Vesta Taylor had been her own boss for nearly 15 years. She owned and operated a gift shop for 10 years, and nearly five years ago she started an interior design business called Vesta Taylor Interiors in Greenville, Alabama. Taylor knows the key to growth for her small town business is networking and educating herself on new and more efficient business practices.

So, when she found out about the free services provided by the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network and its center located inside the Greenville Area Chamber of Commerce, Taylor was eager to utilize the resources. “When you live in a rural town, businesses like mine take time to grow and build. Interior design is not really a necessity in people’s lives,” Taylor said.

Taylor said that many people do not think of her business when shopping for curtains, blinds, hardwood floors, tile, and other home accessories, but they should. She said some of her prices are comparable or less to those of local home store giants, such as Home Depot and Lowes. “Window treatments are my specialty,” Taylor said. She loves what she does, but she wanted to come up with another product she could sell that could generate continuous income when design clients are scarce.

“I decided that I would pray about what we could do when there were no calls for design. Candles were the answer to my prayer. I’ve always loved candles, and I always sold them in my gift shop,” Taylor said.

So, she contacted some candle makers and decided to inaugurate her own candle line, the Vesta line, which she launched in November, 2011. Since then, she has scents representing the State of Alabama that are currently sold in the Governor’s Mansion Gift Shop. “Working with Vesta Taylor on this candle line not only allows me to promote Alabama small businesses and products, but it also gives people the chance to experience the Mansion through smell,” Bentley said. “This historic home is the people’s house, and through this candle line I hope that visitors feel that they are able to take a piece of it home.”

Taylor met Bentley after being selected to decorate the First Lady’s Parlor at the Mansion. Immediately, Taylor shared her two-week old signature

Left to right: Dianne Bentley, Alabama’s First Lady; Annette Watters, AERN Director; Mary Patterson, AERN Outreach Coordinator; Francine Wasden, Executive Director, Greenville Chamber of Commerce; and Vesta Taylor, owner of Vesta Taylor Interiors.
candle idea and Bentley was very interested. “She enjoyed the idea of having her own signature scent as well as scents representing Alabama. She’s a very southern Christian woman and her own scent is called cotton linen,” Taylor said. “It’s a very subtle scent.”

Francine Wasden, executive director of the Greenville Chamber of Commerce, said she has been pleased to have an AERN Center through which entrepreneurs like Taylor can find business research resources.

“I think it is a really good tool for this chamber. I’m hoping with the economy turning around, we’ll be able to find more people to use the service,” Wasden said. “I’m seeing people opening businesses and buying old buildings. People are very cautious though.”

Wasden said many of her clients or would-be clients do not realize the business assistance is free to those who live in the area. “I try to talk about it with different civic agencies to spread the word,” Wasden said. “Sometimes it’s overlooked that we have this free service and access to resources at the University of Alabama.”

Annette Watters, director of AERN, said not only does AERN want to help entrepreneurs in rural Alabama start businesses, they also want to assist business owners like Taylor to expand.

“She was expanding her business, and although she was very good at the work she does, she was a little insecure on some of the business aspects of expansion,” Watters said. “So, we have been counseling with her on cash flow management, accounting procedures, and those kinds of things.”

Though the relationship is new, Taylor already values the insight shared by Outreach Coordinator Mary Patterson. “When I met with Mary, one of the key things she asked was, ‘Who is paying you this week?’” Taylor said. To continue to build, you have to build funds. It’s not that I didn’t know that, but the way she explained it to me made me make it my first priority.”

Taylor’s goal is to design signature scents for a variety of customers. Taylor said she is looking forward to a continuous relationship with AERN as she attempts to expand her business statewide and into northern Florida. “I’m looking forward to learning things that I hadn’t even thought about,” Taylor said.

Kirsten J. Barnes

The Coffee Shoppe Opens in Selma

For Jackie Smith, starting her own business was a dream come true and an answer to a prayer. Since retiring as the Selma City Clerk in 2003, Smith had been commuting to work in Montgomery.

“I would leave home at about six in the morning, and sometimes I wouldn’t get home until after nine at night,” Smith said. “I wanted to get off the road and do something at home and be close to my family.”

So, Smith began researching business ideas. She realized one of the things she loved—fresh brewed coffee—wasn’t available in Selma.

“It was while conducting her research that she found the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, an outreach agency of the University of Alabama’s Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration.

“She was doing the right thing and was looking for information. She contacted the local chamber of commerce. The chamber is our partner and they referred her to us,” said Annette Watters, director of AERN. “We can’t be on the ground every day in every county. Our partners are there to help their constituents in our AERN rural areas.”

