Getting an Extreme Business Makeover

BY GEORGE O'BRIEN | ON FEBRUARY 15, 2011 | IN FEATURES

Program Gives Small Businesses a Needed Lift

It's called Extreme Business Makeover. That's the name given to a program orchestrated by the Western New England College Law and Business Center for Entrepreneurship. Those getting the makeover present their business plan, hopes, and dreams to a panel of experts who analyze the information and dispense unvarnished advice that some participants may not want to hear. It's a learning experience for all those involved, and one of the many ways the center works to help small-business owners and acts as a catalyst for economic development.

Zee Johnson says she's always had a passion for books. A former schoolteacher, she grew up across the street from a public library in Richmond, Va., and spent most of her childhood in that facility, by her recollection. She told BusinessWest that it has long been her dream to open a bookstore and make literature her life and career. And it's a dream come true.

Well ... sort of. Olive Tree Books-n-Voices, the store Johnson opened in 2003 on Hancock Street in the heart of Mason Square in Springfield, which sells not only African-American-focused books, but also many religious items, bookmarks, and calendars, is still very much a part-time venture — open on weekends and by special appointment. Her day job, or jobs, as the case may be, involves human-resources work at both the Dunbar Community Center and the Martin Luther King Jr. Family Services (where she's a vice president), both located in that neighborhood.

It is her desire to someday make Olive Tree the day job, but she admits she needs help with determining if that could happen, whether it should happen, and how it can happen. She doesn't have all the answers she needs, but she has many more than she did following the latest installment of a program called Extreme Business Makeover.
Created and orchestrated by the Western New England College Law and Business Center for Advancing Entrepreneurship, the makeovers are designed to give small-business owners and nonprofit managers a chance to put their ideas, business plans, dreams, hopes, aspirations, and acknowledged challenges in front of a panel of experts to be dissected and analyzed.

Or, in the words of the center’s director, Eric Gouvin, it gives small-business owners a chance to “live vicariously” as a presenter in front of a makeover panel.

“They get feedback on their plan in front of a live audience, offering their thoughts, their plans, and their fears,” said Gouvin, noting that the center provides real-world learning experiences for graduate business and law students, while at the same time supporting the establishment and development of small businesses in Western Mass.

“Sometimes, when it’s an independent third party giving you unvarnished advice, it may not be what you want to hear, but it’s things you should listen to.”

To date, a wide range of businesses and nonprofits have been the subjects of makeovers, starting in the summer of 2007. That list includes Kahriptic Knights Publishing of Springfield; a franchise of a national chain of gyms called Fitness Together; Springfield-based theater company JELUPA Productions; Friends of the Homeless, also in the City of Homes; and an Amherst-based venture called CellAssist LLC, which is working to bring to the market a product that will enable users to employ a cell phone or other electronic device to get a quick diagnostic check of their automobile.

Hendeele Wilson, the principal of CellAssist, was the first makeover subject, and he says that experience yielded some practical advice that has helped him advance his concept to the point where he expects it to be ready for market later this year (more on that later).

For Johnson, the makeover was an eye-opening experience to say the least. She said the takeaways include everything from an understanding that she needs to market more aggressively to acknowledgement that she must fully understand who her customers are before she can properly serve them, to agreement that she needs to enable people to buy her various offerings online.

“It was extremely worthwhile to hear that feedback from professionals who really know business,” she explained. “It was great to hear from people who weren’t friends or customers and that could give me some hard, honest feedback.”

Johnson says she’s already putting some of the advice to work. She’s trying to extend her hours while also beginning the process of taking her Web site to a higher level.

For this issue, BusinessWest takes an indepth look at the Extreme Business Makeover process, and how it’s helping participants determine where they want to take their ventures, and how to take them there.

Sounding Boards
Johnson was quite familiar with Extreme Business Makeover before she sat before her panel of experts last December. But her experience with the program was from a completely different perspective.

Indeed, she was sitting in the audience for many of the previous makeovers, including those involving JELUPA, Friends of the Homeless, and Fitness Together. She thought she knew what it would be like when the spotlight was turned on her small business, but she admits that answering the questions and hearing the comments directed at her is much different than sitting in the back of
the room and watching someone else do it.  
“It was intense,” she said. “They got me to think about things I hadn’t been thinking about — but
needed to think about.”

This is what Gouvin had in mind when he conceptualized the Makeover program several
years ago. He said it’s based loosely on the Maine Business Venture Forum, a program he
took part in while practicing law in Portland.
“It was what amounted to group therapy for entrepreneurs,” he explained. “We’d meet once
a month at the law school; an entrepreneur
would present his business plan, and then
there’d be comments and questions from the
peanut gallery. It was a sharing and
networking opportunity — there was good
feedback for the business, good exposure for
the panel of experts, and people in the
audience were able to network and pick up a

few tips, because everyone has marketing issues, everyone has employment issues, and everyone
has cost-control issues.”

