Women make place in business world

By KAREN MARTIN
Assistant People editor

Bonnie Ferrell calls her construction company "Surety Homes."
"It's from the Bible," she said over her cell phone en route to the parish permit office.
"It means 'The Lord will provide.' And he has."

In a business where women are still a scarcity, Ferrell has been, in her words, "blowing and going" since she started her own construction company two years ago.
Her firm builds about 20 homes a year.

Ferrell is one of an ever-increasing number of women who are successfully running their own businesses.

According to Working Woman magazine, of the 20 million businesses in the United States, more than 8.5 million are owned by women. Between 1987 and 1997, the magazine reported, the number of women-owned firms increased by 67 percent nationwide.

In Louisiana, the increase in women-owned businesses has not been as dramatic, but it's still a marked change.
The National Foundation for Women Business Owners reports that as of 1996, women-owned businesses in Louisiana numbered 101,900 -- a 67.7 percent increase between 1987 and 1996. These firms generate sales of $48.9 billion, according to the foundation.

Women-owned businesses have typically been in the service sector. However, according to Working Woman, today's fastest-growing fields for female entrepreneurs are unconventional areas, such as construction, wholesale trade, transportation, agriculture and manufacturing.

Ferrell exemplifies that trend and takes it one step further. Not only does she build houses, she also markets and sells them through her own real estate firm, Bonnie Ferrell and Co.


"Now, I'm building about 20 houses a year in the $130,000 to $200,000 range."

Ferrell is the only employee of her construction company, calling upon a crew of subcontractors to get the work done. She works with one other agent in her real estate firm.

Being a woman hasn't caused any problems for her in construction, which is still primarily a man's world.
"I'm always asking questions," said Ferrell. "I don't want to have an attitude that you have to do it my way. I'm in a nontraditional field, but I don't feel like I have to wear the pants all the time."

Regardless of the field they choose, Sharon Hickey Kadar is seeing more and more women willing to take the risk of starting their own businesses.

She took that risk 14 years ago when she started her own interior design firm. Kadar was recently elected state president of the Women Business Owners Association.

"Women have unique problems in going into business, especially in the financial world," she said.
Kadar admits it has gotten easier for women to get loans, and that there are more programs to help women establish a new business. But, she said, just wading through the paperwork can discourage some women from striking out on their own.

The local Business Women Owners Association -- there are six chapters in Louisiana -- is available to help women with such problems, Kadar said.

LSU's Small Business Development Center also is ready to help women, and any others starting their own businesses, said manager Tony Martinez.

He said about 70 percent of new businesses fail within the first three to five years.

"We try to help small businesses look at planning. We help them write a business plan, and then encourage them to use it as a mechanism for running their business," said Martinez.

He noted that owners of new businesses often are unprepared to deal with the paperwork that accompanies their job as CEO.

"A woman who makes great pies might go into business making pies. But if she's successful, she could soon find that she isn't making pies anymore, but doing all of the paperwork to keep the business running," Martinez noted as an example. "A lot of people aren't prepared to deal with that shift in responsibility."

Responsibility came quickly to Tammy Jones, who, at age 19, bought a defunct clothing store and turned it into a success. She's also opened a second store.

"My only experience was working at Goudchaux's at the Main Street store," she said. "I was working in the children's department and going to LSU. Hans Sternberg (one of the owners of Goudchaux's) used to do the buying on the sales floor, so I would listen to him. I also would do the filing in the buying office.

When the opportunity came to buy a defunct store, Jones took it and has never looked back.

Thirteen years later, she has two stores, both called The Boutique. The original shop is on Jones Creek Road and the second on Sherwood Forest Boulevard.

"It's not an obstacle being a woman. When I started, my age was probably more of an obstacle," she said. "Most of the salesmen are men, but they treat me with respect."

Jones said both her grandmother and her mother ran their own businesses, and the thing she learned was to know your customers.

"I have a very loyal client base, but it's constantly changing. For example, I added junior clothes because the daughters of my customers started shopping here," she said.

She doesn't worry about other stores or new malls opening.

"I don't think about the competition because we are so customer oriented and so service oriented. I know what our customers want," Jones said.

Bonnie Ferrell, left, builds houses and Sharon Hickey Kadar decorates them. They are two of a growing number of local women who have started their own businesses.

Advocate photo by John Boss