Program boosts business, lives

TANF helps fund education for struggling entrepreneurs

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Because of a federal welfare program, new businesses are popping up all over in Acadiana. In the past year in Lafayette, Joshua Rogers opened a wireless Internet service company; Damian Leger started a computer technology business, and Christina Smith opened her own beauty salon in Broussard.

New business ventures are always risky, but these three have a better chance of success because they are graduates of the Small Business Entrepreneurial Training Program in the Enterprise Center of Louisiana in Carencro. The program is funded partially by the TANF, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, the major federal welfare program, said program coordinator Donna Villamarette.

Louisiana is one of only eight states using TANF funds for higher education, said Tom McGee, CEO of the Acadiana Regional Development District, which oversees the entrepreneur program.

"A lot of our participants come from the unemployment or food stamp office," he said. "It gives them an opportunity to get off these programs." The entrepreneur program started about two years ago, he said.

TANF was created in 1997 to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children and the welfare-to-work program, he said.

Want to know more?

To learn more about the Small Business Entrepreneurial Training Program at the Enterprise Center of Louisiana, call (337) 895-2000 or (337) 895-2005.

The great thing for me is to know there is a team of people helping me succeed," he said. "I've had a lot of follow-up help and quite a bit of ongoing business consultation. They helped me put my brain in a business mode."

"Business is looking up, but I've been struggling," he said. "I put up $1,000 the company had earned and (with $4,000 in matching funds) was able to get some good equipment."

But money is just a small part of what the entrepreneur program offers to its students through its 40-hour short courses, with course titles such as managing your business, business planning, marketing and advertising, and managing staff and self.

Carlos Ruiz, who started his own catering business after graduating from the program, said it made a big difference.

"I had no experience, but he opened his own nursery, and he's doing very well," said Ruiz.

The faculty of the entrepreneur program includes experts from various industries, including banking, engineering, strategic planning and business consulting. Classes are held year-round, with one commencement each year. Sixty-six students graduated on Sept. 10, and current students reflect individual desires.

Rachel Jackson wants to open a designer clothing outlet store in New Iberia. Megenia Johnson wants to open a day care center in Lafayette and Baseline Vidrine wants to own a medical transcription business. And with her cousin, Belinda Daigle and Connie Bourque, Elizabeth Jumonville plans to start a restaurant in Franklin.

"We'll start out with po'boys and hamburgers to go," Jumonville said. "Within three years, we'll build our own plantation-style restaurant with fine dining and a family atmosphere."