

ACCESS Alberta

Women's entrepreneurial spirit empowers parents

by Michèle Jackson, WD
Communications, Edmonton

There is nothing more worrisome than a sick child. For parents, it can be frustrating having to remember a child's health history in a late-night emergency.

But three Calgary mothers have found a way to make this easier.

By networking with other mothers, doctors and health-care practitioners, Marci Andrews and her business partners, Nancy Scott and Jana Sinclair, saw an opportunity to benefit many Canadian parents.

The HealthPod Baby is a unique tool that brings a child's vital health records together in one place. It is a handheld personal organizer laid out in six easy-to-use sections.

This means that there are no gaps to fill when health records cannot be obtained. For many parents, it lessens the stress of remembering illnesses, allergies and prescriptions.

The trio is part of a growing number of Canadian women who are embracing entrepreneurship as a career option.

Today, women are in a unique position to seize new, niche opportunities and capitalize on those markets.

Like most entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs often need financing and business planning advice. This is where the Alberta Women Entrepreneurs Association (AWE) comes in.

"Alberta Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) has been an invaluable service," said Andrews. "Their business knowledge, commitment, recommendations and constant encouragement have motivated us to continue to move forward."

The Alberta Women Entrepreneurs Association is the Alberta branch of the Women's Enterprise Initiative, which has provided more than \$8 million in loans to women entrepreneurs since 1995.

"AWE is all about helping women entrepreneurs succeed in business whether they need business advice, skills, or loans," said Alison Gray, Executive Director of AWE. "Businesses such as

HealthPod Baby have a lasting impact by creating employment and contributing to the strength of Alberta's economy. That is our reward."

Last year, Western Economic Diversification Canada (WD) celebrated ten years of partnership with AWE.

Andrews wants to see this kind of support for women entrepreneurs continue. "We couldn't have done it without all of the people who were willing to help us make our idea a reality." ■



HealthPod Baby founders from left to right: Nancy Scott, Jana Sinclair and Marci Andrews



by Tracie LeBlanc, WD Communications, Edmonton

Small town entrepreneurs get big city results

St. Paul, Alberta has its home furnishings and alarm systems needs met, thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of two town residents.

In the 1990s, Ron Muller and Dwayne Babyn took the risk everyone dreams of—starting their own businesses. They haven't looked back.

Like many entrepreneurs, Ron and Dwayne had the vision and technical know-how to start their businesses, but they lacked the funds to get their dreams off the ground. This is where the REACH Corporation came in.

A member of the Community Futures Network of Alberta, REACH operates in the St. Paul and Smoky Lake counties, providing financial assistance to entrepreneurs for business start-up and expansion.

The Community Futures Network of Alberta operates business service centres throughout Alberta, as part of Western Economic Diversification



Ron Muller, owner of Countrywide Home Furnishings, St. Paul, Alberta.

Canada's Western Canada Business Service Network. The network provides communities with a grassroots approach to economic development.

REACH Corporation offers residents access to computers, help with business plan development, a resource library and business counseling. It helps Northeast Alberta residents obtain the information and services they need to become successful entrepreneurs.

For Muller and Babyn, REACH's Self Employment Program was crucial to their success. "When I first started out 13 years ago, I was nervous about going out on my own," said Dwayne Babyn, owner of ProTech Telephone and Alarm Systems. "Having the employment insurance support from the Self Employment Program was a huge part of my success. The program provided me with the fundamental skills I needed to organize and develop a successful business."

Muller confesses that he didn't have much faith in government programs before starting Countrywide Home Furnishings in 1992.

"Without REACH Corporation's support helping me draft a business plan and stick with it, I wouldn't be where I am today," he said. "I'm living proof that government programs do have a purpose and they do help real people."

They must have the right formula for success because their businesses are flourishing.

When Muller opened the Countrywide Home Furnishings store 14 years ago, his was the first store in Canada. There are now 75 stores in the franchise.

For Babyn, ProTech remains a one-man business, but he has built a solid client base and a reputation for customer satisfaction: two keys to business success. ■

Professional Recognition

- Ron Muller: REACH Corporation Entrepreneur of the Year, 1993
- Countrywide Home Furnishings: St. Paul Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year, 1995
- Dwayne Babyn: REACH Corporation Entrepreneur of the Year, 1996



Dwayne Babyn, owner of ProTech Telephone and Alarm Systems, St. Paul, Alberta.

by Rohit Sandhu, WD Communications, Edmonton

Today's start-ups, tomorrow's corporations

Jennifer Wittal, 24, has done her share of punching and kicking in taekwondo. When she decided to become an entrepreneur, she took the same winning attitude into the world of business. "In taekwondo, you're taught that self-control, perseverance, integrity, courtesy, and an indomitable spirit are the keys to success," says Wittal. "I used the acronym to name my business SPICI Media Productions because I knew that's what it would take to succeed."

