

Upward Mobility

Program takes students from unemployed to owning a business

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For most of last year, Karen Kelley, Nicholas Felix and Anne O'Connor were unemployed. Now, they can proudly call themselves small business owners.

The North Shore residents all recently completed the Entrepreneurial Training Program, a 20-week course at Northern Essex Community College.

The training helps prospective entrepreneurs understand all aspects of being a business owner.

The training wasn't your "Why-don't-you-follow-your-dream?" type of training. "This was the real thing," said Kelley, who owns Heavenly Heeling in Beverly, a pet walking, sitting and training business.

Before admission to the program, candidates must prove how serious they are about the training by attending an informational session and passing a series of interviews with college staff and faculty.

"We look for strong candidates with strong business ideas," said Diane Zold-Isenberg, programs manager of Northern Essex Community College.

Limited to 15 students, the training, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, is provided free to unemployed entrepreneurs. Those with a job may still join the training for a fee.

"Everybody at some point wants to own a business," Felix said.

"But owning a business is not just getting up in the morning and going to work," said Felix, who is putting his 11 years of experience to work as the owner of Felix Woodworking and Construction in Swampscott. He remodels homes and custom makes furniture and cabinets.

"Operating a business is a whole different world," Felix said. "You have to understand the accounting side of business, how to market the business and how to network with people."

Zold-Isenberg said, "After the training, students are so much more self-confident, not just that their business is going to be successful, but they also feel that they can bring so much more to an employer."

The first 11 weeks of training took place in a classroom setting where the prospective entrepreneurs learned about accounting, taxes, insurance, budgeting time, financial management, networking, community resources and sales techniques. Some students, such as Felix, also learned to use the computer.

During the remainder of the training, students are responsible for getting their businesses off the ground, according to Zold-Isenberg.

"The classes gave you the tools to start your own business, but it was up to you to do it," O'Connor said. "It was up to you to do an inventory and find out ways to market your business."

O'Connor, owner of Artistic Expressions by Anne in Salem has been handcrafting jewelry for the last 10 years as a hobby. It wasn't until she was unemployed that she thought of making a living doing it.

The new entrepreneurs' initial investment ranged between minimal funding and up to \$35,000.

Each is in their first phase of their business plan and hopeful that the second phase is just around the corner.

Phase 2 of Felix's business plan includes expansion, adding employees, and building his customer base.

"I don't know when that will happen," he said. "But I will go back and read the business plan and it encourages me."

Felix doesn't encourage people to start a business without professional help.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help," he said. "Don't be afraid to take a risk. If you feel it, go for it."