

# AERN News

Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, "Connecting Entrepreneurs to Resources"

## Jake's Restaurant in Alexander City Has a Plan for Success

Russell Corporation has laid off hundreds of employees in the past decade both before and after moving its corporate headquarters from Alexander City to Atlanta. A new wave of relocations would have forced Jake and Trisse Mixon to move to Bowling Green, Kentucky, but they weren't willing to leave the town where they have lived their whole lives.

The Mixons decided now was the time to reaffirm their commitment to Alex City's sense of community. By using local AERN resources, they opened the restaurant that Jake had been dreaming about for years.

The Tallapoosa County AERN center is located in the chamber of commerce in downtown Alexander City, and the Mixon family has tapped into those resources. "We really appreciate everything AERN did. They helped tremendously in starting us out and laying out what we needed to do. We worked with AERN resources a long time to put together the business plan for this restaurant. We want to keep downtown Alex City going," Jake said.

What better way to revitalize a community and bring people together than good food? Jake's opened its doors at the end of May and hit the ground running. "We are hometown people, we were born and raised in Alex City, and we wanted to bring employment opportunities to this city," said Trisse.



Ribbon cutting ceremony for Jake's Restaurant in Alexander City. The owners Jake and Trisse Mixon used local AERN resources to help Jake make his long-time dream a reality.

But that's not all they're bringing. Good food, local art, and an inviting hometown atmosphere are all on the menu at Jake's. Currently open from Tuesday through Saturday for dinner, Jake's is in the historical downtown area of Alexander City at 16 Broad Street. The hardwood floors are warm and inviting, and the décor is appealing. Local artisan and Mixon family friend John Denney has provided art and photography showcasing the community.

Steak is Jake's specialty, but don't count out the fried shrimp or what customers are calling, hands-down, the best crab cakes around. "We are

always trying to improve, whether it be the quality of the food or how we meet the needs of our customers. We feel like we've gotten better every day," Jake said.

That day-to-day work ethic and attention to detail started with Mike Mixon, Jake's father, who generously agreed to finance Jake's for the first year. Using AERN resources at the chamber of commerce and working with chamber volunteer and AERN ambassador John Cater, the trio came up with a business plan that worked within their budget and expectations.

Mike already has plans to return to the AERN resources at regular intervals to look at other representative businesses to see how Jake's compares. His advice to aspiring business owners: "Do the background work, be realistic, project your expenses and project your profits, don't overstate it. Without AERN's help, I don't know what we would have done."

Despite the layoffs created by downsizing at the Russell Corporation, the Mixons weren't ready to give up on Alexander City. Just a few months after meeting and working with AERN representatives and resources, they are already invigorating the downtown area with steak, local art, an inviting atmosphere, and a commitment to excellence in the town they call home.

*Daniel Hollander  
AERN Intern*

# AERN Partners Meeting in Tuscaloosa in June, 2010

The AERN partners meeting on June 24, 2010 on the campus of The University of Alabama brought AERN leaders together from around the state to discuss the progress they have been making in their respective communities and talk about plans for future growth and innovation. The meeting also featured speakers presenting important topical information.

A new business planning course called CORE FOUR was introduced to the partners by Adelaide Wood, outreach coordinator for the Center for Business and Economic Research. Ms. Wood had recently completed several days of training and certification to teach the program to others.

“Business plans need to be seen as a ‘game plan’ that rising entrepreneurs use beyond the initial process of getting a loan and setting up their businesses. A business plan is not intended just to show other people and never actually use. CORE FOUR can make that process easier,” Ms. Wood said.

The program introduces what are often scary and complicated concepts and then provides clear and straightforward examples, paths, and ideas to take on

those challenges. Market research doesn’t have to be intimidating and financing options don’t have to be confusing.

Paavo Hanninen, director of the University’s Small Business Development Center and co-director of AERN, said, “The CORE FOUR program matches the AERN toolkit perfectly with what we do in the community.”

Ms. Wood elaborated by saying, “The AERN toolkit is a resource for current businesses as well as start-up businesses. We seek ways to encourage current (and sometimes stubborn) business owners to begin using the resources we have available.” AERN research resources can help entrepreneurs find information about their target markets. How many in that group live in the area near my business? How do people spend their money? What other kinds of products or services should I consider carrying to make my business more attractive? A little research in an AERN center can help find answers.



University of Alabama Vice Chancellor Arthur Dunning chats with Sheryl Smedley of Selma at the 2010 AERN partner meeting.

Kevin McMahon, Bryant Bank senior vice president and director of commercial lending, gave a presentation on what banks are looking for in small business loan proposals in today’s economic climate. The great recession has made a big change in the way banks view lending to small businesses. Mr. McMahon gave straight talk, current examples, and good advice to the AERN partners. Financing for small businesses was a topic that generated many questions and comments for Mr. McMahon.

After lunch the partners heard an informal address from UA Vice Chancellor Arthur Dunning. Dr. Dunning



AERN team members display their special AERN 10th Anniversary commemorative tiles. AERN began in the fall of 2000.



