Ron Mason is owner of the The Mason, a new bed and breakfast at 1006 Desotoville Ave. in Butler. In getting his business going, he benefited from the resources supplied by AERN through the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce. Mason opened the lodge in June, 2007 because he felt there was a need for a nice quiet place for people to stay. The idea came to him when he was trying to find places for friends and family to stay when they came to visit. “I felt there was a need for lodging in the area and I wanted to try to meet that need,” Mason said.

While he was putting his plan into action he used the AERN resources that he found at the Choctaw Chamber of Commerce to help him figure out how much things would cost and the details of a successful business plan. He also found a book that contained a complete guide to bed and breakfasts that proved to be an invaluable resource for him throughout the process.

When he is not at the lodge taking care of guests, Mason is district manager for Hardee’s restaurants and also sells real estate. Yet somehow he found time to start a new business. “It certainly was not easy,” he said. But his plan, support from the chamber, and the AERN tools made it manageable.

Developing the business plan was key to a successful opening. It acted like a road map showing where to go. Mason said, adding “without the plan and the Chamber and AERN there were things I would never have thought of.” For example, what licenses would he need to open this type of business? He found the answer to that and other questions at AERN.

He also attended a number of workshops focusing on everything from taxes to building a Web site. There
A New Bed and Breakfast

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was even one specifically on how to start and maintain a bed and breakfast.

“It definitely was not easy, but the tools provided by the chamber made the process flow smoothly,” he said.

The Mason consists of two duplexes giving it a total of four units, three for guests and one for the office. Each guest unit has two bedrooms, a bathroom, a living area and a dining area. There is a covered front porch and a deck on the back allowing guests to step out and get fresh air regardless of the weather. The price starts at $150 for one night, $125 for multiple nights, but can vary from $100 to $150 depending on length of stay and number of guests. Mason said that the lodge is filled about 70 to 80 percent of the time.

Mason gets satisfaction from seeing his guests happy and knowing that he can help people out, giving them a little peace of mind by making their stay in Butler the least of their worries. “It is one less thing they have to worry about because they know they have a great place to stay,” he said.

Jonathan Stinson

Got a Question about Business?

Got a question about business? AERN has world-class resources at the 13 counties in the network. The centers, usually associated with the local chamber of commerce, have everything you need to know about franchising, building customer bases, finding buyers and sellers, even finding a friend with similar business interests.

Here, in alphabetical order, are the most popular resources.

One Hundred and One [101] Best Businesses to Start. No buggy whip businesses here, just those that drive today’s marketplace.

AERNews. Go to http://aern.cba.ua.edu/about/index.html to read success stories about your neighbors who have started their own businesses.

Ask a Librarian. Go to http://aern.cba.ua.edu and talk with Bruno Business Librarians who are integral to AERN. They read and answer your e-mails promptly.

Bankable Business Plans. Great name for a book, because it tells it like it is: you are not going to get that loan you want without a sharp business plan that shows you have thought it through.

Best Customers (demographics of consumer demand). Don’t waste time with people who don’t want what you’re selling. This reference cuts to the chase by isolating the zip codes that buy heavily for certain products and services and examines

AERN website (http://aern.cba.ua.edu) where you can find AERNews and Ask a Librarian.
spending patterns by the demographic characteristics of households to reveal who are the best and biggest consumers.

**Business Plans Handbook.** There are multiple volumes in this book series and our onsite computers also contain the latest business plan software.

**Complete Small Business Guide.** One-stop resource for today’s entrepreneur, especially useful for startups.

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**AERNews Analysis Reveals Much Variety and Diversity**

How thoroughly is our newsletter, AERNews, covering the 13-county area that makes up the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network? We asked communication graduate student Kyun Kim to do what is known as a content analysis of all the newsletters since the first, which debuted in March 2001. There have been a total of 23. The results are not only interesting but will guide us in making decisions about what to include in future issues.

Since our newsletter’s purpose is to be a useful resource for our partners, it is important that the content reach the right audience with useful information. The analysis shows that in many ways, the newsletter is living up to its goals. Here are the highlights:

- All 13 counties in our coverage area have had at least one story in which their county was the central focus of the story.

- Not surprisingly, the largest county, Dallas, was the location for the greatest number of stories, 12. Next was a tie among Choctaw, Hale, Monroe, and Perry counties, all with 5.

- Again not surprisingly, the topic most often written about was “business startup.” Of the 80 stories in the 23 issues of the newsletter, 14 were about starting a new business. Second place was a tie between grand opening/open house and AERN staff-produced workshops, each with 11. Adding a new partner to the network was featured 8 times and special speakers or programs were also featured 8 times. Business expansion was the topic of 5 stories.

A goal of all editors is to make sure that content appeals to a diverse audience. In terms of the racial makeup of the stories featured, black and white proprietors appeared in our stories exactly on a 50/50 basis! Similarly, male and female proprietors were given equal play, with a slight edge to female owners. However, when it comes to photos, we ran 4 times as many photos of whites as we did of blacks, reflecting the fact that...
AERNews Analysis Reveals
(continued from page 3)
more whites are in leadership positions at local chambers, where many of our photos were taken.

AER Q & A with Paavo Hanninen

Paavo Hanninen wears several hats but the two most important are director, along with Annette Watters, of AERN, and director of the Small Business Development Center, both in the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration at The University of Alabama. We asked him to answer some basic questions we have heard from potential entrepreneurs over the years.

Q. Everybody’s always talking about how great it is to own your own business. But, really now, don’t owners of small businesses and their families work all the time, without much of a life outside of work? Why not just take a job with somebody else and maybe earn less, but have more spare time?

A. Small business owners sure do work long and hard. But most of them do it because they love it. And sometimes, they could earn more working for someone else. But owning their own business, either if they started it up themselves or if it has been passed on from an earlier generation, provides them a sense of satisfaction they wouldn’t get from “punching a clock.” While there are all sorts of aggravations and pressures associated with owning a small business, the feeling of being in charge of your own destiny overrides the rest. At the end of the day, it is a matter of personal choice.

Q. One of the most memorable advertising slogans is UPS’s “What can Brown do for you?” Let me throw this to you: What can AERN and its local affiliates do for me? Oh, I know there are all these resources and computer programs. But I need something more personal than that. I really need some handholding, some personal assistance and advice. As I get my business going, how do I go about doing that with AERN?

A. Starting a small business is not an easy task. Many, many people fail in the attempt—either right off the bat or down the road. Sometimes quietly, with little personal financial loss—but sometimes with spectacular financial pain involved. The AERN resources are there to help mitigate some of the risk inherent in any small business start-up.

Along with those physical resources, the local staff professional(s) at the partner agencies have been trained in the use of the materials. They can sit down with you and provide guidance in their use. And as your business idea matures, the AERN partners at The University of Alabama, including the Small Business Development Center, the Bruno Library, and CBER, can also step in with individual assistance and sup-port. As needed, the support can be provided in person, through the local chamber or agency or—in a nod to the modern age—through the AERN website and its direct connection to UA experts via its question and answer feature.

This was one of the useful findings of our research, something we would not have known had we not done the analysis. And it gives us something to work on in future editions. We hope you like our newsletter and will send us your ideas for improving it.