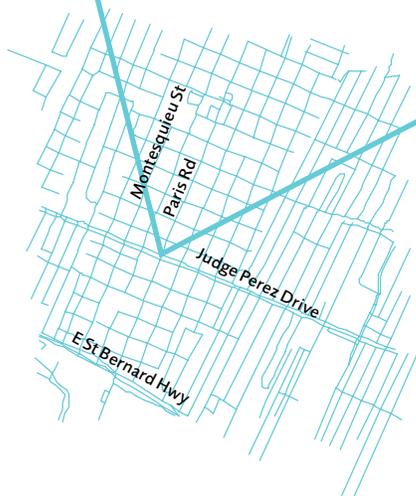




CASE STUDY #3

BULENT "BEN" CICEK

Owner: Da Parish Coffee House
Judge Perez Drive and
Paris Road



Even though he only knew a few words of English, Ben Cicek emigrated from Turkey to the United States seven years ago. Based on a conversation with "a friend of a friend" who lived in the French Quarter, he ended up in New Orleans.

For two years before Katrina, he ran a coffee shop in the Uptown area of New Orleans. Having learned about the coffee business, he saw an opportunity after Katrina to start a business for himself. He and his partner opened Da Parish Coffee House in Chalmette, Louisiana in 2006 and another coffee shop on St. Charles in 2008.

Tell me how you got started opening your coffee shop.

My ex-partner decided to open it up, but had no idea about [how] a coffee shop [works]. We talked about it, and then we started it together because I know everything about the coffee business. Also, I didn't have a lot of money, and it's a small business. That's the main thing.

What problems did you have?

When I was trying to open it up, I couldn't find any construction people. We built our shop ourselves. We did a lot of stuff. We still have problems [with deliveries]. A lot of people don't want to deliver anything to us because we're in Chalmette. It's also hard to find employees. And [there were some] other issues.

Why did you decide on Chalmette as a place to open a coffee shop?

There was nothing up there, and people, you know, people need the coffee. I used to live in Chalmette before Katrina—actually I was here during Katrina. I lost my house—it was the first coffee shop in Chalmette after storm.

Did you think a lot of people were going to be drinking coffee?

It was kind of risky, but I took it. I didn't know what was going to happen. We have good days, bad days. Sometimes business is real good, but sometimes it's not working. But we're still fighting. We can try to make it. We're doing okay, but we still have a couple issues like the economic situation is not good. In Chalmette, they're still trying to fix the houses—fix the whole city—but it's not happening easily. I think it'll happen, but it just takes time.

Why did you decide to take this risk?

I think it's just my personality. I took a risk and came to the United States seven years ago. I had only a few words in English, and I didn't know anybody. I would say that it's just personality; I like to take a risk and help the community a little bit and make money.

It was just an opportunity to take my money and do my own business. I'm not going to say I really wanted to be in Chalmette, that I wanted to open up the business and live in Chalmette forever. You know, it's just a little different when you're a foreigner. [You're] just trying to build your own life.

You said you wanted to help the community?

Yeah, because I used to live here, and they had nothing [after the storm]. I'm trying to make a nice shop and bring in a lot of nice stuff for the community.

I have good friendships [with some people here]. They're loyal people. So, in the future I'm going to open up the other business in Chalmette because the people need a lot



of stuff. We still don't have Wal-Mart. We still don't have a hospital. It's tough to live in Chalmette; it's really tough whether doing a business or just living. But they're fighting, so I'm trying to do my best.

[You said you have friendships with people here.](#)

Yeah, I really didn't know a lot of people in Chalmette when I used to live there about four years ago, but with my business, I became friends with my customers. So I don't have any problem over here.

[Tell me about your customers.](#)

Right now, I would say 90 percent are local. Some construction people are from out of town, I think [around] 10 percent. My first year I had a lot of workers from out of state or construction people. We had very few local customers.

Now they're gone, so mostly, I have local customers. They have a lot of problems, you know, but they're coming back; they're fighting, or so I see it. We just talk about it everyday, so it's good to be there [for them]. It's an experience for me also to watch the development of the new city. It's sometimes exciting.

[Tell me about the problems that they talk about.](#)

Mostly they are fighting over insurance companies, or they are still waiting on Road Home monies, or trying to get rid

of the FEMA trailers, and they're talking about the politics. They're not making enough money. It's too hard to [experience] life. They don't have a hospital—they're always complaining about it. A lot of people want to come back, but we don't have any hospital, we don't have any department stores. These are like biggest problems that I see or that I know of.

[Did you apply for Road Home money?](#)

No, I was in a rental house. But we lost everything, so we got some money from FEMA.

[How did you finance the business?](#)

I had like almost \$10,000 that was my own money, and my partner added another 15 grand into the business. That's how we started. It wasn't really a coffee shop, but we were serving coffee, so we started to make a little bit of money and then improved the business. I remodeled the shop twice, and hopefully I'm gonna try to remodel again after this month, just a little bit.

[So tell me about Luis \[Colmenares\]. \(See page 100.\)](#)

Luis? He's a good guy; he's a good artist. I didn't know him, until he walked in, we started talking. He said, he owned his business, and he does artwork. He did a couple things for my coffee shop and became one of my regular customers.

Everybody knows him. [He's] a nice guy, a local guy; he helps everybody. I like to sit with him and talk about our own problems or business problems. We're good friends now.

Are you in touch with a lot of other business people in Chalmette?

Not really because it's a little local. It's Chalmette: everybody knows each other. I'm a foreign guy. I moved to Chalmette; it takes time to build friendships with them, but right now I think I have several friends there who all own their own business and live in Chalmette, but not a lot.

What do you think Chalmette is going to look like in five years?

Maybe we're going to have another 10 or 15 thousand people: everybody tells the same number, but it won't be more than 40 thousand people; We have pretty much 25 thousand people living here, and we're going to have another 10 or 15 thousand people in, four, five years, I believe. We're going to need to have Wal-Mart or like department stores and especially a hospital, because it's still like disaster area. You have to go to Marrero or Scarsdale for shopping; we have nothing. The people who live in Chalmette, they have been there forever, so they really want to live in the same spot, the same neighborhood. It's not gonna happen like it used to be, but it'll be close, I believe. Everybody has some hope. We'll see.

What can government do to help New Orleans, or to help Chalmette?

I really can't say . . . because everyone's expectations are different. For me, the government did a lot of things, but for the other people, the government did nothing. They're still complaining about living in a FEMA trailer, for almost three years, and they're still waiting and fighting with insurance companies: they've got nothing. But some people are happy, because they got money from Road Home and FEMA took care of them.

What did the government do to help you?

I didn't apply for anything. I didn't . . . I don't know—I just never thought about it. Never thought to try to get SBA loan



Photo: Joanna Andreasson

or get some help from government. It's not me; I'm just trying to do everything by myself.

What can government do to help small business people, especially?

Just for Chalmette? Or national?

In areas hit by Katrina.

I would say they can give us some loan or offer some extra money to make us happy and try to enjoy life, especially these days, because it's really hard. We're not making enough money, but we're just trying to be open. We're not looking for extra money, or trying to make some profit, we're just trying to survive right now.

If you could say anything to the incoming president about what it's like to be a small business person after Katrina, what would you say?

I don't know. I never thought about it, because as I said, I'm looking for a different way. I'm still a new guy in the country. I really don't know what they can do for small business. All I can say is just give us some loan, with a little percentage rate. It could be like very low, two or three percent that we can pay back, five, ten years from now.