



# News Release

ORANGE COUNTY/INLAND  
EMPIRE DISTRICT OFFICE

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## **Alice Kao, CEO & Co-Founder of Sender One Climbing, LLC Selected as 2020 California Small Business Person of the Year**

*Company approach emphasizes the power of community and putting others first*

**SANTA ANA, Calif.** – The U.S. Small Business Administration, Orange County / Inland Empire District Office is pleased to announce Alice Chun Kao, CEO and Co-Founder of Sender One Climbing, LLC, as the 2020 California Small Business Person of the Year. Kao was nominated for the award by Diane Heyden, SVP/Director of SBA Lending at Pacific Premier Bank in Irvine, CA. Kao was chosen for her achievements in this category and dedication to her community while competing against other Small Business Person of the Year winners from districts throughout the state. She will also be recognized at the [National Small Business Week](#) virtual event to be held September 22-24.

Sender One Climbing, LLC is a full-service climbing facility that offers indoor rock climbing, yoga, and other fitness activities. In addition to the fitness services, Sender One Climbing also provides children activities such as after-school programs and birthday parties. Kao developed her business idea when she discovered climbing while living and working in London during a difficult time in her life. Wanting to share the healing and self-discovery that climbing brought her, she decided to start the business upon her return to the United States in 2011 with her business partners.

Initially, Kao's first location in Orange County opened with 300 members and 21 employees, with \$1.8 million in sales generated during the first 12 months. Sender One's numbers grew rapidly and just prior to the pandemic, the business had two locations with 157 employees and \$8.1 million in sales. Kao had 3 additional locations in progress but had to halt their openings due to COVID-19. Although Sender One is not a majority woman-owned business, it is managed by a diverse workforce, with 60% of leadership positions held by women.

Getting people to believe in her idea was one of many obstacles in getting Sender One to where it is today. Upon opening the first location, Kao recounts the time she talked to over 50 banks with her laptop and business plan in hand, attempting to receive her first SBA loan. Other obstacles included people telling her that climbing would never grow because it was an underground sport. Despite these challenges, Kao endured through the hardships and pursued her business venture. In March 2020 and just before the widespread COVID-19 shutdown, Sender One hosted the Pan American Championships, a climbing event from which two climbers qualified for the Olympics, where climbing is making its Olympic debut in 2021.

Volunteer and community involvement are intertwined in Sender One's culture. The company partners with the Boys and Girls Club organization, as well as drug rehabilitation groups in Orange County. Additionally, the business regularly hosts fundraisers and community events for various environmental programs to protect outdoor climbing areas.

As a result of COVID-19, Sender One was forced to close both of its locations, causing revenues to decrease by 95% compared to the previous year. The closures also led to a drastic reduction of staff, but with the assistance of the SBA's Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan program, Kao was able to bring back some of her staff. Though the business continues to suffer due to the closures, Kao continues to inspire her surrounding community with her optimistic outlook. Recently, Sender One's Orange County location was able to reopen with a 10% capacity and has played a part in providing relief during the pandemic by converting its gym into a distance learning support facility for children starting their virtual school year.

The SBA Orange County / Inland Empire District is honored to recognize Alice Kao as the California Small Business Person of the Year 2020.

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### **About the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA)**

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) was created in 1953 and is a Cabinet-level agency of the federal government to aid, counsel, assist and protect the interests of small business concerns, to preserve free competitive enterprise and to maintain and strengthen the overall economy of our nation. The SBA helps Americans start, build and grow businesses, and recover from disasters. Through an extensive network of field offices and partnerships with public and private organizations, the SBA delivers its services to people throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Guam. To learn more about SBA, visit [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov).

### **About the Orange County / Inland Empire District Office**

The Orange County / Inland Empire District Office, under the leadership and vision of J. Adalberto Quijada, District Director, is responsible for the delivery of SBA programs and services in the Southern California counties of Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino. Located in Santa Ana near John Wayne Airport, the office and its staff facilitate understanding and access to SBA loan programs; coordinate and conduct hundreds of training sessions and special events annually such as matchmaking forums and loan workshops; and manage a portfolio of nearly 100 businesses enrolled in the agency's 8(a) business development program.