

## A crash course in business

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HAVERHILL - When Sheryl Nazzaro was laid off from her job as an account manager for a software manufacturer, she transformed her interest in alternative therapies into a business.

Like the majority of new ventures, it failed.

"I jumped into the game but had no idea what the rules were," said Nazzaro, 33, of Derry, N.H.

So she enrolled in an Entrepreneurial Training Program, taught by Commonwealth Corporation, at Northern Essex Community College.

Now, 10 weeks later, Nazzaro is poised to open a holistic wellness center, The Blooming Spirit, and is filled with confidence.

"It gives you fundamentals and a plan," she said. "It's an incredible benefit. I'm glad I found it."

Nazzaro is one of nine students - all laid off or retired workers - who enrolled in the first session of the course offered at Northern Essex this fall.

Similar courses run by Commonwealth Corporation, a nonprofit, quasi-state organization, have existed since 1989. They are housed in the Enterprise Center at Salem State College and at the Chamber of Commerce in Brockton.

"Rather than having people on unemployment, [the state] said 'Let's find different ways to deal with this,' and Commonwealth Corporation was created," said Paul Jermain, who teaches the entrepreneurial course at Northern Essex.

Following the success of the Salem and Brockton programs, which have served almost 3,000 students, the organization set its sights on the Route 495 belt where, Jermain said, "a lot of people were being displaced by large companies like Lucent."

"People get laid off and become dislocated, meaning they can't find another position doing what they did before, or they don't want to do what they did before, and they have an entrepreneurial urge," he said. "The purpose of the course is to help them think through their prospective business and help them create an effective business plan to launch it."

The course is not designed to help people come up with ideas for creating companies. "If they don't have a clear concept in mind, they get lost right away," Jermain said. "It doesn't have to be well developed. If they have an end goal, I'll help them build around it."

Prospective students go through a screening process. They must attend an informational session, fill out an application, and be interviewed.

The course consists of classes three days a week for 10 weeks. One-on-one consulting services are offered for another 10 weeks, as the students launch their businesses. The cost is \$3,400 and often is paid in part by groups, such as the Lucent Alliance, that aid laid-off workers.

One day a week, the class focuses on marketing and sales. The second day is devoted to financial aspects of a business, such as balance sheets, cash flow, and income

statements. The third day, professionals who deal with small businesses, such as attorneys, accountants, and salespeople, as well as graduates of the course, visit with the students.

With help from the instructor and each other, each student builds a business plan "piece by piece and page by page," Jermain said.

Jermain said the students in the course are generally older and motivated. "There is a lot of talent out there," he said. "They are unemployed for reasons not of their own making. It's not a reflection of their skills, goals, or interest. It was the result of a management decision."

He added, "It takes courage to be in the middle of your life - 40 to 50 - and say 'I am going to start a business.' They are very dedicated to making it happen. It's a very intensive course."

And it, apparently, is effective. Jermain said 75 to 80 percent of participants start their own businesses, and 70 to 75 percent of them are still operating after three years. That, he said, is a reversal of the general trend for new businesses, 70 to 75 percent of which fail after three years.

The students at Northern Essex - whose prospective businesses include a professional organizing business, lawn service, antique and ham radio repair, computer consulting, restaurant, imported African spice blends, and an Ethiopian chicken farm - feel the class has given them an edge.

"It might take you three years to gain all the information and meet all the people we've had access to in this class," said Nicole Libresco, 46, of Arlington, who had worked in construction management and is launching Clutter Be Gone, a professional organizing business. "It's a boot camp for entrepreneurs."

Jordan Melaku, 36, of North Andover, a former systems engineering manager at Avaya Communications who plans on importing spice blends from east and west Africa, said the class "helped me think about things in a more realistic way. I feel a lot better about my business plan than I would have sitting in my house doing it on my own."

Her husband, Makonnen Melaku, 30, who had worked in research and development for Lucent, said the course helped him follow his dream of making a difference in his native country. With eggs fertilized in the United States, he hopes to start a high-volume, low-cost chicken farm in Ethiopia.

Jeremy Smith, 30, of Haverhill, who did computer aided design for a Boston engineering firm, is going into consulting in the same field. "The class helped me think about the market," he said. "Had I not taken it, I would have done what others do and try to wing it. I would have gone from contract to contract, paycheck to paycheck without forecasting how my business was doing."

As Nazzaro said, "If you opened a business and didn't have any of this background, it would just be luck."

An informational session for the Entrepreneurial Training Program at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill is Dec. 2, 10 a.m. The course begins in January. Call 978-556-3802 or 978-556-3808. For more on other Commonwealth Corporation programs, call 617-727-8158, or visit [www.commcorp.org](http://www.commcorp.org).