DAV awards $10,000 entrepreneurship award to Navy veteran

Ericka McKim joined the US Navy in 2004. In 2014, she was medically retired due to severe gluten and sugar sensitivities that caused brain fog, gut issues and joint pain. McKim later founded And I Like It, a Dallas-based bakery specializing in keto-friendly cheesecakes and all-natural sweeteners.

After being medically retired in 2014, US Navy veteran Ericka McKim discovered healing and a renewed sense of purpose by starting her own business. Now, with a $10,000 prize from DAV, the entrepreneur can take the all-natural sweeteners and keto-friendly treats she created to an even bigger market.

In October, DAV presented McKim with the Arthur H. and Mary E. Wilson Top Venture Impacting Veterans Award at the Veteran EDGE conference. The four-day event hosted by Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans & Military Families is
dedicated to supporting, developing and connecting veteran and military spouse business owners.

McKim was one of 10 finalists chosen to participate in the conference’s Acceleration Challenge—a “mastermind workshop” for military veteran business owners who graduate from one of the institute’s programs. Finalists can include service-connected disabled veterans, like McKim.

“The Acceleration Challenge is really born out of the idea that we have established businesses that are basically on the cusp of greatness,” said Misty Fox, the institute’s director of entrepreneurship. “And it’s just that little push that they need, whether it’s strategic or even just a capital infusion, or just meeting the right person, whatever it is to really make it to the next level.”

Jeff Hall, DAV’s National Employment Director, sits on a panel of judges who choose one participant to receive the $10,000 award.

“With DAV’s employment program, our goal is to help veterans and their spouses secure a career, whatever that may be,” Hall said. “But there’s just something inherently enticing and attractive about helping a service-disabled veteran or their spouse in starting their own business.”

McKim’s bakery, And I Like It, started as a personal quest to alleviate debilitating symptoms that forced the former gunner’s mate out of the Navy well before she was ready.

She began experiencing severe back cramps, a list of digestive issues and brain fog. After two years of treatments, the Navy determined McKim was no longer deployable.

“It was extremely difficult for me,” she said. “I wanted to serve my full 20 years because I really loved what I did for the military. I really loved traveling all over the world and serving other people and having purpose in my life.”
McKim found herself back in Texas living with her parents, sick and unsure of what to do next. Heeding her mother’s advice, McKim cut gluten and sugar from her diet, but most of the gluten and sugar-free products on the market either sacrificed taste or caused McKim severe physical reactions. One ingredient, maltitol, a sugar alcohol commonly found in sugar-free foods, made McKim’s stomach rock hard and bloated.

“It looked like I was pregnant,” she said.

McKim’s sister, a biochemist, suggested they source their own ingredients and try different formulas. Following a few years of trial and error, the sisters found the perfect formula: a low-calorie, all-natural, sugar-free sweetener without maltitol. Soon, McKim was able to make and enjoy her favorite dessert: cheesecakes.

Around the same time, McKim started participating in business programs for veterans, hoping entrepreneurship would give her the sense of purpose she longed for. Eventually it clicked: Why not build a business around the all-natural sweetener and cheesecakes she had created from scratch?

At her first farmer’s market in 2017, McKim sold 60 mini-cheesecakes. Today, And I Like It sells cheesecakes in 11 stores across the Dallas-Fort Worth area, along with three different all-natural sweeteners. Her customers include people battling health issues and dietary restrictions of their own.

“And so the purpose that I felt in the Navy, I finally feel that purpose again with this job,” McKim said. “I’m not just selling a cheesecake or selling a sugar substitute or selling a candied pecan. I’m actually helping somebody.”

McKim said stores often request to buy her products at wholesale, but she hasn’t been able to meet the demand. It takes her a week and a half every month just to produce the sweeteners. She recently identified a piece of equipment that would speed up production by 650%, but it cost $85,000. Her
application for a bank loan was denied due to her debt-to-income ratio.

With the $10,000 awarded by DAV, and another $10,000 from the D’Aniello Family Foundation, McKim said the bank finally approved a loan.

“I was in tears when it happened,” McKim said of the award.

Fox said the money can help a struggling business survive, but it’s the veteran community that can make it thrive. The longstanding partnership between the institute and DAV is an extension of that community.

“I think the greatest part is, it’s not just an infusion of cash.” Fox said. “Now we’re going to introduce you to this other community that can also help you in so many other ways.”