It’s Party Time in Dallas County!

Candace Johnson, Selma-Dallas County director of tourism, said new owner Kim Williams proves the old saying true: “If you put your mind to it, you can do it.” And with the help of AERN’s resources at the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, Williams saw her dream of a small business come true.

“Another mother and I were at a baseball practice last year and I was trying to plan my 8-year-old son Matt’s birthday party,” Williams said about her small business start-up idea. “We began by discussing that since entertainment assets in Selma/Dallas County were limited,” she said, “I would end up spending quite a bit of money out of town for his birthday. I began complaining out loud, ‘Why aren’t there any inflatable rentals here in Selma like other towns? This would at least give us moms a choice,’ and the more the question changed from a complaint into an idea: Why couldn’t I be the one to start an inflatable rental business here in Selma/Dallas County?”

With that, Williams paid a visit to the chamber of commerce to research her idea with AERN resources. By April 2008 her business, Pop-up Party, LLC, located at 123 Deerfield Drive, was incorporated. By May party equipment was ready for rental. The company’s website, which shows photos of the business’ inventory, is www.popupparty.net/service.html and the e-mail address is info@popupparty.net.

Williams knew that wanting to start a business and actually opening the doors to customers were two different things. “I had several questions about how to create a business plan,” she said. “So I went to the chamber to see if they had any answers for me. The personnel explained to me that specialized business software provided by AERN was written specifically to assist people like me wanting to begin a small business.” Williams said that with the assistance of AERN, her initial idea gradually changed from farfetched dream to reality.

She strongly recommends that anyone with an idea for a new business should make use of the AERN. She says it was especially helpful in showing her whether her idea was feasible from the standpoint of costs. “If you find it’s not,” she said, “you should drop your idea or move on to another idea.”

“Without AERN’s help, getting Pop-up Party’s rental business going would have taken a lot longer,” she said. The staff at the chamber started up the software for her and then walked her through the program and showed her examples of how other businesses had used it.

“Williams returned the chamber’s favor,” said Tourism Director Johnson, “by becoming a chamber of commerce member.”

According to Johnson, Williams’ business is doing well. “People are very impressed with her quality and customer service. She has no competition here, so her business is good for us to recommend,” she said.

Williams describes her business as “going pretty good,” and for the majority of weekends this past summer she was booked most Saturdays and some Sundays. Williams also said that signs, fliers, letters sent to churches and schools, newspaper articles, and the Dallas County Yellow Book are helping her get the word out.

Williams said the 17-foot wet slide, combo bouncers, and moonwalk-with-slide are among the most popular pop-ups. In 2010 she hopes to purchase a 30-foot slip-n-slide and a snow cone machine.

Lindsey Holland
UA Journalism Student

One of the attractions offered by Pop-up Party includes this 17’ slide for wet or dry use.
Introducing Our New AERN Outreach Coordinator

Adelaide Wood has joined the staff of the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network as outreach coordinator.

“We welcome our newest staff member,” said Annette Watters, co-director of AERN. “We have grown so much over the past few years that this addition was essential in delivering our services to rural Alabama communities. Adelaide will be visiting all the sites this year to keep AERN’s momentum going and to learn more about the needs of potential entrepreneurs throughout the state.”

Wood is a Tuscaloosa native, graduating with a degree in economics from The University of Alabama in 1983. She has lived here ever since and has worked in several fields as well as serving as a volunteer for several organizations, including Alabama Public Radio, the public radio network that reaches most Alabama counties. She considers herself a native of the broader Black Belt region as well, and believes she is familiar with problems and opportunities in rural Alabama. “My dad grew up in Greensboro, so I have deep roots in the area.” Wood has worked in banking, marketing, and as a researcher and consultant. She has also worked with elementary schools and in landscape design.

Wood started her AERN job in March, but already has visited several sites. She is still being introduced to people in the field and already senses that the AERN services are needed, appreciated, and widely used.

One of AERN’s goals is to provide computers and peripheral equipment, business software, and other business research resources in convenient sites such as chambers of commerce, industrial development agencies, and other nonprofit organizations (our partners) whose missions include rural economic development. “We have a wide assortment of books. ‘We even have ones to help you start your business on e-Bay. We help make these tools more user-friendly by holding workshops about them or through individual counseling,’” she said.

Another goal is to help citizens start their own business or upgrade a current one. In rural counties of 20,000 or less, where unemployment sometimes reaches mid to upper teens, “that’s a lot of unemployed people,” she says. “If just one person in that town starts a business and hires five people, and then someone else in another town in the county does the same thing, that can make a big difference in a small county.”

Wood sees the results of the lagging economy all around, but believes things will pick up as we go through the year. “Right now people are just hanging on,” she said. “We are all just going to have to get more creative. It may be painting houses, baking cakes, or, you name it, to generate income that can lead to an established business.”

