

# Chico

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## Eco Entrepreneurs

### Alums build businesses to help reduce waste and pollution

BY MARION HARMON

PHOTOS BY THOMAS DEL BRASE

Consider the following statistics: Current estimates say 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic bags, which are petroleum-based, are used every year worldwide. Yet only 1 to 3 percent are recycled. The rest end up in landfills, sewers, streams, and the ocean, and can take hundreds of years to decompose.

Roughly 1 billion bottles of water are trucked around the United States each week—that's 37,800 gas-guzzling 18-wheelers hauling water. We end up throwing 38 billion water bottles into landfills each year—in excess of \$1 billion worth of plastic being discarded, usually after just one use.

The average wedding emits around 14.5 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> in one day, compared to the 12 tons emitted by the average person in an entire year.

As consumers, we often feel overwhelmed trying to change ingrained habits such as buying bottled water. To help us kick our wasteful habits, three CSU, Chico alums are running businesses that make it easier to choose environmentally healthy alternatives. Over the past several years, Jessica Rios, Michelle Kalberer, and Andy Keller each have built companies around products or services that use fewer resources and reduce pollution.

Combining their keen business sense, education, and talents, these young entrepreneurs are rapidly expanding their businesses, creating new jobs, and getting national recognition. Their stories are proof that environmental values can go hand in hand with growing a successful business.

## Jessica Rios Founder and owner, Love Events

The first thing you notice about Jessica Rios is her infectious smile. As she begins talking, you feel her warmth and energy, and by the end of the conversation, you are inspired to do something good, something brilliantly decent for humans and the planet. She truly embodies the most important word in her company name: love.

In the past few years, Rios (BA, Social Ecology and Personal Ethics, '98) has created a business based on celebrating love and sharing her values. "Love is the most important thing in the world, and weddings are the main gathering that honors love in our culture," says Rios.

Inspired by Gandhi's quote "Be the change you wish to see in the world," in 2004 Rios founded Love Events, a wedding and event planning business based in Chico and Marin County. "I work closely with clients, collaborating on ideas and helping to create green weddings and other events that are true reflections of my clients," she says. Whether a couple wants to add some green touches to their wedding or make it as environmentally conscious as possible, Rios helps them find ways to do so.

A Marin County native, Rios has worked on environmental issues since college—her first big "ah-ha" moment came when she was in a religious studies class taught by CSU, Chico professor Bruce Grelle. Grelle showed the class a Bill Moyers film about a dam being built on a river, causing the destruction of habitat. "I sat there crying in class," she says. "Ever since then I've been involved with the environmental movement."

Starting with environmental work in student government, Rios devoted three years of her life after college working for the California Wild Heritage Campaign, a plan that would place 2.5



million acres of wilderness and 400 miles of rivers under federal protection. In 1999, Rios worked alongside prominent environmentalist David Brower for nine months. She was the event planner for The Restoration Faire, a celebration of ecological success stories in California held at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

“Environmental respect—paying attention to the impact we are having on our planet—has always been a focus in my adult life,” she says. “When I started my business, I didn’t see any other way than to include it.”

Even after starting Love Events, Rios has continued her educational pursuits, taking a 10-month leadership course at The Coaches Training Institute in San Rafael and working on her master’s in interdisciplinary studies at CSU, Chico. She credits CSU, Chico marketing professor Marcia Briggs with showing her a creative approach to effective marketing in a small business.

Three years later, business is going strong. Early this summer, Rios was interviewed by *USA Today* for an article about eco-friendly weddings. This reflects the growing trend for couples to cut back on their wedding-day consumption—the average wedding costs \$27,000, according to a 2006 survey by The Condé Nast Bridal Group, and can create an incredible amount of waste. Offering options such as invitations printed on recycled paper and locally grown, organic flowers and food, Rios doesn’t force green alternatives on clients.

