

Tending to business

PROGRAM HELPS FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS GET STARTED WITH VENTURES

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When Connie Harvey started her business, Efficiency Counts, in Hastings in 2004, she loved her work helping small-business owners sort out their bookkeeping. But sometimes she wasn't practicing what she preached.

"I was doing these things for free or virtually for free: Just traveling around and helping people because I loved to do it, but I didn't know how to value it," Harvey said. "If people couldn't pay, I would just say, 'Oh, well.' I kind of always had rather low self-esteem, and yet I loved people, and I loved to help."

That all changed in 2007, when Harvey got connected to the Women's Business Center, a program of the Rural Enterprise Assistance Project. REAP is part of the Center for Rural Affairs, a private nonprofit organization based in Lyons that promotes family-based agriculture and community development.

The Women's Business Center is a center without walls, offering help from business specialists located throughout the state.

WBC Director Monica Braun said the program is REAP's training arm, offering small-business owners training sessions on marketing their business, using Quick Books accounting software, legal structures for businesses, tax preparation and more.

Braun said the center's focus is micro businesses — those with 10 or fewer employees, and particularly those owned by women, although the program doesn't discriminate. About 65-70 percent of the clients have been female business owners, she said.

REAP targets rural Nebraska, so the services are available anywhere in the state outside Lincoln and Omaha.

The Women's Business Center also offers a five-week Business Plan Basics course that helps owners explore a business opportunity, determine the feasibility of a business and devel-



Connie Harvey is pictured in her business, Efficiency Counts, located in the Foote Building in downtown Hastings.

op their own business plan.

Harvey said for her, the Women's Business Center was career-changing.

"I owe my confidence to the Center for Rural Affairs," Harvey said. "It really gave me the boost that I needed in both valuing what I was doing and expanding my business."

Currently, Harvey has two employees and plans to hire more. She's also considering opening satellite branches in other parts of the state or in Kansas City.

"I never would have thought of any of this except for the connections and the trainings I go to and the trainings I provide for the Women's Business Center," she said.

Although her office is in Hastings, Harvey said she has clients from across the state. She now contracts with the Center for Rural Affairs and works with referrals from the Women's Business Center.

"I do a lot of untangling of

Quick Books," she said. "I never get tired of it. To me it's like a big jigsaw puzzle."

Harvey said she uses a gardening theme to discuss bookkeeping with clients.

"I tell people to tend their books. Tend them well, and they will produce a crop of reports at the end of the year that will make your life a lot better. I really have a theme of life and growth and health in the area of bookkeeping."

"Sometimes people roll their eyes at it, but I really encourage people to love their books, tend their books, take care of their books, or give them to someone else to tend," she said.

Braun said when the Women's Business Center began in 2001, often the clients were a spouse on a farm or ranch trying to supplement their family income.

"I think we're still seeing that, and women are also out there starting businesses because of their personal goals," she said. "More women are becoming the sole breadwinner."

Harvey said women have great potential as business owners, but too many don't see their work as valuable.

"Women are so nurturing and so used to taking care of things, but they may not know how to value their work. In a sense, that's what prohibits them from succeeding," she said.

Braun said it's especially important to offer business support to female entrepreneurs because often women have a harder time getting financing.

"Sometimes they also have a harder time because they're doing more of the balancing with the family responsibilities as well as work responsibilities," she said. "So we're trying to help them really target and focus on getting their needs met so they can be successful in both professional and personal areas of their life."

The Women's Business Center has hosted two women's entrepreneur conferences, the most recent one in March in Grand Island. Evaluations from the conference said the best part

was the chance to network.

"I think women take calculated risks, and they're good at networking and supporting each other," Braun said. "That's kind of what we try and do, is provide those opportunities for them. I think they're willing to share and come together, often more than men are."

REAP, which was launched in 1990, has a mission of strengthening rural communities through small, self-employed business development. The organization offer four services: financing (micro loans), business training, technical assistance and networking.

REAP is funded by Community Development Block Grant Assistance through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, as well as funding through the Nebraska Business and Innovation Act, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Treasury and the Small Business Administration Microloan and Women's Business Center programs.

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◆ Aug. 3: More than 40 vendors are expected for Art in the Park 2014 at Libs Park near 14th Street and Baltimore Avenue. The daylong event features art in a variety of media. Admission is free.

◆ Aug. 7-9: The Thayer County Fair will be under way at the fairgrounds in Deshler.

◆ Aug. 8: NASA Race Series, Motorsport Park Hastings, 427 S. Showboat Blvd. Members of the National Autosports Association will converge on Hastings for high-performance, wheel-to-wheel racing on the 2.15-mile-long road course. The event is free to the public. Visit www.racemph.com.

◆ Aug. 8: Regular points show at KAM Raceway, 4880 E. J St. General admission gates open 7 p.m., and racing begins at 8.

◆ Aug. 8-10: Men's slow-pitch Class E and E1 state softball tournament, Bill Smith Softball Complex, 3900 Osborne Drive East.

◆ Aug. 8-10: The annual BMW Biker Rally is planned for the Franklin County Fairgrounds in Franklin, bringing riders from far and wide to participate in the BMW Nightrider Club's annually Huskerrally. This is the 32nd year for the event.

◆ Aug. 8-10: Citywide garage sales are planned in Franklin, coinciding with the 32nd annual BMW Biker Rally in town for the weekend.

◆ Aug. 9: Men's slow-pitch 55-and-over state softball tournament, Bill Smith Softball Complex, 3900 Osborne Drive East.

◆ Aug. 9-10: Deweese Fall Festival Days will be under way in Deweese with traditional events that include a Saturday tractor pull and a Sunday demolition derby that begins 2 p.m. One added feature this year will be a "shop at home" event Saturday in the Community Club Building.

◆ Aug. 8-9: The "Becoming an Outdoor Family" educational event is planned at Fort Kearny State Recreation Area northwest of Minden. Learn more about outdoor recreational events to do with the family, such as camping, archery, outdoor cooking and more. Registration, a registration fee and a valid park permit are required. The SRA is near the Platte River northwest of the unincorporated town of Newark. To get there, travel north of Minden 10 miles on Nebraska Highway 10, then two miles west on Nebraska Link 50A, then north to the entrance. For more information call 308-865-5305.

◆ Aug. 8-10: Kool-Aid Days 2014 will celebrate the world-renowned soft drink first manufactured in Hastings following its 1927 invention. The weekend includes activities at multiple sites in Hastings and includes the World's Largest Kool-Aid Stand as well as

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