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Second Chance

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HAVERHILL -- Lauren M. Dragon looks at her layoff two years ago from Lucent Technologies as an opportunity in disguise.

A single mother with four children, Dragon, 46, enrolled full time as a creative arts student at Northern Essex Community College, where she holds a 3.98 grade-point average.

She also enrolled in the school's new Entrepreneurial Program, developed by the Division of Continuing Education in partnership with the Commonwealth Corporation. She combined her artistic talent with her newly found business knowledge and will launch a business marketing her own glass jewelry and beads, selling on the Internet from her Hancock Street home in Haverhill.

Dragon was among 15 job-changers who paid \$3,400 for 10 weeks of classroom work followed by another 10 weeks of follow-up consulting. The program, which helps students who were laid off to develop and carry out a new business plan, is directed by Peggy A. Ryan.

"This is an alternative to other job training options. We create new business opportunities for entrepreneurs who will employ others in their business while making a career change themselves.

Dragon unveiled her business plan to her classmates, showing samples of swizzle sticks with swans and crafty beadwork necklaces, which, she estimates, will bring in about \$30,000 a year with the right marketing.

Before working at Lucent, Dragon worked for 6 1/2 years as a visiting nurse.

Jordan Melaku of North Andover hopes to launch a business specializing in imported African spice blends. She has used these spices in her own cooking for years

and figures they should sell well in a vegetarian market. Now she hopes to market them online and through a distributor.

Her husband, Makonnen, is interested in opening a mechanized chicken farm in Ethiopia where he plans to buy 4 acres. He expects by year's end to produce 130,000 chickens a month.

Robert S. Weiner spent the last 20 years as a test engineer at places like Analog Devices in Wilmington. A lifelong resident of Haverhill, he graduated from Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School in 1977 with a curriculum in diesel mechanics, earned an associate's degree in electrical technology from Northern Essex, and is back there as a 43-year-old entrepreneurial student.

When Analog downsized last August, he was out of a job that paid \$65,000 a year. Now, he's looking to support a family with a 12-year-old son.

"I was devastated," said Weiner. "I lost faith in the whole industry, something I dedicated my whole life to after working my way from the bottom. I found out about the entrepreneurial program and gave it a shot."

Weiner has decided to become a chimney sweeper. He's given it serious thought ever since apprenticing for a master chimney sweeper in Deerfield, N.H. Now he's putting his plan into motion.

He's got a name for it -- Barberry Chimney Services -- named after his place of residence at Barberry Lane, and is in the process of buying equipment. His market is huge, considering some 57,000 homes in Haverhill alone, most of which are potential clients, according to his study.

"Virtually every new home has a chimney," said Weiner.