“I show them that part of what I like to do is help them reduce their environmental impact on their wedding day,” she says. “For example, they can get a vintage dress so that they are not buying a brand-new item that has to be manufactured. Or they can buy a new dress made out of green fabrics such as organic cotton or a hemp-silk blend.”

Rios sources products from local businesses as much as possible. “I think the greatest impact that I make environmentally is that I’m actively growing other conscious businesses by supporting them,” she says. “I love being able to support a business owner with good values—who is good to their employees, who cares about their products, who treats their customers well.” For a Chico wedding, for example, she might suggest getting flowers from California Organic Flowers and the cake from Mim’s or Upper Crust bakeries, all locally owned Chico businesses.

Living in alignment with your own values is what Rios tries to share with her clients. “We can create a life that is deeply fulfilling when we know what our values are and we live by our values,” she says. “There’s no reason a wedding day should be any different.”



**Michelle  
Kalberer**  
Co-owner,  
Klean  
Kanteen

For many people, working with a brother or sister would seem like a challenge, if not an impossibility. But for Michelle Kalberer and Jeff Cresswell, it's one of the benefits of running their own company. "Jeff and I work so well together, and we're such good friends," says Kalberer.

Family and work go hand in hand for the

siblings—they own two companies with their father, who has had an equine supply company for 30 years. For the past 10 years, they've created and distributed motor skills toys like jump ropes with their company Just Jump It.

When Kalberer earned a BS in business administration from CSU, Chico in 1996, she found herself at a crossroads in her career. "I thought I'd probably end up in the Bay Area because that's where the jobs were," she remembers. "That's when my dad took me out to dinner and asked if I would like to work with him and eventually take over the company. The choice was move to the Bay Area and work for someone else, or stay in Chico with my family and friends and be my own boss. That was really tough!"

After Cresswell finished college at Humboldt State University, he joined the family business. Then, two years ago, the siblings acquired Klean Kanteen, a business they had been helping to run for six months. The Klean Kanteen, a stainless steel beverage bottle invented by Chicoan Robert Seals, is toxin-free and nonleaching, an environmentally friendly replacement for plastic water bottles.

"Stainless steel is such a great material," says Cresswell. "It is extremely long lived, and even after you've had it around for 20 or 30 years, it is 100 percent recyclable—it doesn't downgrade into a

lesser product like recycled plastic does.”

Becoming eco entrepreneurs was a natural progression for Kalberer and Cresswell. Growing up in Chico, they learned to recycle and conserve energy, and were inspired by the open spaces of Bidwell Park. In college, they became even more aware of environmental issues. Cresswell has a degree in fisheries biology and spent five years caretaking the Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve with his wife, Danielle, who has a master’s in environmental science from CSU, Chico.

“It has been really exciting for me to take on this business because it’s getting me more involved with resource conservation,” says Cresswell. “I feel like we are offering a solution to an escalating problem.”

Because Klean Kanteens are manufactured in China, Kalberer and Cresswell also have ethical issues to consider. Well before the latest concerns about products made in China surfaced, they made sure their product was manufactured using fair labor standards, attending workshops on fair labor sourcing and implementing their own factory review system that includes visits to the factory three to four times a year.

Expectations also run high for a company making green products to use green practices. With their toy company and Klean Kanteen, they have always had zero packaging—the toys have no external packaging, and the bottles are individually egg crated. “We are trying to go greener across the board,” says Kalberer. “For example, with our toy company, we’ve been trying to locate recyclable plastic instead of virgin plastic.”

The company is doing well, and sales of Klean Kanteen have doubled in the past six months. The bottles are sold by retailers throughout the United States and are starting to be sold internationally. The siblings have also been making changes to the product line, including a new logo and new sizes like the 12-ounce sippy cup.

Fittingly, the brother and sister have hired family members and friends from the beginning. They also have a local sourcing agent and a graphic designer—Chico grad Scott Rolfson (BS, Business Administration and Recreation, '96)—in Portland.

“It’s been nice having family and friends working in the business because everybody has put a lot of heart and energy into seeing the company progress,” says Cresswell. “We hope we’re going to get that same level of commitment when we hire someone new.”

