Aimee Griffin Munnings was boarding for a flight back to Springfield after a wedding last fall in Baltimore.

Having chosen Southwest Airlines, she was at liberty to pick her own seat. She spied an open one next to a window and thought she wanted it; upon recognizing who was in the aisle seat, she knew she did.

It was Anthony Caprio, president of Western New England College. Griffin Munnings had recently graduated from WNEC's law school, and was looking forward to picking Caprio's brain on a few matters. "He was probably expecting to get some rest," she told BusinessWest. "But he didn't get that opportunity."

Instead, he heard about Griffin Munnings' work since she earned her juris doctorate, all in the realm of business development and much of it with the New England Black Chamber of Commerce Inc., which was created in 2002. There, she worked on such initiatives as a strategic alliance conference, a success showcase, and a facility that provided administrative support to small businesses and homebased companies.

After learning all this, Caprio told her she might be interested in a new venture the college was exploring - a center that would coordinate the talents of the school's law and business faculty members and students to help area entrepreneurs with business and legal issues.

"It sounded like a perfect match ... I told him that if he got the funding, I was the person for the job," said Griffin Munnings, who was chosen this summer to serve as director of the Western New England College Law and Business Center for Advancing Entrepreneurship. The center is currently leasing space in the Andrew M. Scibelli Enterprise Center (SEC) in the Technology Park at Springfield Technical Community College, but will eventually he moved to WNEC's law school, said Caprio, who described the venture as "special resource" for the region.

"We have the only law school in the region, and one of the best business schools in the country," he said. "We
want to take these programs and involve our students in ways that will make our community stronger. By working with small businesses owners, we can help generate jobs for this region."

Eric Gouvin, WNEC School of Law faculty member and associate dean, and one of the main architects of the center, agreed. He said the work at the facility, one of the few of its kind, will build upon pilot programs undertaken over the past two years that involved law and business students at WNEC and tenants at the so-called Student Incubator at the SEC.

Tenants like Joseph Willis. As a student at Chicopee Comprehensive High School, he developed a new product, the Quick Fix energy bar. He later went on to attend STCC and, while working toward his degree, he also worked to grow his fledgling business. As part of the pilot program, Gouvin and a team of his students helped Willis with legal advice (at no charge) about FDA food-labeling requirements, local health requirements, and insurance issues. Meanwhile, business school faculty members and students provided advice on creating a strategic business plan, marketing, and cost control.

The center will continue to work with businesses in the incubator, said Gouvin, but the broad goal is to extend the outreach efforts into the community and assist many of the small business owners who cannot afford legal and business consultation services.

As director of the center, Griffin Munnings, who took part in the pilot program while attending WNEC Law, will be responsible for identifying these entrepreneurs - and also for shaping the full roster of programs and services at the facility. The list could eventually include a library of business resources, a speakers series, a venture forum, and other initiatives.

This fall will be spent laying the groundwork for such efforts, said Griffin Munnings, who brings to her assignment considerable energy - and optimism.

"I have a passion for small business development - and for this area," she explained. "I really enjoy helping people get over the hump and turn dreams into reality."

Degrees of Progress

As she talked about the center and its evolving mission, Griffin Munnings said it will not duplicate the work of other area business-assistance organizations - many also located at the SEC - such as the Mass. Small Business Development Center Network, the Western Mass. Enterprise Fund, and SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives.

Instead, it will operate in conjunction with those organizations, she explained, adding that, as it goes about its work, the center will not be taking business away from area lawyers and business consultants; clients must meet strict eligibility requirements and demonstrate that they cannot afford to pay for such services.
In a nutshell, the center was created to provide very unique services by engaging the talents of law and business students - and their faculty - to help entrepreneurs clear the many hurdles facing them as they seek to get ventures of the ground.

In academic circles, this is known as experiential learning, or learning by doing, said Gouvin, who told BusinessWest that this was the main thrust of the pilot program he initiated in 2002 as part of a course called Small Business Clinic.

Using the Student Incubator as a laboratory, he assigned teams of two third-year law students to several of the business owners. Their assignments varied, but in general, they provided the kinds of legal services entrepreneurs need to start new ventures and introduce new products.

Those services included everything from intellectual property work, such as patent research and domain names, to help with contracts. Students, working off Gouvin's license - all their work was reviewed by him - worked free of charge, but billed for their work so the business owners would gain an appreciation for how much such assistance would actually cost.

The pilot, which Gouvin described as a bridge between law school and law practice, was soon expanded to include MBA students who, also working in teams and under the supervision of faculty members, provided assistance ranging from business plan creation to marketing strategies.

"What we found was that a number of our clients didn't need a lawyer's help as much as they needed a business consultant's help," he said, "That turned out to be a very effective combination; we brought a lot of value to tenants of the incubator."

With the success of the pilot, WNEC desired to create a formal center for advancing entrepreneurship, said Caprio, who told BusinessWest that the proposal has been enthusiastically supported during what he called the 'silent phase' of an ongoing campaign to raise funds for several building projects and other initiatives at the school.

"People within the community know how important it is to help emerging businesses," he said. "That's why we've received some very generous support for this center."

The venture's current home is the SEC, where it is leasing one of many suites created within one of the 19th century buildings that were once part of the Springfield Armory complex. Eventually, it will be moved to the WNEC campus, said Caprio, where it will continue to work in conjunction with other business-assistance agencies and work with small companies across the region.

Caprio said the creation of the center is part of broad strategic plan for the college, which involves a number of outreach components. As it developed that strategic plan, the school focused on "what it can do best," he ex-
plained.

In this case, that involves placing law and business students in situations where they can both further their own education while taking part in what amounts to an economic development initiative.

"A big part of our strategic plan is establishing partnerships and alliances that have a unique flavor," he told BusinessWest. "This center and its programs is one of the things we do best, and it's something that only we can do."

Griffin Munnings, who started her new job in August, said she is currently engaged in developing programs for the center, enlisting area business leaders for an advisory board, and setting the stage for "client work," which will begin in the spring semester.

Nine businesses will be matched with law and business students, she said, adding that she expects of a mix of clients including some tenants of the Student Incubator and other small businesses from Springfield and surrounding communities.

Griffin Munnings told BusinessWest that she entered law school not with the intention of someday arguing cases in court, but instead using that valuable educational experience to further a career in small business development.

That career started in 1992, when she began work for the Western Mass. Training Consortium in Holyoke. There she served as director of Operations and Administration. Later, she worked for the state Dept. of Mental Retardation as director of Vocational Services for the Wrentham Development Center. There, she directed seven businesses that provided training for individuals with developmental disabilities.

In 1997, Griffin Munnings and several partners formed Zoway Business Management Services, an organizational development firm that offered consultation and technical assistance to entrepreneurs. She said Zoway was created to fill an unmet need for assistance to small business owners, especially those in the minority community.

Today, many of those needs are still unmet, she said. "Many business owners don't have the resources they need to be successful," she said. "I've always wanted to create a support system that would help small businesses."

Center of Attention

Gouvin called WNEC's new center for advancing entrepreneurship a true resource facility, and the "intersection of law and business."

By that, he was referring to both the unique combination of services and support that the school can provide -
and the often complex needs of entrepreneurs trying to get a venture off the ground.

The center will thus provide educational opportunities for students and business owners alike, and create a true learning experience, in every sense of the word.

--- INDEX REFERENCES ---

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