Kevin McMahon of Bryant Bank speaking about commercial lending to small businesses.

told the group about his growing up as an African American boy in a rural portion of pre-Civil Rights Era Marengo County, Alabama. Following military service and receiving college degrees from several institutions of higher education, Dr. Dunning has had a long and impressive career as a university faculty member and in the administration of higher education. Throughout, he has enjoyed talking about his upbringing. His rural roots in Alabama gave him many things that money can't buy, and he reminded the AERN partners never to underestimate the power and the potential of the areas they represent.

After Dr. Dunning's inspiring talk, partners engaged in a roundtable discussion. They talked about some of the market issues in their com-

munities and highlighted some of the accomplishments in their counties such as new businesses started, industries recruited, jobs saved or created, workshops delivered, and more.

Demopolis reported on new business starts; Monroeville is proud of a new art gallery; Selma is seeing rising tourism traffic. A new women's prison is under construction in Aliceville, where local officials expect up to several hundred new jobs and a great deal of additional annual income.

Monroe County was recently featured in *Smithsonian* magazine as part of the commemoration of the anniversary of the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Bibb County's Cahaba Lily Festival was featured in the same magazine in late 2009. Annette Watters, associate director of the Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute and AERN co-director said, "These articles help tell the rest of the world what we already know: that rural Alabama is a beautiful place to live and a wonderful place to do business."

Ms. Watters provided current statistical data about the counties of Alabama, including a listing of businesses in various counties, average earnings by educational attainment, unemployment rates, and other socio-economic data. Ms. Watters stressed

that current statistics such as these are always available from The University of Alabama to AERN partners and their clients.

Knowledge is power for the business world. AERN is a program that opens the resources of the business school of The University of Alabama to partners in rural portions of the state. For example, the University's faculty business librarians enjoy their interactions with AERN partners and have a history of answering both simple and complex business research questions for AERN partners. In a team, each side learns from the other, and AERN is a classic example of a successful university-community partnership, as this meeting demonstrated.

At the end of the meeting, Mr. Hanninen and Ms. Watters provided a retrospective of AERN on its 10th year anniversary. Team members were presented with special commemorative tiles. "Our strength comes from you, the local partners. The sustainability and support of the AERN network are unique and immensely powerful. The success and growth of Alabama's business community are in your hands," Mr. Hanninen said.

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## Macon County Is Looking to the Future

One of Macon County's largest employers has announced massive employment cutbacks recently. But Tuskegee and the rest of Macon County know they have economic and community strengths for going forward. In testimony of that, on June 12, 2010 Tuskegee's Greenford Park Community-Built Playground opened to the public with a well-attended reception that included lots of grilled food and plenty of

hands-on testing of the new facility's equipment.

The playground was a project of the Tuskegee-Macon County Community Development Corporation and the City of Tuskegee, built under the slogan "A token of what we can do in our community by working together."

Now Vicky Grice, the executive director of the Tuskegee-Macon County

Community Development Corporation, intends to build upon the success and camaraderie that the community displayed in building the playground to support the county's locally owned businesses.

"The whole community came together to build the playground. It really was a labor of love, and it felt great to see

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people enjoy the park they helped build," she said.

"Tuskegee and Macon County need jobs and economic development like everyone does. Our small towns are really rich and beautiful in culture, but they suffer because of lack of industry," she said.

One of the things that makes a local economy vibrant is the presence of locally owned businesses. The Community Development Corporation used its AERN resources to host three workshops this past year preparing people for starting a home business, and another recent entrepreneurship workshop drew a turnout of 18 people interested in starting a local business.

"One of the things I like most about AERN is the Business Plan Pro software," Ms. Grice said. "It's a really good program. People who come in to do their business plan like it because it's not complicated. Anyone can follow along and get positive results."

David Henderson, owner of Time for a Change, a fitness center in Tuskegee, came into the center and rewrote his business plan using AERN resources. The refined plan he developed with the help of AERN and the Tuskegee-Macon County Community Development Corporation staff helped him revitalize and expand his business.

"We suggested different ways David could grow Time for a Change, figured expenses, talked about marketing and advertising, and we utilized a loan plan to help him expand," Ms. Grice said.

Since Ms. Grice took over as executive director of the Tuskegee-Macon County Community Development Corporation in 2008, four new businesses have been established using the center's AERN resources, and the AERN center there serves as a continuous resource for existing businesses.

"We go out there and visit with and advise business owners; it's definitely an ongoing process where we establish a relationship with an open rapport. We have meetings, talk on the phone, and are really involved with businesses," she said. "We want to be a resource for them and will hopefully see more businesses opening as a result of the relationships we create and maintain."

Ms. Grice is originally from Omaha, Nebraska. She served in the military before becoming a pharmaceutical sales manager for 12 years prior to taking over as executive director of the Tuskegee-Macon County Development Corporation.

"I've always wanted to work in the community and do community development, so when I had an opportunity I took my chance to give back," Ms. Grice said.

Recent economic news surrounding Macon County has been hard to handle, but Tuskegee's Greenford Park Community-Built Playground is a highly visible example of what Tuskegee and Macon County can accomplish if people work together. With Ms. Grice in town, positive economic as well as recreational change is on the way.

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