On a rainy October afternoon, Aliceville Public Library Director Nelda Hudgins sits in a burgundy recliner in the middle of the library.

The library shares the Aliceville Civic Center with the Chamber of Commerce and the Senior Activity Center. The library’s building is on the opposite end of the block from City Hall, a renovated armory that now looks like a city hall.

Earlier, that morning, a group from UA’s Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network (AERN) led by Paavo Hanninen, co-director, and Todd Hines, Bruno business reference librarian, made the 60-mile trek from Tuscaloosa to train the library staff on using the new computer, printer, and small business software provided by the University.

The two-hour training session was for Hudgins and her staffers Teresa Gibson and Katie McFarlin, for Debbie Fason of the Chamber of Commerce located across the hall, and for Mary Bess Paluzzi from City Hall.

This day, and every Thursday, Hudgins keeps the library open until 8 p.m., so with long hours and “rain-out” weather, kicking her legs up for minute while waiting for a reporter to arrive made sense.

What also made sense was putting AERN resources in the centrally located and heavily used library rather than any other public place in Pickens County. The library is fast becoming not only a library but also a hub of community activity and information exchange.

“We were already having patrons come in and ask us if we had information on how to find grants to start a business or how to write a business plan,” Hudgins said. “So when Alan [Harper] and Mary Bess [Paluzzi] from the city approached me on the possibility of doing this with the University of Alabama, I couldn’t see anything negative about it. I thought, yeah, this is great.” Hudgins and staff quickly started renovating the audio-visual room, directly off the main library.

The new small business planning center now features the new Dell computer, small business software, and a printer from AERN next to a seven-foot shelving unit bought by the City of Aliceville for housing the AERN reference books.

The addition of the AERN resources is just one of several recent improvements to make the library an information and education center for the 2,600-population town near the Tombigbee and Sipsey rivers. Others improvements include increasing the number of high speed access computers in the computer lab from two to six, renovating the children’s library, and offering Spanish language classes for the people of Pickens County.

The library is open weekdays from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. except for an hour for lunch and is open on Saturday from 9 until noon. It stays open later on Thursday to allow working adults and school kids whose after-school hours are spent in sports and other activities to have a chance to use the library.

To give her library staff consistent schedules, Hudgins stays late every Thursday and offsets her hours by coming in after lunch (except for the day of the AERN training).

On this particular day, Jill Unruh, a resident from nearby Macon, Mississippi is working on the new AERN computer. She is prepping for the upcoming state-licensing exam to sell (continued on next page)
Flash back to Macon County, Alabama, 1881, the year Booker T. Washington established Tuskegee Institute. The people there were suffering because newly freed men and women were still prepared to work only in subsistence farming while all around them society and the economy were changing.

Washington started his school with a yearly budget of $2,000, no teachers, no students, no buildings and no campus—but plenty of cynics who expected the experiment to fail. The first step for Washington and his initial students was to build a kiln. Why a kiln? To make bricks to make buildings and buildings to make what is now one of the flagship historically black universities in the world, Tuskegee University.

Flash forward to Macon County, Alabama, 2005, and another self-determination champion, Carlos Finkley, becomes the obvious choice to lead a young community development organization in Tuskegee. The Tusk-Mac Community Development Corporation was initiated in 1997 to strengthen Tuskegee University’s involvement in greater Tuskegee-Macon County. A HUD-HBCU grant followed, opening the door for renovating a building and hiring a staff.

During his school days, a hunger for knowledge led Finkley to places like Alabama State University in Montgomery to major in biology and minor in chemistry, San Antonio, Texas, for Army medic training, A&M in Huntsville for his master’s degree, and Ohio State University to pursue a doctorate in molecular biology. Just a year from completing OSU’s molecular genetics doctoral program, he received a taste of community outreach work. And to Finkley, it tasted a lot like chocolate chip cookies.

A requirement for the doctoral program was community service. Finkley chose to work as a volunteer assistant at Ohio State’s Cooperative Extension Center. It was in a tough neighborhood. His job was to help candidates walking in the door to process paperwork for home improvement grants. One who sought his help was an insurance. Passing the exam will allow her to represent her new employer, State Farm Insurance.

Since patron registration at the library has more than tripled in the last six years, having someone in the small business center using the AERN resources—reading, typing, clicking a mouse, developing plans to grow Pickens County, one small business at a time, is now more than just a possibility; it’s a reality.

