Selma residents have gotten a taste of Robert Armstrong’s grandmother’s chocolate chip cookie recipe, and they have come back for more. Recently Armstrong started a microbakery that specializes in cookies. Before he opened his business, he used AERN resources to formulate a plan and jumpstart the business, which is located in the heart of downtown Selma.

After Armstrong graduated from the University of Alabama, he spent a brief time in Birmingham before moving back to Selma. When he went back to his hometown, he decided to pursue his idea of marketing a family recipe.

In educating himself about how to operate a business, he came across the AERN resources at the Selma-Dallas Chamber of Commerce. The resources were very helpful, he said, when it came to understanding the rules and regulations of selling food. His business idea percolated for almost a year while he returned again and again to the chamber of commerce to go through the AERN reference and research materials.

The business opened in October 2009 with a strong emphasis on community enrichment. As further evidence of Armstrong’s commitment to his fellow citizens, Selma Good Company donates 10 percent of its profit to an international Christian ministry called Integrity Worldwide.

“My grandmother loves this,” he said. “But she thinks it’s hilarious. I said, ‘I’m going to make a million dollars from these cookies one day.’ ‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ she responded.” His grandmother doesn’t mind sharing her secrets, though. And, in addition to marketing his grandmother’s recipe, he’s come up with a few adaptations that are his own.

Armstrong says he also had another reason for moving back to Selma, a city that by 1960 had more than 28,000 in population but has decreased to about 18,000 currently. “I always said, ‘I’m not going to give up on this town.’ I lived in Birmingham for awhile getting my feet wet, but I always knew I would come back.” So he returned to help keep the town vibrant, even as some people have moved away.

“I want the town to be an attractive place to live and it’s got to have young people. Young people have to want to move here. There’s some negativity because of things that happened in the past. I’ve heard people saying that it was great one day and now it’s kind of deteriorating. But I don’t see it that way.” Selma will always be his home, he said.

**Selma Microbakery—an AERN Success Story**

“When I heard from the AERN intern that they were interested in a new microbakery in Selma, we marketed it as a Selma Good Company cookie,” said Anice Armstrong, Robert’s grandmother. “The AERN information provided Armstrong with much-needed insights to facets of the business community. “There are just a lot of people here who aren’t really educated about starting their own business,” he said referring to Selma. “There’s definitely a need here.”

Brett Bralley
AERN Intern
Since its ribbon cutting ceremony in 2008, the new AERN center at the Alexander City Chamber of Commerce seems to be making a positive difference in creating businesses and jobs, says chamber director Marvin Wagoner. Over the last few months, Wagoner has noticed an increase in visits to the AERN site, and he says he can attribute the opening of at least one business and the upcoming opening of another to the owners’ use of AERN resources.

“It’s had a positive impact in creating two things: new retail and a few new jobs,” he said. “I think there has been a definite correlation with having an AERN site in the chamber of commerce and having new businesses open.”

Wagoner is fervently promoting the AERN resources every chance he gets, he said, whether it is through his weekly spot at the 8 o’clock hour on the local radio station 97.5, or his monthly television spot on WAXC-TV, which is a statewide broadcast, where he also discusses chamber business.

Wagoner refers to the site when he discusses business in the local newspaper. He usually brings up the site to local city groups at their meeting. “Any venue that I have available to me, I present,” he said. “This [AERN] site and the [AERN] resources should make a difference with what [the chamber is] doing to replace job losses we have had.”

Wagoner says another important facet of the Alexander City AERN is chamber volunteer John Cater. “He sits down and counsels the individuals coming to use our resources and helps them and guides them through the resources,” he explained. “It has been a huge plus for the user.”

Part of the site’s success is due to Wagoner himself. Wagoner worked for several years for the Alabama Department of Transportation. After that, he was the general manager of Satterfield Welding and Industrial Supply. “It just seemed to be a natural progression to the position I have now,” he said. “I am very honored to have it and to have the opportunity to lead Alexander City to the growth it deserves.”

2008 ribbon cutting ceremony of the AERN center at the Alexander City Chamber of Commerce.
One of the newest Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network partners has helped its community see recent successes. New businesses have sprouted in Butler County and have used the business resources at the newest AERN center. Francine Wasden, the director of the Greenville Area Chamber of Commerce and AERN partner, said that three businesses that used AERN resources have opened, while two others are in the process of getting started.

Southern Treasures, a consignment shop. Gracefully Done by Elizabeth Reid, an art gallery that also offers art classes, and Nancy’s Heirloom Shoppe, a gift and heirloom sewing shop all three have opened in Butler County.

There are two other entrepreneurs who are looking at AERN resources while they research their business ideas, Wasden said. One is a spa and salon shop that is considering a Greenville location and the other business possibility is a bakery.

AERN’s success in Butler County could be due to the amount of promotion the center has done. “We’ve promoted [AERN] through our local civic organizations, the local newspaper has had a couple of articles and some exclamation about it, and it’s just mainly word of mouth, honestly,” Wasden said. “It has also been brought up at city council meetings.”

Though the AERN has certainly already helped generate business in Butler County, Wasden said she would like to see more entrepreneurs utilizing the resources the center has to offer. Those interested in starting their own businesses can use AERN resources to formulate business plans.

“We’d like to have more [activity], with the economy the way it is,” she said. “But we are hoping things are going to pick back up.” Despite the recent poor economy, Wasden says she sees great potential for Butler County. A positive sign is that the chamber of commerce has 319 members, which Wasden says is quite impressive for a county the size of Butler County.

The purpose of the AERN center, providing resources for entrepreneurs planning their own businesses, meshed with the vision of the chamber of commerce in Butler County. “It’s a perfect fit for us,” she said. “We have a great location, and our chamber is very active.”

Another factor that gives the area great potential, Wasden says, is its proximity to Montgomery. “Location, location, location,” she said. “We are small enough where you can know everybody, but we are still adding businesses. We see that in the next 10 years we will be perceived as being a lovely community that is easily accessible to Montgomery.” Wasden sees success in Butler County’s future.

Brett Bralley
AERN Intern
Shoe Repair Shop Expands Thanks to AERN

Husband and wife business owners Jack and Jane McKnight have been in retail business in Monroeville for quite some time. Earlier this year the McKnights decided to expand their business, McKnight Shoe Repair, and change their store’s name. The new business is a company that sells a wide variety of products and brands.

They used business resources at the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network site at the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce to help make the leap. Sandy Smith, director of the chamber of commerce, helped the McKnights utilize the AERN resources. “The assistance we provided was in helping rewrite their business plan, referring to some of the business plans available through AERN, and also providing more up-to-date demographics and doing research on competitive products in the area,” explained Smith.

The McKnights moved their shoe repair store from an old rented building to a new, wide-open facility. Smith said, “As a result of the move, the McKnights are able to offer more selection, particularly in women’s shoes.” The McKnights changed the business’s name to McKnight Liquidation to emphasize the wide variety of products they sell, including school uniforms, men’s work and recreation boots, and a wide selection of women’s shoes, according to an article in The Monroe Journal.

“We buy our merchandise from stores that have had to close their doors, and for other similar reasons,” said Jack McKnight in The Monroe Journal’s article. “That way, we can offer good quality merchandise at lower prices.”

Smith said the AERN materials helped the McKnights determine how many areas they would be catering to with their business. “We were able to pull information from the Buxton report that demonstrated that shoes are difficult to find in Monroeville/Monroe County and even in surrounding areas,” she said. “The store will serve clients in a larger area than just Monroeville.”

Brett Bralley
AERN Intern