Wood said that she’s already having fun on the job. “It was so much fun,” she said recently after a visit to one of the sites. “These people are willing to do anything to improve their towns.” The best part of her job, she said, is being able to help others “one small business at a time.”

Lindsey Holland
UA Journalism Student

The winter 2009 AERN newsletter got a great deal of notice around the state when it featured color photos and a story with the engaging headline “Marion Catches Entrepreneurial Fever.” After the Perry County story and photos ran in our newsletter, it was picked up by several newspapers. The Tuscaloosa News, for example, ran it on the section front of its local news section. We also ran it on our very newsy AERN website.

The story and photos were by senior journalism student and intern Andrea Mabry. She spent a whole day in Marion talking to entrepreneurs and taking a remarkable set of photos in attractive downtown Marion.

AERN got several e-mails from folks who had heard about or seen the story and felt some equally worthy businesses got left out. The story didn’t intend to leave anyone out, but

its focus was on businesses that have used AERN resources rather than focusing on all Marion, Alabama businesses. We were very pleased that so many people were talking about something positive in the economy of rural Alabama.

What did our partners think about that issue of AERNews and what uses, overall, are they making of one of our most expensive communication tools?
We send the newsletters to the partner agencies. Then what happens?

To find out, we used our interns to call the partners and interview them. We were able to reach all but Macon County. So we have some good data on how people are using the newsletter. Last year, you may recall, we did a content analysis of our newsletters to find out whether we were featuring just a few counties or just a few types of business. That study showed us that we have been getting news from all the counties and that we feature a variety of businesses, men and women, minority and nonminority sources.

There is good news and bad news from our recent telephone survey. The good news is that nine of the 12 responding counties are distributing at least half of the 80 or so newsletters we send; but that also means that three counties are not. In fact one county reported that only 10 or 15 of the copies find their way into the hands of people who might become inspired to start or expand a business as a result of reading the newsletter. The rest of the newsletters, sadly, “age in place” and are tossed out or filed away when the next issue comes in.

Another positive is that we learned that 100 percent of our county partners noticed and were impressed with that issue that featured Perry County and Mabry’s colorful photos.

We wanted to know—if we could send extras—would our partners mail them out? Unfortunately, most said their budgets would not permit this. While nine partner agencies said they have a mailing list, only five said they would use that mailing list to give greater circulation to the newsletter. These same five, by the way, are already mailing the newsletter to a limited list. Other AERN partners said they just didn’t have the money. Our survey respondents said the average cost of mailing to a mailing list would be about $50, though two said the cost would be closer to $200.

We were pleased to learn some of the ways our partners make use of this newsletter. All said the newsletter is displayed in the office, but eight said they also make it available specifically to AERN resource users, and nine partners take copies to civic clubs and other groups with whom they regularly meet. Research shows that pass-along readership of publications is very important and that some publications average four to five readers of a single issue. If that is the case with AERNews, then 80 copies could actually mean 400 readers!

When you add to that the occasional story that gets picked up by other media, AERNews can boast of a very large exposure indeed.

All survey respondents agreed that if the newsletters are just left in the office without making any other effort to distribute them, there would be leftovers when the next batch came in. So, our challenge is to find effective ways of getting the AERN newsletter into the hands of people who would benefit from them but who don’t come to an AERN partner agency office to pick them up.

While use of our website was not covered in our survey, we are hearing from more and more of you that you are making good use of aern.cba.ua.edu. We want to increase traffic to all sections of the website. As you may have noticed, we post a pdf of all our newsletters and the annual Report to Our Partners. So if you need back copies, you can get them there.

We will ponder these matters and we welcome additional suggestions for improving communication about the resources and the entrepreneurial potential associated with the AERN program in rural Alabama counties.

Edward Mullins  
Professor Emeritus of Journalism,  
The University of Alabama,  
Department of Journalism, and  
AERN journalism student intern supervisor
Economic Indicators for AERN Counties

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<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Total Personal Income (Thousands of dollars)</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Civilian Labor Force</th>
<th>Employment</th>
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<td>Regional Percent of State</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis; and Alabama Department of Industrial Relations.

Six percent of the state’s population lives in the AERN region. Five percent of the total income, labor force, and employment occurs in these counties. As the economic status of these counties improves, all of Alabama benefits!

AERN on the internet...

Connecting Entrepreneurs to Resources where you can find the following information and more.

1. AERN announcements and upcoming events
2. Success stories
3. Print out resources
4. Databases
5. Training tools
6. Visit the Alabama Virtual Library
7. The Small Business Handbook
8. Other helpful websites and tips
9. The newest issue of AERNews