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Greenville business owner overcomes adversity, wins SBA's 2009 Small Business Person of the Year award

Steven Bailey, CEO and Chairman of the Board of Merus Refreshment Services Inc. in Greenville, is the 2009 Small Business Administration (SBA) Small Business Person of the Year. Bailey will represent South Carolina in the national Small Business Person of the Year competition in Washington, D.C., on May 17-19. The annual competition is part of National Small Business Week, which runs the week of May 17 this year.

Bailey founded Merus in 1998 as the exclusive South Carolina dealer of Innowave™ drinking water systems, which tap into existing local lines to purify and chill the water – a system that was revolutionary in an era of ubiquitous break room water coolers.

“When I worked for other companies, I worked hard ... but all I could really do was ‘work.’ I wanted to *build* something, and I wanted to build something out of nothing: For me, it really was and is the American Dream!” Bailey says.

Shortly after starting the company, Bailey was diagnosed with cancer, which required surgery and subsequent treatment. However, Bailey said, “[W]e simply dealt with the problem, never yielding to the adversity.”

Business adversity soon followed personal adversity. After several years of operation, the company’s receivables and expenses were growing while cash flow was shrinking. Water sales had proved to be seasonal – up in the summer, down in the winter. And so in 2002, Merus added a new component focused on office coffee products. With its opposite sales seasons, coffee proved the perfect complement to the water systems. In 2003, Merus entered into a strategic agreement with a large coffee roaster to custom roast and package Merus’ own product line. Merus has since acquired three other small office coffee service companies.

Merus Refreshment Services is now both the state’s leading provider of point-of-use drinking water systems and the largest South Carolina-based provider of office coffee services. From two employees and one office at start-up, Merus has grown to include 26 employees and three locations across North and South Carolina. And despite the economic downturn of the past year, the company’s revenues and gross profits have continued to increase each year.

Not satisfied with the success of just his own company, Bailey is active in the Greenville community to help other area small businesses succeed. He is Chairman of the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce’s Small Business Council and a member of the Regional Advisory Board for the Clemson University Small Business Development Center.

All SBA programs and services are provided on a non-discriminatory basis.

Bailey lives in Greer with his wife Kim and their two children. He was nominated by Scott Welchel of the Greenville Small Business Development Center and Brenda Laakso of the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce.