When Frankie Oglesby decided to buy a strip of buildings along Washington Street near the town square in Marion, Alabama, people thought she had gone mad. Oglesby said she made the purchase, “because the buildings were in such disrepair, with fallen-in roofs that I was sick of looking at them.”

The long-vacant buildings Oglesby bought in 2000 have been transformed into five sharp-looking businesses, all with owners who, like Oglesby, hope to see Marion become a thriving small town. Oglesby credits the transformation in part to the resources made available to her by the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network through the Perry County Chamber of Commerce.

“Frankie has been one of the prime movers,” says John Martin. “She has put her money where her mouth is in restoring downtown.” Martin, executive director of the Chamber, adds that Mia Bella’s, a clothing boutique in one of Oglesby’s buildings, was in business within 30 days after its business plan was drawn up. The owner feels that the AERN program was a “vital asset” to the process.

Oglesby, an instructor at Marion Military Institute, first moved to Marion in 2000. According to Martin, her first idea was to put all electrical utilities, including power lines, underground. However, there was not enough community interest in Marion’s downtown to warrant spending the money on the project.

The city of Marion, Alabama, is in the midst of an initiative to revamp its downtown and make it a more desirable place to shop. Renovations continue and currently empty buildings have plans for new uses.
So the Coalition of Women Entrepreneurs, of which Oglesby is a member, decided to find a way to bring more people to the town square. The result was a plan for all of Marion, not just Oglesby’s business interests.

The first step for Oglesby was purchasing the buildings off the town square. She wanted to develop the space into retail stores. However, she had to renovate the existing buildings before moving forward. She felt that lessons learned from an AERN workshop in 2001 came in handy after the buildings’ roofs were repaired and the rest of the remodeling was finished. “The workshop,” she said, “taught attendees about the process of making a business plan. We learned what to look for and what to think about.”

Shortly after, she opened Blue Byrd & Company, an antique store where dealers rent a small space in which to display their items. Then she was ready to find tenants for the remaining buildings. The first came in the summer of 2003, a gift shop named Tallulah’s. Mia Bella’s and a shoe store, The Shoe Boutique, followed, and then Bronaugh’s replaced Tallulah’s on the corner of Washington and Green streets. Soon a beauty salon will fill the place of an art gallery owned by Oglesby, the last space in her buildings.

Oglesby’s tenants have taken advantage of the resources that AERN has set up in Marion, including one computer program that helps small business owners lay out a plan. Oglesby said, “The program is user-friendly and very helpful. It is very impressive to show up at the bank with a plan on paper when trying to get financial aid for a business.”

Oglesby said, “The act of restoring the buildings has helped to preserve the history of Marion. If that section of buildings had been torn down, it would have ruined the town square atmosphere.”

Instead, Oglesby’s buildings house businesses that have helped keep residents’ money in Marion and make downtown a more desirable place to be.

Andrea Mabry, Intern  
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All photos in this issue of AERNews by Andrea Mabry unless otherwise indicated.
Johnnie Mae Richardson, like most 21st century Americans, uses her computer on a daily basis and always had to go online to order ink cartridges for her printer. Richardson found it tiresome to continue to order ink cartridges online and thought others in her community might feel the same way.

Furthermore, owning a business was always something Richardson wanted to do, and she thought that opening an office supply store in Eutaw, her hometown, would be very useful for the community. While reading the local newspaper, Richardson saw an advertisement for AERN. She decided to call and discuss her idea of opening an office supply store.

The first thing she needed was a building for her new store. She looked around town but was not able to find the right place. Richardson decided to call a friend about buying land to build a new building. Through this phone call, Richardson found out that there was a building set to go on the market. She was able to purchase the building for her new store and was prepared to complete the dream of owning a business.

Richardson’s new store is located across the street from the Greene County Industrial Development Board on the square in Eutaw. Phyllis Belcher, an AERN partner and director of the Center, immediately made AERN resources and high speed Internet available to Richardson. Through these resources Richardson was able to compile information she needed to become a business owner.

Belcher told AERN, “Johnnie Mae Richardson is exactly the kind of client we like to work with through our AERN partnership. We will spread the word, using her as our latest example of entrepreneurial initiative in Greene County. She used AERN’s technical and human resources to their fullest advantage in getting her business going.”

The AERN provided Richardson with books containing vital information about small businesses and a quiet area to read. When Richardson met with AERN’s co-director, Paavo Hanninen, he told her how to use AERN resources to research exactly what she needed, a list of distributors and wholesalers. Once Richardson had this list, she used the Internet the AERN provided to look through the distributors and wholesalers to find the items she wanted to sell in her store.

Richardson was well on her way to opening her store, but she needed employees because she had a great job at the bank that she did not want to give up. Doris Johnson, a friend of Richardson, was her first employee. Johnson had an accounting degree and experience in accounts receivable and clerical and retail work. Then Richardson’s niece, Sabrina Davis, was also looking for a job. She was someone Richardson could trust, so Richardson hired Davis as her second employee.

It took about five months to go through the entire process of starting the business, but on January 19, 2008, Richardson opened her store, Eutaw Office Supply. When the store first opened, Richardson offered a few office supplies and electronics. Since then, Richardson has added many more products like jump drives, digital cameras, iPods, and digital recorders.

“I would like to thank AERN for making the resources available to me and for being professional and courteous during the process of starting my business,” Richardson said.

The closest Wal-Mart to Eutaw is about 45 miles away, so Richardson’s store fills an important community need. Several customers have come in to ask for specific items. If she doesn’t have what they want, Richardson special orders it and the customer has it a few days later.

“Our store motto is ‘Small Business with Big Ideas for Serving Our Community,’” Richardson said. That is exactly what the Eutaw Supply Store is for—the community.

Richardson said that she wants the store to be there for her community’s office and school needs.

“I’m looking forward to getting a bigger building and having more customers find out about my business” creating an opportunity to “work with the community and supplying all the offices and schools with the supplies they need.” Richardson said.

Richardson said that 2008 was long and brought some hard times, but hopes 2009 will be better. She has been advertising Eutaw Office Supply by word of mouth, in the newspaper, and on one radio station.

“I would like to thank AERN for making the resources available to me and for being professional and courteous during the process of starting my business,” Richardson said.

Hannah Seay, Intern
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A Perry County entrepreneur who has taken full advantage of AERN’s resources at the Chamber of Commerce in Marion, while also receiving help from John Martin, chamber director, is Milford Oakes. Oakes has opened Anderson’s Banquet Hall, a facility that can seat up to 200 people.

Oakes says that business is already doing well. He has been open just a month and seven groups have used the facility for everything from wedding receptions to family reunion gatherings.

Equipped with a sound system, tables, chairs, and arrangements for catering if necessary, the banquet hall can be rented for any kind of event where large numbers of people need to congregate. There is no other comparable facility in Perry County.

Oakes says that he is but one among many recent entrepreneurs who have used AERN resources during the past few years in Marion. Several have received chamber director Martin’s help using AERN resources to research information about business plans, financing, finding suppliers, and marketing to customers.

In remodeling the building, Oakes was able to do much of the work himself, saving a good bit on labor. He said, “The biggest costs of opening the banquet hall were supplies, equipment, and furnishings.” He believes that using AERN references enabled him to get these items at better rates than he would have been able to find on his own.

Milford Oakes readies Anderson Banquet Hall for a wedding reception. Though the space had only been open a month at the time, Anderson’s had already had seven events.

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