



VETERAN-OWNED BUSINESS OF THE YEAR, Kepa Services Inc.

Otolá's gamble pays off

By Allison Batdorff

Mpeti Otolá took a leap recognizable to most entrepreneurs.

Instead of staying with a stable job working for the Iowa City Veterans Administration Healthcare System, he plunged into the unpredictable construction management market.

The Iraq war veteran originally hails from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the majority of people live on less than a dollar a day. Otolá said he sees "opportunities everywhere" in the United States.

But seeing opportunities is not the same as taking advantage of them. Otolá said he needed help getting his business, Kepa Services Inc., started.

"In my company's case," he said, "I don't know where we would be if I didn't have other business owners willing to partner with me and put their money on the line."

The first hurdle for Kepa, which qualifies as a Service Disabled Veteran Owned business, was establishing the necessary bonding to take on work, Otolá said.

"It is a chicken-and-egg scenario," he said. "(You) can't go after projects without bonding, (you) can't get bonding without having substantial assets, and (you)

can't accumulate assets without making money by executing projects."

Kepa joined the Emerging Construction Business Incubator and is now an 8(a) certified company specializing in general contracting, safety compliance, energy reduction services, and design-build construction for government and commercial projects.

The strategic partnerships that helped get Kepa started still are standard operating procedure, Otolá said.

The company is teamed up with TCI Architects/Engineers/Contractor Inc., La Crosse, in a Small Business Administration-brokered relationship. Kepa's contribution and insight into government contracting is valuable, said Kevin Lisowski, TCI's vice president of the Government Division.

Otolá said he is just as willing to work with companies that do \$10 million a year as those that do \$150 million.

"We are still pretty open," he said. "Sometimes, the partners call us; other times we call them. We put great value in our partnerships.

"Karma is very strange. You never know when a small business may blow up, and you may need help from them."