

Published June 14, 2009

5 friends, 5 businesses

Recession turned out to be 'opportunity' for bonding, career changes

By ELISHA SAUERS, Staff Writer

Earlier this week, a group of longtime girlfriends met at Brio Tuscan Grille restaurant in Annapolis Towne Centre at Parole for a ladies' luncheon, complete with a couple of glasses of white wine, a lot of storytelling and hearty laughs.

Michele Warren, Patty Lewis, Kim McGuigan, Tracy Webster and Stacey Smith had much to celebrate. Just months ago, each one of them was facing some of her hardest times financially in years, but now they are enjoying helping one another grow their own businesses.

Warren, Webster and Smith had lost their jobs to recent layoffs, and McGuigan and Lewis worked in fields that have been hit particularly hard by the recession.

But instead of frequenting the meat-market-style job fairs or hoping their resume landed in the e-mail inbox of a hiring employer, they chose an arguably riskier route: Each decided to start her own business in the midst of a oppressive



Courtesy photos

TOP: These five friends faced the failing economy together, each starting their own business and relying on one another for help, support and even referrals. The back row, from left, is Patty Lewis, Kim McGuigan and Tracy Webster; and the front row, from left, is Michelle Warren and Stacey Smith. **BOTTOM:** Patty Lewis, an avid golfer, started Gaming Golf Pros, which provides additional gaming supplies and other services for charity golf tournaments. She had worked in promoting and advertising, but lost several customers because of the recession.

recession.

Warren, who lost her job with an interior-design firm the week before Christmas in 2007, decided to start her own interior-design company one month later with a partner, which they call Plan B Designs.

Webster who managed an upscale art and jewelry gallery in Georgetown was laid off this February, but since has launched her own jewelry company called Tracy Webster Designs.

And Smith, a marketing professional, was laid off in June 2008, but started her own marketing firm, Smith Marketing & Events, less than two months later.

Though McGuigan and Lewis weren't laid off, the recession forced both to find other work. McGuigan, a real estate agent, needed to find a way to supplement her income in the face of a struggling housing market, and Lewis, who worked in promoting and advertising, lost several customers.

McGuigan began a professional cleaning company called A Finishing Touch, and Lewis, who is an avid golfer, began a company called Gaming Golf Pros that provides additional gaming supplies and services for charity golf tournaments.

The bunch has been intimate friends for a couple of years now, but the shared struggles with the economy have brought them even closer, they said. Not only did they support one another emotionally, but they have provided essential client referrals to their friends to help launch their start-ups.

"All of our businesses are about having clients," said Webster, who works out of her Crofton home. "It has all been word of mouth and we all have big mouths."

And their strong networking skills have helped them all land significant successes for their young business ventures, they said. So far their track record looks promising:

Smith scored work with one of central Pennsylvania's largest homebuilders.

Warren and her business partner designed and furnished the common areas of the Grandview luxury condominiums building in Annapolis Towne Centre.

McGuigan was hired by Cypress Homes to do several new construction cleanings.

Lewis has more than 30 tournaments booked for 2009.

Webster's fashion wares were picked up by Prima Moda & Professional Man in Washington, D.C.

Almost all of them already have recovered their startup costs, with Lewis, an Eastern Shore resident, well on her way, she said.

Despite the comfortable lifestyles they enjoy now, their success was not handed to them. With all five of them single professional women in their 30s and 40s - and Lewis, Webster and McGuigan also moms - each one is the breadwinner of her household.

"I think that it's important to note that we didn't just have husbands and decide to start a business," Warren, of Annapolis, said. "We did this on our own."

Without loans, the friends said they each footed their own start-up costs out of pocket. For McGuigan, she didn't have to sink but about \$600 into her initial cleaning supplies and insurance. And for Warren, whose original expenses likely were the highest at about \$5,000, she said she was flying by the seat of her pants and charged things on her credit cards.

She said she cut corners wherever she could. For example, she and her partner, a designer who had been laid off from the same company, needed a big functional desk space, so they went to the hardware store and spent about \$30 on a long piece of plain fiberboard and two filing cabinets to use as legs.

"And no matter how successful we get, we're going to keep that desk forever," she said. "Even though it's slightly warped where we stacked heavy things. It has sentimental value for us."

Build on success

A success for one business often led to another opportunity for another one of the gals. After Warren completed the Grandview project she was able to help McGuigan get her cleaning-services fliers to each condo owner in the building, McGuigan said.

Lewis said Smith, who is an active volunteer at the Light House homeless shelter, put her in touch with the shelter organizers who were coincidentally working on their own charity golf tournament. They hired Lewis to help with the event, and on Friday, Lewis' business, Gaming Golf Pros, provided the promotional games.

But Lewis said even more than their contacts, her group of friends has been an unending source of emotional support and inspiration for her new endeavor.

"These women have been my lifeline," she said. "It's so comforting and reassuring to know that, for one, you are not going through this all by yourself, and two, all I have to do is pick up the phone and they will be right there with the answer or to just listen."

The women admit there were scary times in the process when their budgets tightened. Wine at lunch is a newfound luxury for all of them, who reminisce about pinching pennies in the grocery aisles not long ago and cutting out any of the extra girly amenities such as pedicures or trips to the movie theater.

"The decline in my income due to the slow real estate market, I had already reduced all my spending to the bare minimums," McGuigan said. "When I first started in October, I was at a point where I wasn't sure how I was going to pay my bills the following month - very scary."

Smith said through the scariest moments she simply gave herself an ultimatum that "failure is not an option." Across the mirror in her bathroom, she wrote the words to constantly remind her of that.

Smith, of Eastport, was responsible for bringing the bunch together when she organized a professional women's social networking group about two years ago. When reflecting on the ups and downs of the past few months with the recession, she said she would not have been able to overcome her hardships business-wise without her friends and contacts.

She said she believes the dour economy may serve as a positive opportunity for many others because it will challenge them to rethink their careers and dare to do something different.

"It was always a dream of mine to start my own business or own my own retail of some sort," Smith said. "If I hadn't been laid off, I don't know for sure if it would have happened or when."