

UB program helps owners grow companies

By George Pyle - NEWS BUSINESS REPORTER

Date: [Sunday, March 21 2010](#)

The problem with running your own business is that, all too often, it runs you.

For some entrepreneurs, even those whose businesses are relatively well established and profitable, just the day-to-day concerns of keeping the doors open and the bills paid prevents the owners from taking the time to step back, examine what they are doing and figure out what they ought to be doing for their business not simply to survive, but to thrive.

That's what Laurie Albertsson and her 17 classmates were looking for when they signed up for the current round of the University at Buffalo's Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership's Core program. And that's what Albertsson, vice president of the North Tonawanda equipment leasing outfit Fernwood Capital, got from taking her turn in the well one evening last week as she saw her business development plan dissected by her classmates and a panel of visiting businessmen.

"It definitely makes you focus," Albertsson said the next day. "It puts you in a new arena and makes you look at what your true objectives are."

The feedback she received from classmates, supplemented for the evening by a judges panel of experienced business people and moderated by CEL Executive Director Thomas Ulbrich, was mostly positive, she said, confirming rather than undermining her plans. Still, they were plans that might never have been fully drawn without the CEL class to prod her along.

"With their help, I see that I need to do A, then B, then C," Albertsson said, "not C and then A."

Rob Albert owns Impressive Imprint, an embroidery and promotional products supplier in North Tonawanda. He graduated from the CEL Core class last year and recommends it to business owners who are serious about reaching their goals.

"When you are the boss, nobody makes you write down your goals," Albert said. "And if you don't tell anybody your goals, nobody knows if you've accomplished them or not."

In the CEL class, Albert said, goals are not only written down, but presented, refined and challenged -- challenged in the sense of being opened up to comments from classmates and mentors who are not out to crush dreams but to push people to accomplish them.

"There is passion in there," Albert said. "There is never arguing or yelling or negativity, but there is intensity."

All this self-examination can lead the student entrepreneurs through another path of self-discovery. One example is CEL director Ulbrich.

He was a student in the Core class a few years ago, and after doing all the work and examining his own goals and dreams, he decided that he wasn't all that devoted to the businesses he was in. He was more drawn to public service and, after a failed run for a seat in the Erie County Legislature, wound up as CEL director.

The Core class, which extends through an entire September to June academic year, is one of the programs that operates out of the CEL's home in the Jacobs Executive Development Center, at Delaware Avenue and North Street near downtown Buffalo.

Another is the Panasci Technology Entrepreneurship Competition, which offers cash prizes to UB-affiliated scientists and researchers that will allow them to turn their ideas into marketable products. That program includes lessons in how to make a presentation to would-be venture capitalists.

The CEL also offers advanced classes for alumni of the Core class, a class for women and minorities in business, partially funded by Allstate Insurance, and a 10-week Hi-Tech CEL program operated jointly with UB's New York State Center for Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences.

"I really think the future of Western New York is in the high-tech industries," Ulbrich said. "The future of the country, too."

The invitation to a CEL alumni reunion and business expo earlier this month referred to the program's graduates and mentors as "the most powerful small-business group in Western New York."

"We've had some 800 businesses through our programs," since the center's 1987 opening, Ulbrich said. "It's a pretty powerful group of people, representing maybe a couple of billion dollars in annual economic activity."

Students in the Core program are usually business owners or managers who have been in their current businesses long enough to be established, but that have not reached their potential. One thing the program provides to each student is a mentor, someone more experienced -- or at least more successful -- in running a business.

Mentors, though, are chosen from a noncompeting business, something in a different industrial sector. That, Ulbrich said, not only eases any concerns that competitors will steal one another's ideas or stymie each other's innovation, it also brings a fresh pair of eyes to a business that isn't weighed down by the prejudices and habits of one industry.

"There's only so many places they can go to talk to anyone," Ulbrich said.

e-mail: gpyle@buffnews.com