

# Starting a New Business? First, Call the SBDC

by Carolee Smith



*The SBDC's five-person staff includes (seated) Business Advisor Rich Gottschall and Director Delena "Dee" Clark, as well as (back row, l-r) Administrative Assistant Linda Willett, Business Advisor Karen Stehlin, and student intern Jenna Garrand (an entrepreneurship major from Champlain)*

**I**f you've been thinking about starting your own business, where can you go to get help? If you already own a business and are thinking about expanding, where can you go to get help? The answer to those two questions is the same. Quick call, email or drop by the Small Business Development Center, located in Ward Hall on Draper Avenue on the SUNY Plattsburgh campus.

And the best news? It won't cost you a cent.

Plattsburgh's SBDC is one of 23 regional centers in New York State, all administered by the State University of New York and funded jointly by SUNY and the federal Small Business Administration. The state-wide 2004 SBDC Annual Program Report notes, "Since the program was established in 1984, (those 23 programs) have worked with more than 221,000 New Yorkers, helping them locate over \$2.5 billion to start or grow their businesses, and creating or saving more than

107,000 jobs." That's big business.

And locally? Delena Clark, director of the North Country's own SBDC, said, "During that time, our advisors have worked directly with 4,922 businesses that have created or saved 1,594 jobs, and helped them to invest \$37,804,705 in the area's economy." That's big business right here.

SBDC's service area includes Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Warren and Washington Counties. Its resource partners



include the Technical Assistance Center, the various Chambers of Commerce, NYS Department of Labor, NYS Department of State, Empire State Development, commercial and alternative lenders, government officials, other local agencies, Adirondack North Country Association, and private businesses.

Plattsburgh's SBDC currently has a staff of four, Clark, business advisors Rich Gottschall and Karen Stehlin and administrative assistant Linda Willet. Additionally, student interns from the college's School of Business and Economics regularly gain hands-on experience in entrepreneurship, working side-by-side with the staff.

### **Help for the Prospective Entrepreneur**

Clark explained what kind of assistance a prospective business owner can expect to find. "Generally, a client will come to us with an idea for a business. We'll set up a meeting with a counselor to discuss the project. We don't do the work for the client nor do we make the decision. But we'll help the client put together the information necessary to make an informed decision on the potential for success. We can help with research in the particular industry. We'll help the client do some industry analysis and take a look at possible competition."

As part of the process, the counselor will help identify typical costs involved with that type of business and work with the client to determine profitability. "A common reaction at that point," Clark said, "is surprise. People often do not realize the extent of fixed costs: cost of product, fees, taxes, insurance, utilities, wages, and so on. From the outside looking in, many people think small business owners are making money hand over fist, but when they figure out the profit margin after all those fixed costs, they are amazed at how slim that margin can be. There may be lots of money flowing through the cash register, but it does not all stay with the owner!"

At this stage, it's not unusual for clients to decide that owning that small business may not be for them.

"That's why it's a good idea to come and talk with us," Clark said, "before you quit your job and invest your life savings. We will work very hard to determine if your new business is a realistic venture."

However, if it does look like the project will work, the SBDC staff has more help to offer. "If the client makes the decision to go forward," Clark explained, "we'll help with the next step, which is to put together a

*continued to page 26*

## **SBDC Helps Helping Hands**



*The four directors of Adirondack Helping Hands (l-r) Jessica Colburn, Katie Calkins, Bridget Benware, and Christy Bezruczyk*

The Small Business Development Center at SUNY Plattsburgh has hundreds of satisfied customers. Among them are the four young owners of Adirondack Helping Hands, which is a "family-oriented Early Intervention and preschool agency devoted to the development of children ages birth to five."

*continued to page 28*





*Dee Carroll of the Galley Restaurant (l.) with SBDC's Dee Clark*

business plan. The client needs to know, for example, how the business will be financed, how operational procedures will be put into place and what staffing they will need." A clear and well-organized business plan is critical to successfully applying for start-up funding and developing that plan may be one of the most valuable pieces of assistance the SBDC will provide.

Potential entrepreneurs need to understand their real goals. Are you doing it for financial gain? Personal satisfaction? To create a job for yourself?

