

Enterprising women get a hand with business

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Women-owned enterprises on the South Coast have a number of resources they can turn to in order to get their businesses up, running and successful.

Economic uncertainty has been a contributing factor to many of these recently launched enterprises. With national unemployment high, stock prices sinking and wages flat for the millions still working, self-employment on some level is a viable option for many women in Santa Barbara County, according to the founder of Women's Economic Ventures, one of the most visible organizations offering resources.

Indeed, trainers are busy gearing up to offer another series of bi-annual self-employment training and business plan courses in September.

Sessions are expected to be full.

The 14-week self-employment training course, which includes a free orientation session, is offered to women — along with a handful of male attendees — in Santa Maria, Buellton and Santa Barbara. Santa Barbara orientations are 6-7 p.m. Tuesday and noon-1 p.m. Thursday. The Buellton program is set for noon-1 p.m. Thursday. A Spanish-language session in Santa Maria is offered by appointment only.

WEV, originally established as the Women's Community Building Project, is a nonprofit organization providing low-cost coaching and education to startups and existing businesses in both English and Spanish, said founder/CEO Marsha Bailey.

Ms. Bailey takes great pride in the fact that since 1991, WEV has helped to create or expand more than 2,000 businesses, creating or retaining more than 3,000 local jobs through training, loans and other resources to help local women — and men — start or grow a business. About two-thirds who enroll don't have a business at all.

Since the recession began, about 30 percent of the recent attendees are "necessity entrepreneurs," said Ms. Bailey, referring to participants launching businesses as a last resort.

"Many are the long-term unemployed, so when times are tough, people have to start a business just to survive," said Ms. Bailey, adding that WEV itself was launched in the middle of a recession in 1991.

Before the economy wasn't in such dire straits, Ms. Bailey said the typical WEV clients typically had full-time job



THOMAS KELSEY / NEWS-PRESS

Chocolate, fine art and eco-friendly containers are some of the products created by local enterprising business owners who have benefitted from training programs at Women's Economic Ventures, which is guided by founder Marsha Bailey, second from left. Displaying some of the fruits of their labors recently at Chocolats du Calibressan in La Arcada are, from left, Jill-Marie Carre, Michele Zuzalek and Andrea Thein.

the Year for 2011 was gourmet chocolate shop owner Jill-Marie Carre, who attended one of the courses.

"About one-third of our clients are up and running, but they may be stuck" and either need to finally write a business plan or revisit a current one that may not be working, Ms. Bailey said.

There are about 100 women's business centers around the country, "but we are a true trailblazer," she proudly asserted.

The organization receives about 10 percent of its funding from the Office of Women's Business Ownership of the Small Business Administration.

One local success story is fine artist Michele Zuzalek, who was an early WEV course participant, taking the self-employment training course back in 1996.

"You have nothing to lose by learning," said Ms. Zuzalek, a single mom who originally took the course to grow her graphic design business.

She realized that fine art was her true passion, but she needed to learn the steps to really qualify as a working artist.

"Perseverance and passion are important but you need a business plan, too," said Ms. Zuzalek, who embraces the business aspects of the

training WEV's six-week business plan course offered her, as well as the small business loan she received from WEV after completing her business plan through the course.

Ms. Thein chose this route since she works full-time and wanted to get her business up and running quickly before committing to it full-time.

Her business has now been written up in publications, including *Bon Appetit*, and that has helped her launch her products to a wider audience and has given one product in particular "rock star" status. She is continuously looking for ways to improve her business and attributes much of Happy Tiffin's success to WEV and her training. She looks forward to the holidays, when she will be adding more products.

She also hopes to target schools as customers as well as purveyors of camping equipment. Her company motto: "Practical, Earth-Friendly and Stylishly Hip!"

As her enterprise evolves and grows, Ms. Thein said she will probably take more WEV classes.

For more information about the upcoming sessions, call 965-6073 or visit www.wevonline.org.

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and self-employment was a way to generate additional income.

That's still the goal of a good number of clients, she said, and trainers are helping them negotiate the path toward self-employment. Right off the bat, a realistic business plan is the first order of business.

Trainers are business owners themselves who are hired to facilitate the program, said Ms. Bailey. Guest speakers are volunteers. They include lawyers talking about business formation issues, bankers discussing access to credit, and accountants weighing in on setting up the books. "They add a lot of depth," said Ms. Bailey about the guest speakers.

"Bringing in an additional \$500 to \$1,000 a month can make a huge difference in their quality of life," said Ms. Bailey of the clients still working their day jobs, but easing into permanent, full-time gigs.

A fair number of attendees realize that a business may not be feasible at the conclusion of the class, said Ms. Bailey.

The average age of WEV clients is about 40 and many are going through life transitions. Reasons for launching an enterprise could be the loss of a job, divorce or children leaving the nest. Women tend to form businesses later in life while men are more likely to launch entrepreneurial endeavors in their mid-20s, observed Ms. Bailey.

Whatever the age of the client, "We want to prepare them for the reality of business and not sugarcoat it," she said.

Ms. Bailey chuckled when she was reminded that the WEV Business of

work— pricing her work, networking and marketing, which she considers as important as the time she spends at the canvas.

Another plus for her business: an artist who keeps getting commissioned work is never retired.

Another WEV client, Andrea Thein, is an example of someone who has maintained her full-time job while starting up a new business, called Happy Tiffin. Based on tiffin carriers, which are commonly used in India, Ms. Thein said the eco-friendly, stainless steel containers resemble lunch boxes. Ms. Thein said she was inspired to launch the business because she has a love of fashionable containers and has collected them through her travels all over the world.

Because she owns a web-based business, she has the flexibility without the overhead. Shipping her goods worldwide, Ms. Thein uses warehouses in the U.S. She feels the products are particularly relevant items for people today who are eco-conscious, see the sustainability of stainless steel, and who are comfortable using the Internet to purchase the containers.

"I started with WEV in 2008," said Ms. Thein, who continues meeting with others from her program on a monthly basis where the "grads" bounce ideas off each other. She's kept her day job as a webmaster for a local software company.

Her business is growing incrementally. "I haven't had a bad year yet revenue-wise," she said.

Ms. Thein is thankful for the

WEV facts at a glance

For Santa Barbara County, Women's Economic Ventures reports the impact of its services on client business performance and the local economy. Here are some outcomes reported in 2010:

Business Performance

Within 18 months of receiving services from WEV:

- The percentage of clients operating a business increased 104 percent — from 35 percent at intake to 71 percent.
- Average gross business sales per client increased 565 percent, from \$7,860 at intake to \$52,236.
- Average gross business sales per client business increased 145 percent from \$32,487 at intake to \$79,660.

Community Economic Impact

In 2009, WEV client businesses:

- Created and retained an estimated 216 jobs in Santa Barbara County
- Created a total of 131 new jobs in Santa Barbara County
- Generated an estimated \$820,149 in tax revenues for the state and local economy

Source: Women's Economic Ventures