



**From Shipwrecks to Biotech Startups:  
One Entrepreneur's Legacy**  
By Lori Williams

Nola Miyasaki has been the Director of the Riata Center since 2009, but she traces her entrepreneurial roots back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After her great grandfather worked on a whaling vessel, was shipwrecked off the island of Kauai, and served as a chef for Queen Liliuokalani, he opened his “Ishikawa Shoten” in Kona, Hawaii.

“I recently found a late 1800s black and white photo of my great grandfather,” says Nola Miyasaki. “It’s from the late 1800s, and he’s standing in front of his saloon store.”

The storekeeper’s son kept up the tradition by running an office supply shop in Hilo. “My maternal grandfather started it with a few American partners in the 1930s . . . Once Hawaii became a state and my grandfather became a naturalized citizen, the partners sold the store back to him completely,” says Ms. Miyasaki.

“In those days, that’s just what people did. They didn’t think of it as starting a business. They thought of it as a way to live.”



“That’s what entrepreneurs do. They figure out ways to create value and find customers.”

Nola’s paternal grandmother was a micro-enterpriser. Among the first crowds of Japanese immigrants to reach Honolulu, “she had a boarding house, a barber shop, and a noodle and hamburger stand,” says her granddaughter. “She used her money to purchase rental property . . . she used that money to send my dad to USC Dental School. He had his own practice for over 40 years.”

“My mother was a housewife who took over the real estate rentals and expanded it to include vacation and commercial rentals. It’s now a small family limited partnership.”

Nola Miyasaki is the fourth generation to carry on her family's tradition. Before assuming the directorship at the Riata Center for Entrepreneurship at Oklahoma State University, she earned an MBA as well as a J.D. Along the way she managed several of her family's businesses and launched her own sports marketing consulting company. She also helped Tissue Genesis LLC, a biotech startup, during its early stage of development. Although the list could go on, there is a common thread throughout. "I like helping entrepreneurs," says Ms. Miyasaki.

"At the Riata Center we provide experiential learning opportunities for OSU students who want to be entrepreneurs. We also bring our resources to the community to help build a more vibrant culture of entrepreneurship across the state."

With those goals in mind, the Riata Center offers over a dozen programs. The Veterans with Disabilities Entrepreneurship Program and the Women Entrepreneurs (WE) Inspire Conference are two stellar examples.

"There's not anything else like the WE Inspire Conference in the western half of the U.S.," says Ms. Miyasaki. "We want to encourage women to start the kinds of businesses that will not only create wealth for themselves, but will also create jobs and help our state's economy."

Keynote speakers at the 2012 event, which attracted almost 650 women, included Patricia R. Miller, co-founder of Vera Bradley, and Julie Clark, founder of Baby Einstein. The 2013 Conference is set for April 2 at the Cox Convention Center in OKC.

"Every year the conference has about 20 breakout sessions for women who have already established a growth track. This year we started to do monthly webinars for the attendees, and we plan to do some networking events for the women as well."

The Veterans with Disabilities Entrepreneurship Program (VEP) is offered on the OSU campus to disabled veterans who have the desire to start their own business or have already done so. (Application deadline is October 1, 2012.)

"The program consists of an intensive eight day long boot camp. Delegates receive online support for a year and mentorship from a Tulsa Rotary member for ten months."

Last year Mike Laws of Oklahoma City was one of the 40 veterans who attended the program. He already had an established environmental services business, but he needed to take it to the next level.

"After the VEP conference, Mike understood how to market his company," shares Nola Miyasaki. "He repositioned his business and started getting some government contracts. He added several new employees and essentially quadrupled his revenue."

From the VEP Class of 2010, Robbie Maples from Hugo, Oklahoma wanted to run his family's engine repair shop. After graduation, he not only established a showroom for equipment sales, but also launched an additional business presence in Durant.

"This is a fabulous entrepreneurship program," says Ms. Miyasaki, "and we offer it free of charge to the veterans."

"The faculty all teach for free. Guest entrepreneurs drive in from all over the state for free. The VEP relies 100% on donations." (For more information, see [www.osugiving.com/vep](http://www.osugiving.com/vep).)

"We'd like the VEP to be a model for a national program where there are different sites across the country, with Oklahoma as the base."

As the Director of the Riata Center sums up the driving force for her work, she says, "The future of our economy is in startups and the growth of entrepreneurial businesses."