar.com)

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