Her attitude is working. Two months after establishing her media and graphic design business, Wittal has produced and edited several wedding videos. She's now negotiating with a local grocery store to produce its staff-training video. "My goal is to develop a solid reputation so clients will come to me first. That's so important in a small city like Lethbridge," adds Wittal.

Young entrepreneurs who live in rural communities and have limited business experience face many challenges. That's why Alberta's Community Futures Development Corporations (CFDCs) and the Canadian Youth Business Foundation (CYBF) partnered to provide additional loans and mentorship services to youth entrepreneurs.

"This partnership gives Alberta CFDCs another option to assist youth in starting their own businesses," says Marc Butikofer, Assistant Executive Director of the Community Futures Network of Alberta. "It enables youth entrepreneurs to stay in their own communities and create jobs locally," adds Brian



Jennifer Wittal, owner of SPICI Media Productions, has benefited from additional loan opportunities for youth entrepreneurs.

Thompson, Vice-President for Western Canada at the CYBF.

Western Economic Diversification Canada supports CFDCs as members of the Western Canada Business Service Network. The partnership between the CFDCs and the CYBF has allowed more young entrepreneurs to access vital resources. "Over the past 10 years, the CYBF has supported 1,600 youth entrepreneurs nationally, who have in turn created 9,300 jobs in 1,000 communities across Canada," says Thompson.

Loans, mentoring services, and business advice have given Jennifer Wittal a

chance to make her dream a reality. "Starting a business was intimidating, but the Lethbridge Community Futures office and the CYBF said they wanted to see me succeed," says Wittal.

She sees a lot of opportunities for youth entrepreneurs in Alberta's booming economy. "The important thing is to find something you're passionate about, then show your customers what you can offer and make it work."

For more information about the Community Futures Network of Alberta and the Canadian Youth Business Foundation, visit www.cfna.ca and www.cybf.ca. ■

by Linda Chorney, *The Business Link*

Learning through stories, Aboriginal entrepreneurs share lessons learned

Transforming big ideas into a successful business is a difficult journey for any entrepreneur.

For Aboriginal entrepreneurs, the trek can be a little more difficult. But the rewards are amazing says Paul Chateau, President of Chateau Communications Group Ltd. "I'm living my dream and I encourage others to follow theirs."

But how do you transform a dream into a business?

By taking into account the Aboriginal tradition of storytelling, The Business Link's Alberta Aboriginal Business Service Network (Alberta ABSN) organized sharing circles, networking and a business conference to provide Aboriginal business owners with a place to tell their stories.

Aboriginal entrepreneurs from across the province took part in the gathering, focusing on two key business challenges: financing and staffing.

Paul Chateau shared his story of diversifying his Calgary/Edmonton marketing and consulting firm by purchasing a co-operative advertising magazine, *Finest Values and Savings*, in 2003.

"Securing financing was definitely a challenge I faced, but it meant working diligently with Aboriginal Business Canada and Apeetogosan Métis Development Inc. to put the deal together," he explained.

Another story came from Gerry Gionet, President of AQUA Industrial Ltd., an Aboriginal-owned and operated enterprise in Fort McMurray.

AQUA provides structural steel fabrication and steel erection services to the oil sands industry. With more than 330 employees, finding the best people is a challenge for Gionet, particularly in today's competitive labour market.

"We endeavour to train, coach and mentor all our staff to be ambassadors in the community, as well as valued employees in the regions where AQUA performs work," said Gionet.

By sharing their experiences, participants learn the rewards of being their own boss. They learn that building relationships with mentors and gaining independence and personal satisfaction make the journey worthwhile.

To help Aboriginal entrepreneurs start and grow their own businesses, The Business Link has designed products and services tailored to their needs through its Alberta ABSN service, one of the business service partners funded by Western Economic Diversification Canada.

"Over the years, we've come up with a number of guides, online tools and training sessions to help Aboriginal people in their business planning," said Shannon Armitage, Alberta ABSN Co-ordinator.

For more information, call 1 800 272-9675 or visit www.cbcs.org/alberta/absn to find resources across the province. ■



Paul Chateau shared his experiences with other aboriginal entrepreneurs at events organized by the Aboriginal Business Service Network.