AERN Participates in 2015 New Orleans Entrepreneurship Week

AERN was selected to be an Entrepreneurship Support Organization (ESO) in the Delta Regional Authority’s launch of its Delta Entrepreneurship Network.

Delegates attended New Orleans Entrepreneurship Week (NOEW) at the Idea Village on March 24-27, 2015. The DRA Entrepreneurship Network (DEN) is a competitive fellowship program to identify entrepreneurs and support organizations in the Delta region, which includes twenty counties in Alabama. The purpose of the program is to nurture entrepreneurial talent and grow entrepreneurs into talented, innovative drivers of the local and regional economies. DEN Fellows who participated in NOEW 2015 took the stage in front of regional and national investors as seen in the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5No+u8IVON0

As a part of the network, AERN hosted a workshop at the Edge on March 13 to assist Alabama entrepreneurs in preparing for the upcoming pitch competitions in New Orleans. AERN Director Mary Patterson, along with Greg Sheek, Alabama Launchpad director, and Brenda Tuck, Marengo County EDA director, joined together to share resources on perfecting a business pitch with three Alabama entrepreneur finalists who had been selected to attend NOEW and pitch their business idea to investors. The workshop provided expertise from UA’s Culverhouse College of Commerce faculty including Dr. Lou Marino, Dr. Whitney Hough, Mr. Allen Henry and David Ford. They participated on a panel that critiqued the pitches and offered instruction on improving content and impact.

Alabama entrepreneurs who attended NOEW with AERN included Al Barnett of Control Flo Medical, inventor of the ResQ Non-Bladder Invasive Catheter, an innovative urinary blockage and drainage device for the treatment of urinary incontinence; Winfield Ezell of Obsidian Creative Studios, a platform

Entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas on the Big Idea stage during NOEW 2015.

AERN Hosts Workshops for Entrepreneurs

AERN hosted workshops in 2015 in Tuscaloosa and surrounding counties by partnering with the Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute (AEI) at The University of Alabama and with partners in Bibb, Lamar, Marengo, Pickens, Tallapoosa and Wilcox Counties. Additionally, AERN participated in the Rural Development Session at the Economic Development Association of Alabama’s summer conference, held July 19, 2015 at the Grand Hotel in Point Clear to present stories and lessons learned at New Orleans Entrepreneurship Week on plugging more rural communities into an entrepreneurial ecosystem so that entrepreneurial talent can become the drivers of the Delta’s local economies.

Kicking off a series of workshops at The Edge, Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, AERN partnered with AEI on February 20 to host a workshop taught by Dr. Lou Marino, Marketing Professor in the Culverhouse College of Commerce, on “Pitching a Business Idea.” Another workshop presented by Dr. Craig Armstrong, Associate Professor for Entrepreneurship in Culverhouse, on November 20, provided instruction on value proposition creation and using the business model canvas for producing innovative business models, developing pitching skills and writing and presenting a focused business plan.

Stacy Brown, founder of Chicken Salad Chick, was the guest speaker at the Alexander City Chamber of Commerce’s Lead Forward Women’s Conference and Business Expo on March 20. Brown shared her success story of developing her chicken salad recipe from a business in her home to a franchised restaurant with 50 locations in the Southeast. Ann
Rye, Executive Director of the Chamber, shared the success stories of local women leaders, and Mary Patterson, Director of AERN, shared AERN resources with other women entrepreneurs in attendance.

In partnership with Mary Wallace Cobb Memorial Library, AERN provided a workshop in Vernon on May 28 to local business owners on “Low Cost Marketing Ideas.” Kimberly Hutcheson, a graduate in UA’s Masters of Marketing program presented the program on building customer relationships and using digital media to market products and services.

Patterson spoke to the Aliceville Rotary Club on June 9 and to the Demopolis Rotary Club on September 2 to explain the library of resources in AERN centers that can be used to develop a business idea or to create a marketing plan to expand a business.

AERN co-hosted a workshop on using AERN resources to develop a business plan at the Demopolis Chamber of Commerce’s breakfast on August 11.

The Center for Business and Economic Research sponsored the Alabama State Data Center Conference in Tuscaloosa on August 17, and AERN invited its partners to attend the session on “Learning to Navigate the Business Development Tool” provided by the Census Bureau.

Black Belt Treasures in Camden in Wilcox County began its artist entrepreneur workshop series in October and asked AERN to provide education on Social Media Marketing. Susan Fant, Instructor of Social Media Marketing in the Culverhouse College of Commerce developed program content, and Maria Sanders, a graduate student in the Masters of Marketing program assisted AERN in presenting a program on Social Media Marketing on October 23.