Kirsten J. Barnes
“When a rural entrepreneur wants the University of Alabama’s help, our partners let us know.”

Not only was Smith able to speak with Outreach Coordinator Mary Patterson about her specific needs, but she also was able to use the AERN resources located in Selma at her local chamber of commerce. These resources are provided free of charge by The University of Alabama’s administration and a federal grant for AERN.

“I was able to get information on my business plan and all types of tips for operating a successful coffee shop. Anything that they didn’t have there on the shelf was on a website that linked you directly to other resources. It was a lot of help,” Smith said. “Mary is a jewel. She not only shared with me her business knowledge and finance background, she took a personal interest in making sure that I succeeded and to make sure I had everything I needed.”

Smith opened her store, The Coffee Shoppe, on Nov. 14, 2011. Open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Friday and 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays, the restaurant is already getting requests to add a breakfast menu to its assortment of homemade pastries, salads, soups and panini sandwiches, as well as fresh ground coffee and espressos.

“The customers want me to grind and bag it. I’m thinking about it, but we’re not there yet.” said Smith, who has three employees, one part-time and two full-time. “Business is great and has steadily increased. We have our loyal customer-base and we have our share of tourists. Everyday we’re seeing more customers, new customers and customers bringing customers. We’re still seeing growth past the honeymoon period.”

Smith said she knows it is the hard work and preparation that has made the difference in her immediate success. But, she also has noticed another success story.

The Coffee Shoppe, just a few blocks from the Edmond Pettis Bridge, provides something Selma has longed for, for generations.

“Selma has always been a town that is divided by so many things: race, class, income. We’ve had our share of differences,” Smith said. “Today, The Coffee Shoppe is that place where white, black, young, old, lawyers, doctors, working people can all come together. It a place where a diverse group of people is enjoying good food and drinking good coffee.”

Kirsten J. Barnes

Aliceville Entrepreneur Buys Local Publishing Business

Karen Long Upton had never thought of owning her own business as she worked as the office manager for The Shoppers Guide in Aliceville, a job she held for 17 years. However, when the owner told her he was selling it and she could lose her job, Upton decided to make him an offer. “I did already know all the ins and outs of the production, and I was well established with the customers,” Upton said, recalling her logic.

She went to her local chamber of commerce and also spoke to State Rep. Alan Harper, who was then the economic development director for the City of Aliceville. They told her about the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, an outreach agency of the University of Alabama’s Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration.

“She was telling people she wanted to buy a business,” said Annette Watters, director of AERN. “We sort of talked her through the process. She needed financing, and we told her the ways she could get financing. We also told her that for an important legal transaction like this, she needed a

Left to right: Gladys Layton, Ed Long, Karen Long Upton and Delin Fuller.
“The University professionals came to the Shopper and looked at the business and examined the figures and gave me a list of things I would need to go forward,” Upton said of the people working with AERN. “The resources that were supplied to me by the University of Alabama were very helpful because of their objective view of the market. I had been in the business for 17 years and I was seeing everything from one point of view; it was a great relief to have fresh new eyes on the same concept.”

Although Upton knew how to run the business, she did not know how to finance a business.

“We were able to get her hooked up with a lender who was able to help her get financing and negotiate a deal with the owner,” said AERN Outreach Coordinator Mary Patterson, who has a background in finance and is a certified public accountant. “We just kind of talked to her a little bit about expanding, growing, and how to purchase a business.”

In addition, Upton was able to use AERN’s free service to help her retool her business plan and learn about pricing and costs. Upton said she did not know enough about bookkeeping and taxes, and it was essential to be able to trust that she was getting good information.

Watters said this is exactly how the program should work to help entrepreneurs in rural Alabama build the foundation they need to succeed.

“In my opinion she’s going to be a really good owner because she was running the business everyday,” Watters said. “She had on-the-ground ideas about better ways to do things. She is interested in improving the business. It was already a profitable business, and I think she’s going to make it more profitable.”

Two of the important assets that will help the business grow are its current employees. Gladys Layton has worked for The Shoppers Guide for over 27 years. Over the years she has held many different positions and is now the offset press woman and general manager. She was born and raised in Aliceville and knows nearly everyone in town. The Shoppers Guide is also proud to have Sandy Huff as the bookkeeper. The Huff family has been part of the Aliceville business community over 75 years with the local Piggly Wiggly supermarket.

Upton says, “We are trying to keep business and jobs here at home and hope to be able to employ more local talent as time and growth goes on.”

Kirsten J. Barnes