

Business success is on the shelf and at the seminars at local libraries

By Jeremy Rosen

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"We've had deli owners, dog walkers and people who need to start something to support their families. If there's anything they need they can tell me and I'll set something up."~ Librarian Meredith Bonds-Harmon

EAST PROVIDENCE — She built it and they have come. Meredith Bonds-Harmon, East Providence Public Libraries' outreach librarian, created a guidance program in January 2007 to help small business owners and hopefuls achieve their dreams.

Former Barrington resident Bob Thibeault said he had been thinking about starting a bed and breakfast with his wife for years. The 55-year-old said after being laid off from his corporate electrical engineering job in 2007, he started an active search for a location.

Then, in March 2007, he received the direction he needed when a real estate agent told him about free business seminars at the Riverside Library. Mr. Thibeault said he attended several seminars that taught him everything he needed to know.

"Meredith is wonderful. We are using a lot of what we learned on the planning, public relations and marketing end," he said. "The hardest part is advertising and marketing. It's how you sink or swim."

Mr. Thibeault said the first five weeks of business have been "all good" for his bed and breakfast, The Shaker Mill Inn in the Berkshires of West

Stockbridge, Mass. He said he and his wife, Mary, have been moving in since Jan. 10, but have attracted many skiers and a few repeat customers.

"We have great personalities and create a nice atmosphere," he said. "We had a family of six come last weekend for their fourth stay. We keep friendly relationships going."

The tools of success

As for progressing with the help of their library-seminar acquired small-business knowledge, Mr. Thibeault said its time to expand online.

"After a couple Web seminars, I know what to do. We want to improve our site and attract more business, about 10 percent of our rooms are booked online," he said. Mr. Thibeault said he is eternally grateful to Ms. Bonds-Harmon and may return to host a Riverside Library business seminar of his own in the summertime. "Anyone with a business or wanting to start one would be crazy not to go to these classes," he said.

Riverside resident Ed Slattery has been a business owner for 25 years and is a regular attendee at the business programs. He also said classes are a terrific idea and nice service provided for small-business people who need professional help or tips to start from scratch.

"The information is local, free and the speakers are very good," he said. "The most useful for me was marketing. As a contractor, builder and small-scale developer, the information gave me concrete tips to put my latest house on the market in Warwick."

Making it happen

In early 2007, Ms. Bonds-Harmon thought small business owners could be better served by the city's public libraries. One thing she did was push to enhance the business book collection, including "how to" publications.

The free programs came next and serve to educate and create network opportunities. She said word of mouth, fliers around the city and postings on the library website have created a buzz. "Generally five to 25 people attend. We've had all different professionals present, on whatever topics people want to explore," she said. "We've started an e-mail network to keep in touch."

Ms. Bonds-Harmon said people who attend may be established or have a dream. "We've had deli owners, dog walkers and people who need to start something to support their families. If there's anything they need they can tell me and I'll set something up," she said.

What the library offers

East Providence Outreach Librarian Meredith Bonds-Harmon has put together monthly educational programs from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. hosted by industry professionals for small business owners and hopefuls for about a year. Some of the class topics have included:

- * Small business financing
- * Taxes and accounting
- * Business planning
- * Public relations and marketing
- * Business plans
- * Patents, trademarks and copyrights
- * Website development
- * Internet marketing
- * Disaster preparedness
- * Customer service

The next seminar is scheduled for Thursday March 27 on small business financing. For information on upcoming seminars, call Meredith Bonds-Harmon at the Riverside Library on Bullocks Point Avenue, 433-4877.