With so many opportunities and challenges, the two remain happy and excited about their work. “It’s amazing,” says Kalberer. “The business is growing, and it’s a learning experience every day. I think it’s a really exciting time for America and the world—things are really changing, and people are becoming so much more aware. People are really wanting this, and I think it’s great.”

## Andy Keller Creator and owner, ChicoBag

When *Real Simple* magazine selected their “Product of the Month” for September, they addressed the modern dilemma: paper or plastic? But both kinds of shopping bags create trash. *Real Simple’s* solution? The ChicoBag—reusable, lightweight nylon bags designed in Chico and sold nationwide.

The problem of too much trash is what inspired Andy Keller to invent the ChicoBag. It began with a trip he took to the local landfill while landscaping his backyard.

“I was horrified by the volume of trash being buried every day,” says Keller (BS, Business Administration, '97). “The plastic bags caught my eye, blowing around, stuck on the tie-downs. It was that day I set the intention to kick the wasteful single-use bag habit.”

Keller went to a thrift shop and bought a sewing machine, then sat at his kitchen table and created a prototype for a handy, reusable shopping bag.

That was two-and-a-half years ago, and Keller’s original inspiration has led to a successful and rapidly growing business. ChicoBags have a compact design that makes them easy to throw in a purse or fit on a belt loop. They’re washable and durable, and their \$5 price tag makes it easy to afford several bags—the key being to use them (many people now have reusable bags but often forget to take them to the store).

In September the company incorporated as ChicoEco Inc. Eventually Keller hopes to offer a full line of environmentally friendly products. “The thing I love most about my work is that I make a difference—that what I’m doing is important, and I’ve never felt this with a job before,” he says.

Keller attributes his success to the accumulation of his life experiences. In these experiences are also clues to his success as an entrepreneur. “I was never given an allowance, which forced me to find new ways to make money,” he says.



Keller started his first business at the ripe age of 8, when he mowed lawns in his neighborhood, and then started a Christmas light installation service. “During high school, I worked at a fabric store, which gave me a solid understanding of sewing,” he recalls. “Attending CSU, Chico provided a solid academic understanding of business.”

Keller says he received a lot of help from College of Business professors such as professor emeritus Richard Davis. “I not only received one-on-one support when needed for my academic work, but also for my work with the American Marketing Association, as well as support for starting a restroom advertising business that helped me pay for my education,” he says. “I always attribute my networking skills to the dynamic and close-knit community that CSU, Chico fosters.”

To find ways to operate his company, Off the Wall Advertising, with little capital while he was in college, Keller hired student interns and traded services with local vendors. Keller eventually sold the company, which still operates in Chico. After college he commuted to a job in the Bay Area, got laid off, and worked for a year and a half as a real estate appraiser. When he was sure he could make more money selling ChicoBags than appraising, he made the switch. And he’s glad he did, not just from a financial standpoint.

“The big picture is that I want to make a difference,” he says. “It doesn’t have to be in regard to the environment—I see it all tied together, actually, as far as social causes, health, the environment. Basically just recognizing the interconnectedness of humanity, to each other as well as to everything else in the universe.”

Keller exhibits those values by hiring employees who share the same values; manufacturing the bags in a fair-labor, fair-wage factory in China; and fostering a recycling program for expired ChicoBags. In addition to selling the bags to retailers, Keller prints them with logos for use as promotional items by companies and nonprofit organizations.

The bags are also available at a lower cost for school fundraising. “This third part of our business is the one I’m most interested in,” says Keller. He offers schools an alternative to selling cookie dough or candy that is “more in line with educational standards and environmental goals.”

Keller just moved his office from his home into a 2,500-square-foot space on Third Avenue in Chico and is in the process of doubling his workforce by hiring two more salespeople and another administrative staff person. With his entrepreneurial spirit and drive to make a difference, success for Keller is practically in the bag. 🍃

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