

**5 min: Pilar Guzman Zavala testimony for Congress
03-18-21 Committee on Small Business Subcommittee on Underserved, Agricultural, and
Rural Business Development Hybrid Hearing**

It is an honor to be speaking with all of you today. Thank you everyone for taking the time to listen to my story. A story that reflects the reality of many small businesses like mine.

My name is Pilar Guzman. I am the CEO of Half Moon Empanadas.

I represent one of the 32 million small business in America.

I represent what is best of America. America is the land of the opportunity.

I came to America from Mexico when I was 22 right after college. My entire work life has been done in America. I had the privilege to attend Georgetown School of Foreign Service. My focus there was to understand how to promote economic development to reduce poverty. My dream was to create better opportunities with the collaboration of businesses, government and international organizations.

Little did I know back then that I would end up creating this impact as an entrepreneur in Miami.

My husband, Argentinian born moved to America when he was 8 years old. Spend his whole life in McLean, VA until he decided to move to Miami to become himself an entrepreneur. Miami is home for us for the last 15 years. Miami is my community and where my children were born.

Half Moon Empanadas is a fast casual concept of empanadas in South Florida.

We have been in business for 12 years. Before Covid, we had 14 locations opened in Miami.

But our story was not easy from the beginning. It took us 7 years to get a paycheck from our business month to month. I did a "master's degree" in finance when I applied for our first loan to finance our store in Miami Airport. It took 10 banks, 10 rejections, to get actually the financing. And it only happened because a mentor of mine recommended me to a local bank, whose leader believed in me, and approved the loan. Our first store in South Beach almost took us bankrupt.

The struggle to build Half Moon Empanadas was real for us from the beginning. So, when Covid hit, we felt the same emotions as to when we started. A year ago, 13 of the 14 stores were already closed. We kept the airport store opened, until all closed in May.

But we did what any entrepreneur does. We push and move forward. I called every person I knew that could buy our empanadas.

We applied to the PPP. And it took us 3 banks to get finally the PPP. We went to a large Bank, Bank of America, who did were not responsive. Then I moved to a local medium size bank that was overwhelmed. And finally, after a month of trying and waiting, I decided to call the Director of Impac Fund, Kathy Carvajal, the local partner of ABIC, and asked for help. She promptly connected me to a local bank, US Century Bank, that in two days approved my PPP.

I am a mentor and a board member for many local organizations, and I am also part of a network of entrepreneurs, EO. I was able to learn the reality of many entrepreneurs in many industries, and most of them were struggling to get the support. I decided to reach out to Kathy and help connect the entrepreneurs to different CDFIs, and local banks. IMPAC and ABIC were able to connect several small businesses, women and Hispanic owned companies, with a code so that their applications would be put first.

For us, and for many, PPP allowed us to keep all our salary people. Things continue to feel very unstable, and we continued to look for opportunities. So, I learned about a local need to feed the seniors and became certified to provide these meals through a contract that the Miami Dade County had with FEMA. We became a restaurant making meals for seniors.

We also continue our efforts on the digital space. Building our online ordering component.

My dream is to create a new category in food in America, with empanadas. This is the best country in the world to make your dreams come true. When I competed for the RFP in the Airport against bigger players, I told my husband when the biggest company was presenting. If this country is what I think it is, we are winning this.

I cannot imagine how difficult it has been for you as government officials to have to come up with a plan to support our entire economy and communities. I know in my own skin, this pandemic has been really difficult for businesses, for people in general.

I would like you to know is that the work that you have done to support small businesses matters. That the work you have done has helped many businesses like mine. Because of the PPP, I was able to keep 50 families employed.

The work must continue. There is always room for improvement and to do more. I saw with my own eyes, how important was the role of organizations like ABIC, Impac Fund, the CDFIs. They understood in the moment of crisis that we needed to connect with those businesses that were not too sophisticated, or not that connected. Local organizations understand this. Let's us learn from this. And the learning to me is that more support should come from the local level.

When I had the chance to speak to President Biden this past month, I expressed to him, how important the PPP was, and how important was to focus our efforts as a country to get to the "true" small businesses, those that are less than 20 employees. I also had a chance to speak to Secretary Yellen, and I expressed to her the importance of creating a pipeline of support for small businesses of technical assistance and financial support.

I see challenges as opportunities. I believe this whole crisis has showed us a different way to do things. I am thankful for President Biden's leadership, and your leadership to support programs like the Community Navigators. They are important, they make a difference.

Thank you so much for your attention and support.