

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Sunday, August 27, 2006

Entrepreneurs vital to area

By Mike Rutledge
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Northern Kentucky newcomers often are struck by the area's recent development successes and its can-do business spirit.

But Rebecca White, founding director of the Fifth Third Bank Entrepreneurship Institute at Northern Kentucky University, wants to step up the region's entrepreneurship, while training the next batches of local business mavericks.

"We teach some things in our classes that aren't covered in a traditional business curriculum," White said. "Like opportunity recognition, like creativity, and learning to piece together things that already exist, in new and unique ways."

Her institute also helps link successful entrepreneurs with each other, and the next hopeful generation.

"Entrepreneurship is often about making those connections - meeting people, and learning to create resources where none existed before," said White.

Entrepreneurship was a key part of Northern Kentucky's recent Vision 2015 process, which set strategies and goals for how the region can improve over the next decade. One Vision 2015 aim is to attract 50,000 new high-paying jobs over 10 years in areas of advanced manufacturing, technologies, finance, business services and health care.

"There's a lot of effort, and there are many organizations set up to support the entrepreneurship angle," said Karen Finan, vice president of marketing and technology projects at Tri-County Economic Development Corp.

Roger Griggs, a 56-year-old Union resident, has launched several

local companies. Finan calls him a "serial entrepreneur." Griggs thinks recent efforts can help Northern Kentucky's economy a lot.

"That's the key to this kind of thing, I think, is having great mentoring," Griggs said.

'Serial Entrepreneur'

In 1991 Griggs started Richwood Pharmaceuticals, a sales and marketing company, with seed capital from two local businessmen. In 1997, it merged with Shire Pharmaceuticals, a firm with more than \$1 billion in yearly sales, of which the Richwood component represents about 75 percent.

"What I enjoy about it is you have what you think is a good idea, and you have the resources and the people around you that are willing to act on those ideas, and make them materialize," Griggs said.

Griggs eventually left to form Union Springs LLC, an investment company whose objective was to create other pharmaceutical firms.

"I guess if I've done one thing well, I surround myself with good people and make those things possible - good investors, good managers, that sort of thing," Griggs said.

Another job creator

Rich Hempel, 43, also of Union, calls Griggs "the icon of entrepreneurship in Northern Kentucky," along with Corporex Cos. developer Bill Butler.

Hempel has done some company-building of his own: He helped start the Covington technology-services firm, A.F.Kelly, about nine years ago. He later started Natural Bridge Group in Erlanger, a holding company with two businesses beneath it:

Conference coming

Northern Kentucky University will be in a national entrepreneurial spotlight when it, the University of Cincinnati and University of Dayton host the National Consortium of Entrepreneurship Centers Conference on Oct. 12-14.

The event, to draw people from at least 175 universities, will be at NKU's METS Center in Erlanger.

"We're in excellent company, because this was at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill last year," said NKU's Rebecca White. "It's going to be at Syracuse next year, and it's going to be at Arizona the next year."



Griggs



Hempel

Business-leader assistance

Several groups are available to help entrepreneurs.

"I think one of the things Northern Kentucky is doing real well is kind of that hand-off, where we understand what each organization or each group is here for," said Karen Finan of Tri-County Economic Development Corp. "We're able to utilize those resources, hand-off and leverage the best of each group."

Here are some of them:

Northern Kentucky University's Fifth Third Bank Entrepreneurship Institute, which helps students of all kinds think like entrepreneurs, and also helps them network with each other.

NKU's Office of Economic Initiatives, which is fostering growth of businesses by connect them to other local firms that can help them, and also helps them elevate their business practices and improve operations.

Northern Kentucky E-Zone, formerly the Madison E-Zone, an incubator for tech firms that helps them keep lower overheads and receiving business mentoring.

NKU's College of Informatics, which trains a workforce that understands in detail the technology uses in managing such fields as health care, construction or business services.

Gateway Community and Technical College's Center for Advanced Manufacturing Competitiveness, is producing graduates with expertise needed to make products that require high levels of engineering and design.

Thomas More College students, who often work with businesses while in master's of business administration programs.

Northern Kentucky Tri-ED, which attracts companies and helps retain existing companies, while also helping businesses win assistance from the state of Kentucky.

Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, which offers training for existing employees, while also monitoring companies' needs and holding job fairs.

Edunet24, a joint venture with a Mexican company that provides online bilingual tutoring to learners of English in the United States.

Natural Bridge Technologies, which provides on-shore information technology resources to domestic companies. Rather than outsourcing to India or China, this company uses IT consultants in rural West Liberty, Ky., who earn “a significantly lower rate than metropolitan resources. And we combine them with some resources in Northern Kentucky to provide a blended rate to clients that is not as low as off-shore, such as India or China, but it is less than standard metropolitan-area rates for IT consulting, programming and services,” Hempel said.

Northern Kentucky may be ahead of other areas for its climate of entrepreneurship, but Hempel hopes it will improve.

An improving climate

“When you look at the culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in Northern Kentucky - or maybe even Greater Cincinnati - compared to the booming areas like Silicon Valley, Boston, Northern Virginia, we’re still way behind those areas,” he said.

“I do think it’s going to take several years to have an impact on this culture of entrepreneurship here,” he said. “But when I look at what’s happened over the past five years, I think we have moved the needle significantly in the right direction, compared to where we were four or five years ago.”

It’s not that the area’s development wasn’t good, he stressed.

“You have a very traditional community that has done an outstanding job - in fact, nationally recognized in our traditional economic-development organizations that we have and what we’ve done in the traditional economic-development side,” Hempel said.

But now, technology and entrepreneurship are so closely linked that it’s hard to have one without another, said Hempel, who is president of the board for the Northern Kentucky E-Zone, a Covington-based tech incubator that has helped 82 companies, creating more than 300 jobs.

Hempel doesn’t just want to see entrepreneurship programs in colleges. He also hopes to someday see a magnet school that focuses on the concept.

Environment for success

“I think it’s in the water - everybody’s an entrepreneur,” said Donna Salyers of Newport, owner of Donna Salyers’ Fabulous Furs, a faux-fur manufacturer and seller that in Oc-

tober will expand on its catalog operation by rolling out products in about a dozen Nordstrom stores nationwide.

“It’s kind of fun to solve the riddle” of making a business work, Salyers said.

She cites several factors for the area’s entrepreneurial successes, including:

“I think cheap space is important to entrepreneurs, and real estate is very reasonable, especially compared to Cincinnati,” she said. “You can’t have this huge overhead, or it’ll kill you before you’re out of the gate.”

Local colleges provide access to “young, smart help.”

No mere capitalist

“The real distinction in my mind between an entrepreneur and a capitalist is that an entrepreneur is looking for a better way to do something,” White said. “Capitalists usually, they want to make money.”

Not that there’s anything wrong with that.

Some major contributors, like Fifth Third, Corporex and the Castellini Foundation, have given to the program, White said, “And what they say is, ‘We want employees who think like entrepreneurs.’”

Aside from master’s degrees, NKU offers a non-degree, year-long online program that can be taken without stepping on campus. NKU recently started offering Kentucky’s only undergraduate major in entrepreneurship.

The university also offers a minor in entrepreneurship to all NKU students, even in such unexpected fields as music or theater. Even students earning minors must work internships and create business plans.

“We’re really at maximum capacity in most of our classes,” she said.

The institute recently created software “that attempts to assess the readiness of entrepreneurs for capital markets,” White said.

NKU graduate students, who have used the software on real-life cases, have “come pretty darn close to the same decisions that investors make,” White said. “So we believe there’s some validity there. We’re still testing it - that’s why we haven’t commercialized it yet.”