Gouvin said the same opportunities are part and parcel to the Makeover program, which is one of
a number of services provided by the Law and Business Center for Advancing Entrepreneurship to
what he called “low-income” business owners, meaning those who cannot afford professional
business or legal services at this stage of their operation. These services come in essentially two
categories: clinical and community outreach, with Makeover falling in the latter group.
In the former category are the center’s Small Business Clinic, which provides legal and business
services to entrepreneurs and small businesses. Law students work on transactional (non-litigation)
legal matters that are typical in the startup phase of a business, said Gouvin, such as choice of entity,
employment policies, contracts, regulatory compliance, and intellectual-property issues relating to
trademark and copyright. Meanwhile, business students assist clients with general management
issues as well as market assessment and direct-marketing techniques.
Other clinical services include ‘office hours,’ during which a clinician and students meet with a
business owner to discuss a specific legal matter and provide some feedback to help that business
person get the assistance they need, and a legal-referral service that facilitates the matching of
businesses’ needed legal services with lawyers who will be willing to provide those services at no
cost or a reduced fee.
Other community-outreach programs include:
• The Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Entrepreneurship and Community Development, a
daylong event that gathers scholars and policymakers from both the legal and business worlds,
along with speakers from the private sector and non-government organizations to explore issues
relating to entrepreneurship and community development;
• A speaker series. Four times a year, the center brings experts to visit the WNEC campus and share
thoughts about entrepreneurship and business success;
• Information sessions, staged throughout the year and at locations across Western Mass. They cover
issues ranging from government licensing to protecting intellectual property; and
• A resource center, which features a wide range of books on legal and business topics of special
interest to entrepreneurs.

Gouvin said that the Makeover program, like all the other services, has the twin goals of helping
entrepreneurs and nonprofit managers negotiate some of the hurdles to getting off the ground and
reaching that proverbial next level, and serving as a catalyst for economic development in the
region.
Summarizing the makeovers to date — while also issuing an informal call for potential subjects for the next event, slated for this June — Gouvin said they have covered the gamut, from a young inventor, like Wilson, trying to take an idea off the drawing board and to the marketplace, to a franchise operation, Fitness Together, to a nonprofit group (Friends of the Homeless) searching for ways to become more efficient while also recruiting more ‘friends.’ And the advice has been across the board as well, from more focused marketing to narrowing (or broadening) one’s mission, to sharpening the focus on customer service.

He said that, when putting panels together, he enlists people with experience in business, law, marketing, and advertising, as well as the field of the participating business owner. The goal is to provide advice, but also generate a dialogue.

Setting the Stage

Springfield native L’Kuicha Parks started her career in the theater as an actress, appearing in many types of productions, especially musicals. She later branched into choreography and, in 1992, after a lengthy stint with the Denver Blacks Arts Co., returned to her hometown. Upon recognizing that there were very few vehicles for minority artists to showcase their talents, she created one — JELUPA Productions Inc., a nonprofit group that employs the slogan ‘Fortifying Life Through the Arts.’

Over the years, the group has staged a number of productions — including a Douglas Turner Ward play called Day of Absence, a John McCallum work called Long May She Wave, and a Cheryl West play called Before It Hits Home, about a jazz singer who finds out he has AIDS and what happens to his relationships with lovers, friends, and family — and at a number of area venues, including the theaters at Springfield College, American International College, and Springfield Technical Community College. In recent years, the company has moved well beyond theater and into other forms of the visual arts.

In June of 2009, at the behest of Amy Griffin-Munnings, former director of the law and business center, Parks became a makeover participant. She said the experience was thorough and intriguing, and that much of what she heard was focused on protecting and enhancing the JELUPA brand. “They told me to make sure that everything we do is really high-quality, and that the product we provide makes people want to come back and tell others about that experience,” she said, adding that this advice was needed reinforcement of what she already knew. “They advised me to make sure that we stay true to our goals and not branch off in too many directions and get overloaded. “I think we were trying to do too many things just to say we were doing them,” she continued, adding that the Makeover panel strongly advised her to streamline the operation and focus on what the organization does best, feedback that she’s following, while still working to steer the venture through an economic downturn that has taken a toll on most all arts-related businesses. She’s also broadened her marketing efforts, with a harder push into both the Amherst-Northampton area and the Hartford market, while also trying to recruit more board members, both of which constituted further advice from the Makeover artists. “Overall, it was a great experience that gave me a lot to think about, and act on,” Parks told BusinessWest.

Wilson said essentially the same thing, noting that his makeover provided new perspective that has helped push CellAssist to the top of the launch pad.

It’s taken a long time to get this point, he explained, noting that he started with some software and a simple concept — using a cell phone to tap into the diagnostic information that today’s cars are continuously disseminating, and find the cause of the dreaded ‘check engine’ light, among other uses. “Diagnostic costs are becoming outrageous,” he said, hinting on the motivation for and real benefit from the CellAssist. “If anything is wrong with your car, if you go to a service center, they’ll charge you for one hour, even though it took two minutes to plug in their device, run in a diagnostic test, and find out what’s wrong.”
At his makeover, Wilson, who had made use of many of the center’s other resources, brought in what he called a bare-bones prototype — “it looked like a bomb ... it had wires coming out of it” — and was able to gain a lot of feedback about both the viability of the product and what the next steps should be.

“It was very beneficial because I had only been viewing this from my perspective for so long,” he explained. “It was great to get some thoughts from the community, business people, and experts who could help move me in the right direction.

“I had been very nervous about taking my idea to the world because I thought someone might take my idea and beat me to the punch,” he continued, “but one of the panel members told me I couldn’t hold back, I had to get my idea out there, I had to meet people and present my idea. That was probably the best advice they gave me.”

Look to the Future
Still, Wilson was careful to talk about his CellAssist in vague terms and not let too much information out at this critical juncture. He’s not sure where his venture will be in two months or two years, but he’s quite sure the Extreme Makeover program helped him take it forward.

Johnson and Parks can say the same thing, both acknowledging that much hard work lies ahead, but they have a better roadmap now than before they stepped in front of their makeover panel.

Thanks to the WNEC center’s program, they’re putting new faces on their business ventures.

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