



## Founder Letter

If you asked me in 2023 what business I was starting, I probably would have told you I was building a coffee cart business. Looking back now, I realize the coffee cart was never the destination—it was simply the safest way to test a much bigger vision.

That vision began long before Zemi existed. It began with my family's coffee farm in Canóvanas, Puerto Rico. For decades I learned, my abuela and her children worked the farm and grew coffee on that farm, fueling my inspiration! The land represents hard work, resilience, and the opportunity to create something that could outlive those who built it. As I watched the farm slowly disappear into overgrowth, I realized I had a choice: allow a piece of my family's history to fade away or find a way to give it new life.

Rather than starting with the farm, which is a long road to acquire, I chose to start with the customer.

I took an idea I had in my 20s of a coffee cart and launched a single, pedal-powered coffee cart in Oak Park in September 2023. Using my years in corporate innovation it allowed me to answer the most important question first: would people embrace Puerto Rican coffee, the culture behind it, and the experience we wanted to create with a cart on the streets? Every decision since then has been guided by the same philosophy—take measured risks, learn quickly, improve constantly, and reinvest what we learn into the next stage of the company.

Oak Park was ripe with opportunity as a coffee trailer was already working the streets, it had a mobile business license that could accommodate my idea, and it's a community that is well known to embrace small businesses. Starting with my kids' school at morning drop off, grew into a reputation as “the coffee lady” and fandom among kids and adults!

Over the past several years, Zemi has become much more than a coffee cart. We have tested neighborhood service, community events, private catering, seasonal café operations, new menus, equipment, staffing models, and operational systems. Some ideas exceeded expectations, while others taught valuable lessons that fundamentally changed how we intend to grow. Even the missteps strengthened our business rather than discouraged us.



The vision today is to build a vertically integrated soil-to-cup company that connects a family coffee farm in Puerto Rico with hospitality, food production, specialty coffee, and community. We believe customers increasingly want to know where their food comes from, who produced it, and what story it represents. Puerto Rican coffee provides us with an opportunity to share an origin that remains relatively unknown while celebrating a culture that has shaped me into embracing it and bringing it to others.

Our goal is not to become the largest coffee company. We want to become a respected local business, through thoughtful growth that is more sustainable than rapid expansion. Every new service, every new employee, every investment in equipment, and every square foot of our future warehouse should strengthen the entire business rather than distract from it.

The cafe operations we did in winter 2024 and 2025 were difficult, gut wrenching, cash draining experiences. Yet out of it we gained tons of customer feedback, learned operationally what works for us, and what doesn't, and that mixing our brand with others does not work well. It helped us refocus our attention to our goal of the warehouse and how that is where we build to grow.

Every day on the cart customers gush about what they are experiencing, the quality of the product "this is the best coffee I have ever had", plus the sheer amount of "you saved my life" because they were out of coffee or we were right in their path. While kids love us for our engagement when serving them, and the drinks they love.

The warehouse, the carts, the kitchen, the future commissary, and eventually the family farm are not separate businesses. They are pieces of one connected ecosystem designed to support one another. Together they create multiple revenue streams, reduce risk through diversification, and allow us to control more of the customer experience over time.

Leveraging all of our learnings, we believe owning the warehouse space and securing funds accelerates the vision and allows us further solidify our position in the community and establish a place where we want to come work every day for as long as we can.

Most importantly, I hope Zemi becomes a company that people are proud to work for, proud to support, and proud to recommend. When we succeed, we will have preserved a family legacy, created meaningful jobs, introduced thousands of people to Puerto Rican coffee and culture, and built a business that future generations of the Betancourt family can continue to grow.



Our intention is for this to be a place that the community says “it has been there for 20 years!”, not growing into 10, 20 stores but a single location that is a staple in the community. Where we foster high employee retention so customers feel it’s a place where everyone knows your name, while supporting Puerto Rico by buying our coffee and other products direct from the island.

Thank you for considering becoming part of that journey.

Dominique Betancourt  
Founder, Zemi Coffee Cart