The Bibb County Chamber of Commerce held its Holiday Open House on December 2, and Patterson shared AERN Center resources with the business owners in attendance.

Entrepreneur Al Barnett expressed his gratitude for the NOEW experience, “NOEW taught us more than we can say. First, preparing for NOEW taught us ‘how to pitch,’ how to improve our executive summary, deck, and accompanying documents. Next, it offered us ‘great help’ from Delta Regional and other supportive organizations.

Many of the people gave us direction and ideas that we only dreamed of pursuing. Most importantly, the experience opened the door to meaningful contacts, those interested in making investments or helping others find good investments. Being ‘referred’ or ‘introduced’ to those in the business was huge! We are very grateful for the organizations that came together to make it possible for us to participate.

‘Thank you.”

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for creative short films with global impact underlying themes of diversity, positivity and community and appealing across generational, racial and socioeconomic boundaries, and Jeff Howell of Howell’s Service Center with a specialized trailer system that allows backing a trailer without jackknifing. Both entrepreneurs and ESOs attended work sessions and pitch competitions with other start-up companies and engaged with investors to gain technical knowledge and access industry experts. Ms. Patterson commented, “The NOEW experience allows all participants to share ideas and best practices so that the entrepreneurial ecosystem is enhanced in the Delta region.”

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The Delta Regional Authority (DRA) held its second annual Delta Challenge pitch competition in Selma on Oct. 8, 2015, with AERN participating with other Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs) including Alabama Launchpad and The Arsenal Place Accelerator (2016 ESO), who hosted the competition.

The Delta Challenge is a series of “shark tank” style pitch competitions to identify and nurture entrepreneurs in the Delta region and the Alabama Black Belt. Sheryl Smedley, executive director of the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce and AERN’s partner in Selma, assisted the Arsenal staff in organizing the event.

Participants in the Selma Delta Challenge pitched their business ideas to a panel of judges who selected three winners and an alternate to advance to New Orleans Entrepreneurship Week (NOEW) at the Idea Village during spring 2016. The winners were G Momma’s Cookies, Revival Coffee Company and Just PlugIn. The Wright Call that Calls ALL was chosen as an alternate. The winners received a $1,500 Delta Entrepreneurship Network (DEN) fellowship award to participate in NOEW, where they showcased their ideas to investors, participated in workshops and connected with industry experts and mentors, as well as other entrepreneurs.

The DEN addresses regional deficiencies in capital, training and best practices by connecting entrepreneurs to support organizations, educators and investors, which strengthens the entrepreneurial ecosystem. DRA Federal Co-Chairman Chris Masingill said of the network, “Our region’s entrepreneurs have the innovation and creativity to develop highly successful and scalable products, and ideas to grow our regional economy as well as identify solutions to our region’s greatest challenges.”
Business Professor Discusses Uses of Social Media in Monroeville

By COKIE THOMPSON
UA Journalism Student

The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network and the Monroeville Chamber of Commerce hosted a luncheon for local business owners with special guest Susan Fant, a professor in the Marketing Department of the Culverhouse College of Commerce. She spoke about how small businesses can use social media to meet their needs.

Fant introduced several platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but she noted that not every business will benefit from a presence on every social networking site.

“You gotta pick the platforms that suit your business,” Fant said. “You gotta pick the platforms where your customers are at.”

Fant spoke about the difference between followers or likes and customer engagement and the struggles business owners face to overcome that gap, especially in spaces people look to for leisure or entertainment.

“We’ve got to integrate our content with people’s beach pictures,” Fant said.

The Monroeville Chamber of Commerce held the event as part of National Small Business Appreciation Week. Sandy Smith, the group’s executive director, said it’s part of an ongoing effort to provide resources Monroeville doesn’t typically have access to.

“We do something every year around this time to honor small businesses which are the backbone of our chamber,” Smith said.

Smith said the number of large employers in the community has gone down, so events like this one and groups like the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network are more important than ever.

“I think the future of our economy is the small, maybe ten and under businesses,” Smith said. “And things that people can do themselves rather than waiting for this big corporation to come in, because those days are kind of over.”

Emmie Jernigan, director of the Women’s Business Center, said small businesses are the backbone of communities like Monroeville across the state and programs like the luncheon give them access to resources and information they might not have otherwise.

Although some of what she does is help businesses get started, she also works to build and maintain relationships with existing business owners.

“A lot of times, existing businesses get caught or have trouble and don’t know where to go,” Jernigan said. “I usually try to walk around in our communities and let people know who I am so they feel comfortable coming to me for resources or advice even.”

Beyond the advice, events like the luncheon give local business owners the space to network with each other to the help the community grow.

