

NITTY-GRITTY COURSE GUIDES LEAP FROM IDEA TO ENTERPRISE

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One of the reasons Bob Gouveia of Dracut accepted early retirement from Hewlett-Packard in June 2002, after 25 years as a software engineer, was to avoid the risk of impending layoffs. The other was to free his energies for a new career.

A staff member of the Department of Employment and Training in Lowell had initially directed Gouveia toward programs to help him write better resumes and improve his interviewing skills. But Gouveia replied, "I don't want to go back into the [high-tech] industry, because there are no jobs there." Gouveia observed that one of his displaced colleagues, who had been earning a six-figure income, had grown increasingly depressed by his job search. "He'd be sending out 400 to 500 resumes and receive two rejections and nothing else," said Gouveia. "I asked myself, do I want to beat my head up against the wall? I'd prefer to start my own business. My wife was poking around on eBay and making some money on a part-time basis, and we wanted to kick it up a notch."

In January, Gouveia enrolled in the 18-week Entrepreneurial Training Program at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill. NECC first offered the program through a partnership with Commonwealth Corp., a nonprofit organization that helps displaced workers, in September 2002, and has held the course four times. By the end of this month, 52 aspiring entrepreneurs will have completed the program.

Gouveia applied what he learned from the course to launch Kept Treasures Inc., an eBay-based consignment and consulting business. The business mainly serves people who are downsizing from larger homes and need to sell furniture and other items. Gouveia also teaches seminars about eBay and buys collectibles from individual sellers and at auctions. Paul Jermain of Jermain & Co. has been teaching the course since the spring of 2001, originally in Brockton, though the training has been available through Commonwealth Corp. for more than a decade, serving more than 2,500 people.

Diane Zold-Isenberg, programs manager for business and professional development at NECC, said the course responds to an urgent need in the community. Having guided hundreds of displaced workers when the Prince Pasta plant in Lowell was closed, then later when 566 lost their jobs at Osram Sylvania in Danvers, Zold-Isenberg was contacted when the layoffs of about 4,000 workers began at the Lucent Technologies Inc. plant in North Andover.

"A number of people asked if there was a program for those who didn't want to go back into traditional employment, and instead wanted to begin their own businesses," said Zold-Isenberg. "We knew about the Commonwealth program and decided it was worth pursuing, so we worked to bring it in-house at NECC."

The first class consisted mostly of former Lucent employees. Over the past two years, students have come from a mix of companies in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Classes are held three days a week for 10 weeks, followed by eight weeks of followup consulting. Sales and marketing topics are covered on Tuesdays, and financial statements are addressed on Thursdays. Wednesdays are reserved for guest speakers.

The results of the program have been heartening to Zold-Isenberg. "These laid-off workers were able to go into a program with little more than a good idea and come out with a viable business," she said.

Through a shuffling of state agencies and funding cutbacks, the entrepreneurial training program was discontinued in June. The Department of Education and Training now owns the program on a state level and is in the process of choosing providers for the program, with DET funding.

There are likely to be multiple providers around the state. "We feel that the partnership between my company and NECC has a very good track record, giving us the credentials that will enable us to have a good chance at being awarded," said Jermain.

Jermain cited statistics about the program that were developed during the spring. Of the people who completed the program, roughly 70 percent went on to start their own businesses. Of those, 70 to 75 percent were still in business after two years. "That's a reversal of the general statistics, where 70 percent to 75 percent are out of business in two years," said Jermain. "In my opinion, they succeed because they had the opportunity to think through their business concept, prior to getting into business."

Guidance from the course made Venkat Pula of Andover change his mind about a new business. In August 2002, Pula had been laid off as a senior software engineer at Comverse Inc., a Wakefield company that develops speech-recognition and voice-activated products. Pula, who had a high-tech MBA from Northeastern University, enrolled in the NECC course in January 2003 with hopes of opening an Indian grocery store.

The course required him take a more pragmatic look at his goal, which he discovered would not have been viable. "Based on projected revenue versus costs and overhead, the business model showed that the profit margin was very slim," said Pula. "I probably would have lost money." With a wife and two children, ages 5 and 10, he decided to find another line of work.

On Nov. 17, Pula and a partner opened a franchise of Huntington Learning Centers in Acton. Not only would he be able to make a better living this way, the focus was consistent with his background, which emphasized the value of education. "We can reach out to the kids who are not doing well at school and need help," said Pula.

The course at NECC is helping Ira Sarver of North Andover to make his third major career change. He spent seven years as an English teacher, then switched gears when he started a family. "Back in 1983, I was still able to go back to school full time for a six-month programming course," Sarver recalls. "But I never used a day of it." Before the course was over, Prime Computer Inc. hired him as a video producer for training programs.

Laid off from Prime after six years, Sarver launched a successful consulting business in the same field. In 1995, he helped start an Internet company, which disbanded in 2001, he said. Although he tried to retool his skills as a webcast consultant, Sarver said, "the market was much harsher than when I did it previously."

Sarver enrolled in the program because he plans to open a branch of Sal's Just Pizza in the Middleton/Peabody area. "The program has been spectacular in giving us a quick hit, like a shot of adrenaline, of the basic information you need to know about running a business: accounting, finding locations, staffing, human resources, tax and legal issues," said Sarver. Running a pizzeria, he said, "is the perfect business for me. I've been bringing my kids to Sal's since we moved here nine years ago; it's a great place. It's a good, stable income, with solid growth potential."

Like Gouveia, Ann LeBlanc of Chelmsford was a software product manager for 22 years before she took early retirement from Hewlett-Packard. LeBlanc is about to complete the NECC course and plans to launch "seeART" with a former colleague by March. Through lectures and curating exhibits, her new company will try to help people look at high-quality artwork and understand what makes it great.

"It feels like a weight has lifted," said LeBlanc. "I get to do something I really love."

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