

EXPLORING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Program provides guidance for those looking to create own job

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Melba Jones sat in the Exploring Entrepreneurship class in Kennesaw, on the cusp of a decision.

For Jones, 54 and laid off from her secretarial job in December, and for others like her, the two-day course is a time of exploration and uncertainty, of self-examination and self-doubt, a place where hopes and dreams meet fears and anxieties about the future.



Instructor Steven Yates, an entrepreneur himself, pumps the class with various bits of wisdom. 'Remember, you're looking to change your life, and the lives of the people around you,' he advised.

Should they go into business for themselves, or simply try to find another job working for someone else?

Jones has a killer idea — literally — a bug spray she concocted at home. So she knew she could kill ants. But could she be a successful entrepreneur?

The first signs weren't exactly promising. In a self-assessment to measure her skills in sales, marketing, financial planning, accounting and personnel management, Jones scored 15 points out of a possible 40. Anything less than 20, an exam note suggested, and "you should reconsider whether owning a business is the right step for you."

Yet, Jones was undaunted.

“I’m excited,” she said after completing the program, taught at The Edge Connection, an 11-year-old, nonprofit microenterprise training program at KSU Center. “At least now I feel like I’ve got good direction.”

The class, program officials said, is the first part in the decision-making process. The Edge, a corporate-supported and government-subsidized center that’s independent of KSU, holds another class, the 13-week, 26-session, 78-hour “Plan for Profit.”

Part two in the process, Plan for Profit is intended for Exploring Entrepreneurship graduates who want to develop an actual business plan.

Individuals launch businesses without the aid of such programs, but The Edge officials note that of those who go through their program and start a company, 75 percent are still in business after three years. That, they say, is far above the national average of 16 percent.

Create your own job

Interest in the program is high now, said The Edge executive director and CEO Patricia Harris, and the reason is simple.

“When the economy’s bad, we traditionally see a rise in entrepreneurship,” said Harris, “because people realize that the only way they can provide a job for themselves is to create one.”

The numbers bear her out. Of the 27 students registered for the current Plan for Profit class, which runs through August, 62 percent are unemployed, roughly the same percentage seen in the previous two classes, going back to last summer when the economy nosedived.

By comparison, at one session in 2000, only 9 percent of those who took the class were out of work.

Beyond the numbers, the mood of those taking the class is different.

Said Harris, “What was frightening about the last class is that they were so desperate.”

More people are expressing interest in the program as well. Normally, there might be a dozen people in the summer Plan for Profit course. These days, they’re “begging” to register, Harris said. The size of the class varies, but capacity is limited, usually to about two dozen, because the program is subsidized.

Opportunities made

The participants in Jones’ Exploring Entrepreneurship class, which is held twice a month and is limited to about a half-dozen students each time, didn’t seem desperate. They did seem uncertain, perhaps because they didn’t expect to be there.

Eric Roth, 61, and his wife, Floss Manning, 55, of Vinings, didn’t. He was an executive coach and she was a corporate human relations director until he got downsized and she left her job, both in the past year.

Otherwise, given his age, Roth said, “I would’ve stuck with [his old job] for the duration.”

The class was attractive because it got him thinking about the specifics of what it would be like to open his own executive coaching firm. And, at \$40 for the two days, the price was right.

Roth, Manning and Jones were joined by Dedra Waindi of Acworth, a 29-year-old MBA student at Southern Polytechnic University who hopes to open a marketing consulting firm; and William Byass, 68, a Guyana native who'd like to open a bakery.

The class instructor was Steven Yates, a multifaceted entrepreneur with an upbeat, energetic manner. With a preacher's passion, Yates pumped up the class with various bits of wisdom.

"It's not about money, it's about being fulfilled," he counseled. "Remember, you're looking to change your life, and the lives of the people around you," he advised.

Along the way, Yates talked about S corporations, SBA loans and SIC business codes. He offered tips on networking, "poor man's patents" and market research. And he did his best to ease their discomfort.

Nobody scrambling to replace a lost job could be truly comfortable, but, as Roth noted, at least there's plenty of company.

"Almost nobody I'm talking to these days – and I talk to a lot of people – is feeling secure," Roth said. "It's like, they have a job now, but in three months, there's a good chance they won't have one. And they're trying to plan accordingly. There's a defensive mindset out there."

Security from insecurity

Manning and Roth continue to look for corporate gigs, but seem to recognize that this may be their future.

"People are saying to us, 'Why not?' " he said. "Corporate jobs are so insecure. Why not try something on your own?"

Roth and Manning still weren't sure of their future when the class concluded late on the second day. They're not even decided on whether to sign up for the next Plan for Profit, which begins in September.

Jones is signed up, and psyched up after her two days, even if she still doesn't know how to get a patent or how to handle many of the other requirements of an inventor/business owner.

She is buoyed by the prospect of a dozen free one-on-one counseling sessions she'll get as part of Plan for Profit, and Yates has soothed her by saying she might consider handling the product development piece of her business, and farm out some of the detail work to others.

"I don't feel as overwhelmed," Jones said, "because I feel there's going to be people with direction to give me. That's exactly what I need."

But what of that low score in her self-assessment?

That 15, she said, smiling, "was before training."