“Social media is hugely important, but so is face to face interaction,” Jernigan said. “To me, having these kinds of events are hugely important.”
Entrepreneurship Center Opens in Hale County

After much planning and engagement with local business owners and women, AERN held the grand opening and ribbon cutting for its Hale County Entrepreneurial Center on Feb. 25, 2015, in the HERO (Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization) office in Greensboro. HERO Executive Director Pam Dorr hosted the event. Although the threat of winter weather was in the forecast, Dorr and AERN Director Mary Patterson were excited to officially open the new center to local business owners and entrepreneurs. Sen. Gerald Allen, R-Ala., braved the cold rain to stop in and visit with local residents who came to enjoy refreshments and learn about AERN resources.

Patterson explained the benefits of having a dedicated computer in the HERO office so that entrepreneurs can research a business idea and develop a business plan using the library of resources and software provided, such as Business Plan Pro. Bruno Business Librarian Paul Brothers provided a training session at the time the equipment was installed so that the HERO staff could utilize the many features of the AERN website and relay business questions to the Brune Institute of Business Administration, and plans to offer workshops and seminars as needed. The opening of the Hale County AERN Center was made possible by a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (administered by ADECA) and support from The University of Alabama.

The Shopper: Scaling Success in Pickens County

When Karen Long faced the possibility of losing her job at the Shoppers Guide in 2011 when the previous owner decided to sell, entrepreneurship and the dream of owning her own business became a reality. After seeking advice from her friends, family and the professionals at AERN, Long was able to secure financing and purchase the business that she had managed for seventeen years. Since 2011, the business has doubled in size and has exceeded all of Long’s expectations.

“I paid off the business in 2015 and began to make plans to purchase a new building with more space and new equipment which brought in untapped revenue,” Long said. “The new location is much better with more parking and a warm, welcoming atmosphere for the customers that seek our products, and everyone seems to enjoy the vintage theme.

“We did a complete remodel using a local contractor, Bill Huff of Quality Home Maintenance and Repair, and (we) tried to use products from local businesses,” she said.

To increase revenue, The Shopper has expanded to the internet and has attracted new customers from Columbus, Macon, Tuscaloosa and surrounding areas. The internet has added to the customer base with some customers as far away as Nebraska. It is delivered to over 11,500 households with ads for the local grocery stores and other businesses, which helps to boost their sales and to keep dollars in the local economy. Long has built her business by closing the seasonal revenue gaps with new products that attract customers throughout the year such as invitations, cards, banners and brochures. She has plans to expand the weekly paper and introduce 3D personalized cards and fundraisers for the local schools.

Long reflected on success in a small, rural town. She said, “You have to change with the times, count your blessings, help others and remember the customer is always right. Be dependable and service your customers in a timely manner.” Long has added employees since her expansion and credits her success to dependable employees who have worked at the Shopper for many years.

“One advantage to rural living,” Long believes, “is that your friends and neighbors always have your back. I have learned from experience that you should always try to learn from local outlets such as AERN, schools and other professionals to help with your planning, finance and marketing so that you learn the ropes and gain confi-
On the Road With AERN

The Bistro Opens In Demopolis

Ashley Coplin and Mary Patterson Present Seminar at Demopolis Chamber Breakfast

Mary Patterson, Dr. Craig Armstrong and Tommie Syx worked with entrepreneurs at The Edge.

Dr. Armstrong teaches workshop to UA student entrepreneurs and area business owners in 2015.

Jeff Howell, left, of Howell Service Center works with student Zack Freeman.
Left, Maria Sanders presents a social media marketing seminar at Black Belt Treasures in Camden in 2015. Right, Sulynn Creswell, Black Belt Treasures, director, Mary Patterson, and Maria Sanders spoke to artist entrepreneurs.

Left, Vance-Ellison House Bed Breakfast held its ribbon cutting and open house in Centreville in 2015. Right, the Bibb County Chamber of Commerce held its holiday open house in December 2015.

Above, AERN hosts a workshop on low-cost marketing ideas presented by Kimberly Hutcheson to an audience of business owners and local leaders in Vernon. Above right, Mary Patterson with members of the Aliceville Rotary Club. Patterson spoke to members about AERN resources. Below right, Brenda Tuck, Marengo County, Greg Sheek, Alabama Launch Pad, and Mary Patterson spoke at the Rural Development Session at the EDAA conference at the Grand Hotel in Point Clear.
Patterson, director of AERN, said, “It is rewarding to play a role in laying the foundation for success, and at AERN, we work to mentor small business owners on their journey as they grow and expand.”

Above, Karen Long, owner of The Shopper works on new printing equipment at the new location of her business. Below, Long and members of her staff show off the antique cash register that she purchased to carry out the vintage theme.