In Minh Tran's makeshift workshop, which is carved out of an end table at the foot of his bed, wackiness comes in sackfuls.

The Vietnamese immigrant is hard at work mass-producing a toy called the Wacky Bird, a feathered, lightweight variation of Hacky Sack, a small ball designed to be kicked. The Wacky Bird, however, takes the shape of a radish rather than a sphere.

Under the guidance of a new multicultural economic development program at the Union of Pan Asian Communities (UPAC) that provides technical assistance to aspiring small-business owners, Tran is test-marketing his product. The game has been popular for years in Vietnam and parts of Asia.

He has been giving the Wacky Birds away by the sackful.

"Everybody seems to like it. Kids in my old neighborhood on 58th Street ask me for one every time they see me," the 32-year-old said. He now lives in National City.

A "hot, new sport"

Billing the toy as a "hot, new sport" that requires the physical dexterity of a soccer player but which has rules like volleyball, Tran has sunk about $15,000 into start-up costs. He spent an additional $2,700 for patenting the product in anticipation of a nationwide sales push.

Made of a plastic base topped with neon-colored duck feathers that Tran buys from an El Cajon poultry farm and hand dyes, the Wacky Bird can be whacked, kicked, or slammed in any manner to keep it airborne.

But while he is an authority on the rules of his favorite childhood game, Tran possesses little expertise in sales.

He approached UPAC after reading an advertisement of the economic development project in a Vietnamese magazine.

Following the staff's advice, Tran placed consignments at local Vietnamese stores, and sold them at swap meets and to ice cream truck drivers. He has reported some sales, project director A. Tri Tran said.

Mainstream distributors, such as Viking Wholesale, also have shown an interest.
"A really good idea"

"He has a really good idea," said Viking co-owner Dana Smith. "It's possible for it to catch on, he just has to get it out there."

"I wouldn't know how to do this on my own," Tran said during a telephone interview while waiting at the program's El Cajon Boulevard office for help with some tax documents. "I need help, a lot of help."

The program began about six months ago with $150,000 from the federal community development block grant program administered by the city of San Diego. It will receive an additional $100,000 in the coming year, said Marcus Thomson, manager of the city's Office of Small Business.

"They've been extremely effective," Thomson said.

Staffed by three former business owners who speak Vietnamese and Chinese, the program targets low- to moderate-income Vietnamese-Americans and Chinese-Americans in the Mid-City area. It includes City Heights, Normal Heights and parts of downtown, Tri Tran said.

Expansion to cover other ethnic groups is in the works, said UPAC's president and chief executive officer, Margaret Iwanaga-Penrose.

"The survival of small businesses is especially important in a time of corporate cutbacks," she said.

Program staffers reach out to potential clients by visiting businesses and ethnic organizations, and giving talks at English as a second language classes. So far, they have reached some 1,000 clients, Tri Tran said.

They also have invited experienced business owners, such as members of the San Diego chapter of the volunteer Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), to conduct seminars and workshops. Discussion focuses on finance, accounting, franchising and tax preparation.

Advice can range from market research to how to approach a buyer, Tri Tran said.

"We don't encourage people to go into business," Tri Tran said. "We lay out the advantages and disadvantages and let them make their decision. But we'll support them either way."

Bo Sheng Gu, a 37-year native Chinese starting an import-export trade business with China, is effusive with thanks after the program paid for his business license.
"They're like an anchor, they're always glad to help," Gu, a former shipyard accountant, says in Chinese Mandarin. "The program has done wonders for my morale."

Doanh Nguyen, a 22-year-old from Vietnam, and Santiphab Navasak, a 23-year-old native Laotian, said they accomplished their business plan six months ahead of schedule because of UPAC's help.

Contracts cited

The two, clients of UPAC's East Wind Socialization Center that organizes activities and rehabilitation programs for the disabled, now hold janitorial contracts with three businesses and two private homes.

"UPAC helped them through the bureaucracy of opening a business after they came up with the idea and a plan," East Wind supervisor Victor Yee said, translating for Nguyen.

Existing businesses such as Vicki Nguyen's Hung Vuong Vietnamese and Chinese Restaurant and Cuong Nguyen's Four Good Travel, also have praise for the program.

Vicki Nguyen was advised to spread the word about her new restaurant on El Cajon Boulevard by inviting local dignitaries to a grand opening reception and through advertising. Cuong Nguyen credits the program's staff for helping him apply for a loan to expand his University Avenue travel agency.

Where UPAC's staff falls short, SCORE is prepared to lend a hand to enhance its effectiveness, SCORE's San Diego chapter president, Irv Abel, said.

He has pledged free field- and office-counseling -- as SCORE does with others who seek help at the office in the Small Business Administration -- for the program's clients.

"There's tremendous competition among small businesses," said Abel, a former partial owner of an advanced marine vessel development company. He said the new businesses have to know who their competition is, how to get people to buy from them, their cash-flow projections, and whether they have something people want.

"We urge people to be sure they're prepared before they take the plunge," Abel said. "But once you jump into a big pool of water and it's over your head, we can act like a lifeguard.

"We can't save them all, but we can certainly help some."

Caption: 2 PICS
1. Wacky Bird: That's the name of the toy Minh Tran is producing at his home business, with help from the Union of Pan Asian Communities' new economic development program. (Eds. 1,6,7,8) 2. Fine feathers: Jesse Bringas assembles Wacky Birds, toys
that resemble Hacky Sacks but made with duck feathers, for his cousin's business.

Memo: Head varies
Editions vary
Caption varies

Photo varies
Edition: 1,6,7,8
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-3:7,8 B-6:1,6

Index Terms: AID ; ASIANS ; BUSINESS ; CITY ; FINANCE ; GOVERNMENT ; IMMIGRATION ; RECREATION ; TOYS ; USA ; INTERVIEW; Minh Tran ; UPAC

Record Number: UTS1145634

***Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune***
Full-text obtained via NewsBank