

Small business, big dreams

McCracken career endowment aims to help more minorities start their own businesses

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If entrepreneur Lonnie Crowdus had one wish, it would be to start after-school cooperative programs as early as the 10th grade to teach teens the value of work.

“If you start it when they’re young enough, it’s new to them and they’re excited,” he said.

Crowdus is a new board member for the McCracken County Community Career Endowment, which is restarting the Alpha Project, a regional training program to help low-income people learn how to start and maintain small businesses. The program is co-sponsored by the Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce and Murray State University Innovation and Small Business Development Center.

“We’re going to work with people of all ethnicities,” said Linda Dungey, interim executive director of the endowment. “We’re going to be teaching people how to put together a concrete business plan and all the things to look at — marketing, financing, getting paperwork together.”

Training is expected to be held Tuesday nights at the Commerce Center, 4th and Kentucky, starting in March. Specific dates and times are pending.

The endowment also is offering \$14,000 this winter to African-American residents of Paducah and McCracken County to help them improve their education and marketable skills.

Crowdus started Crowdus Maintenance and Cleaning in 2001 while working at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant. He retired from the plant in August, and now devotes his attention full time to cleaning 26 professional buildings around town. Crowdus credits being a chamber board member since 2001 with the networking needed to build his business.

“I had a good-paying job at the plant so that I could be competitive and build rapport with my customers,” Crowdus said. “I credit my success in knowing how to present myself.”

Crowdus said there is a shortage of disadvantaged, small businesses in the Paducah area, and many minorities feel they don't have or can't generate the contacts needed to succeed as entrepreneurs. Others don't sufficiently consider whether there is a viable market for their services before setting up shop, he said.

Many minority entrepreneurs go into fields such as cosmetology and barbering, Dungey said. “I don't see that much in terms of technological or innovative businesses.”

The endowment hosted about 120 people at a job fair in August. Attendees went through a career key to help them think about their personalities, interests, motivations and tools needed to make small businesses work, she said

Dungey said several Alpha Project students previously went into inappropriate ventures and were intimidated by how much work lay ahead. The program is being reworked to more intensively reach out to low-income people and pair them with experienced business contacts.

“If they want to go back to work for someone else, or need more intensive training, the endowment is there to help them do that,” Dungey said. “We want to make assessments early to keep them from being discouraged.”

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