AERN business books have a new home in the Pickens County Library in Aliceville.
84-year-old woman living in a run-down house. A stickler for detail, Finkley helped her fill out her application for home improvement quickly and accurately. He developed a rapport with her and on follow-up visits she insisted on seeing him only.

Months passed and the same 84-year-old woman came to the center demanding to see him. She brought with her a plate of still-warm chocolate chip cookies made in her new oven in her newly renovated home. He recognized her immediately.

“It almost brought me to tears. I can almost taste them now,” Finkley said. “She told me she didn’t know what she would have done had I not helped her. All I could think to say was, ‘I’m here to help,’ and ‘if there is anything else I can do for you, just let me know.’” This was the day Finkley caught the community service “bug.”

“Just knowing you have made a direct impact on someone’s life even if you didn’t do anything but facilitate a process to me was something I was excited about, versus me being in a laboratory somewhere working on some scientific experiment,” Finkley said. “It was that experience that really drove me to get more involved in community and economic development.” The bug drove him back to Alabama to A&M for his master’s degree and to his new office at the CDC in Tuskegee in a renovated structure that once housed the county health department.

And now Finkley has a new partner, the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network. He is moving quickly to establish AERN in his area. Finkley’s office already had a focus on recruiting industry. But “to keep from becoming dependent on industries owned from outside, we are nurturing the entrepreneur who is local,” Finkley said. “A business owner who is from Tuskegee is more likely to stay in Tuskegee. If you help them solidify their stake in Tuskegee by helping them become a sound business owner, they are less likely to go anywhere else, even if they expand into a $100 million a year industry.”

Finkley gets excited when he describes how he and a couple of Macon County citizens “cracked the back on the new books” from AERN. As can be witnessed on the center’s website, www.tuskmac.org, Tusk-Mac personnel strive to be accessible and are already networking tightly with many other partners such as Tuskegee University, the City of Tuskegee, Macon County Commission, Tuskegee Housing Authority, Auburn University’s Economic Development Institute, USDA, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and local lending institutions.

AERN supplied a computer, printer, books, software, and training to the Community Development Center to enable potential business people from the area to use the new resources to create a proper business plan, one that meets the standards of UA’s College of Commerce and Business Administration.

AERN has helped Finkley achieve some of his goals for Tusk-Mac because the software and reference material let prospective entrepreneurs do advance work on their own. Finkley has retooled group training already in place. Instead of working one on one with people in different stages of writing a business plan, he has designed a Thursday night workshop where he, staff, and work-study students from Tuskegee University cover a new section of the business plan every week. One week the subject is marketing, the next strategy, the next, personnel, the next, products and services, and so on.

Having AERN software and a computer lab on site allows people to come in throughout the week and catch up at their own convenience. So when Thursday night comes back around, everyone in the class is doing the same thing.

Finkley is excited about Tuskegee and Macon County’s future. Some of that enthusiasm is fueled by the tourism draw of the Tuskegee Airmen Museum, Tuskegee University, the Kellogg Conference Center, and the annual Booker T. Washington Economic Development Summit.

Finkley is also excited about industry coming to Macon County, such as Halla Climate Systems, a supplier of the Hyundai automobile plant near Montgomery. But what he is most passionate about is home, business, and capital ownership by the people of Macon County. So when Finkley said that AERN’s box of goodies made him feel like a six-year-old at Christmas, perhaps it’s because the best gifts are in the giving.

**Credits:**

Feature articles and photos (except Alan Harper photo)* by Richard Andrew Mullins
Community Journalism Network, The University of Alabama

* Photo of Alan Harper courtesy of his website: http://campaignwindow.com/alanharper/
### Outstanding Local Partners for AERN

The Economic Development Association of Alabama for the coming year will have a strong AERN-area flavor in the coming year. Phillis Belcher, executive director of the Greene County Industrial Development Board in Eutaw and AERN’s representative in Greene County, has been elected president of EDA. Alan Harper, of Aliceville in Pickens County, which joins Macon County as a new AERN member this fall, will be first vice-president of EDA.

The AERN network congratulates its partners who will serve in economic development leadership positions at the state level this coming year.

### Outstansding Local Partners for AERN

**Phillis Belcher**, who represents Greene County AERN, is the new president of the Economic Development Association of Alabama.

**Alan Harper**, industrial development manager for the City of Aliceville and state representative for Pickens County, was instrumental in establishing AERN in Pickens County and is the new first vice-president of Alabama’s EDA.