"One big question to ask yourself," Clark said, "is how will you sustain yourself during the start-up period. Do you have enough money to get through an initial period? You should know that, if you quit your job right now to start a new business, it is extremely likely that it will be several years before you are earning what you're earning today.

She added, "People sometimes think about starting their own business because they don't like their boss or because they are unemployed or because they see someone doing well and want to cash in on the action. Those are not realistic reasons. Owning your own business is hard work."

There's a lot to think about and, in reality, only about two of every ten new businesses will succeed over the long run. That fact brings up the other part of what SBDC can do to help.

### **Help for Existing Businesses**

"When a new business succeeds, eventually the owners may decide to expand. That often means more financing, perhaps more employees, perhaps expanding the facility," Clark said. "At this point, our counselors can again advise owners on updating their business plan to clarify their objectives, realistically plan out that growth and expansion and take a look at everything needed to obtain necessary funding."

That's the good side of the equation. On the other hand, sometimes an existing business will begin to struggle.

Clark said. "For whatever reason, a business will start losing ground and profitability. Business owners need to be aware of changing trends and take action before it's irreversible. We can help with getting that business going in a profitable direction again. Unfortunately, some people wait too long, then find they would need a huge influx of cash to keep on going. We always advise people not to wait. If you see your business in a downward trend, do something! If you don't know what to do, call us."



### **Dee Carroll and the Galley Restaurant- A Satisfied Customer**

Dee Carroll, who oversees The Galley Restaurant and Bar at Westport Marina, where she is an owner along with husband Bob and sons Jim and Larry, asked SBDC for some assistance a few years ago. "The Galley was initially a hot-dog stand with just a service window. Each summer, the business grew and we decided to expand into a full-service restaurant," Carroll explained.

She continued, "We had no real in-depth experience in operating that kind of business. We needed help with the next step and didn't know where to go." Carroll attended a workshop sponsored by the Champlain Valley Heritage Network, where she learned about SBDC. She decided to call. "Rich Gottschall came down to talk with us. He told us we needed to put some policies and procedures into place so we worked them out. He also helped us with our business plan, with tracking expenses and recording sales." Carroll laughed, "We really needed a Business 101 course and Rich was tremendously helpful"

The best part, Carroll noted, was the fact that the service was absolutely free. "That was important to me," she said. "Small businesses are often marginal and here was a chance to get free advice!"

Carroll commented on another aspect of SBDC's service that was important to her. "Here in the North Country, everyone knows everyone. Privacy is valuable to me and we discovered that SBDC's service is completely confidential."

Small businesses seldom have separate departments overseeing human resources, operations or marketing, and entrepreneurs often need to run ideas by someone else, Clark said. Carroll agreed that, too, was a positive aspect of working with SBDC, saying, "It's very helpful to have someone you trust to talk out your ideas and thoughts with and know that they will give you objective feedback and constructive advice."

Asked would she recommend SBDC to other business owners? She replied, "No one should hesitate to call. There is absolutely nothing to lose."

The Galley is located on Lake Champlain in Westport and offers a full-service bar and restaurant for lunch, dinner and late night with live weekend entertainment during the summer months.

### **SBDC and SUNY Plattsburgh**

The SBDC's connection with SUNY Plattsburgh is a very positive one, Clark said. "The college provides us not only with space,

but with access to the expert faculty members in the School of Business and Economics. The creation of the new major in entrepreneurship has created an even closer bond, since we work directly with entrepreneurs who have successfully gone into business as well as with clients who are entering that field for the first time. Students can see the whole process up close."

Certainly, there is a large educational component to SBDC's work. In addition to personal counseling, seminars and workshops are offered throughout the service area. Since July of 2002, 52 training events have been offered to prospective entrepreneurs, as well as for other interested parties, and more than 800 people have attended those events.

Dr. Colin Read, who assumed the position of dean of SUNY Plattsburgh's School of Business and Economics on June 1, already views the relationship as productive, commenting, "As the new dean, one of my top priorities is to continue and strengthen integration of the SBE with the business community. Dee (Clark) and the staff of the SBDC provide a direct link to regional businesses and entrepreneurs. I envision many opportunities for the business, non-profit,

and government communities to benefit from their expertise and the expertise of their colleagues in the School."

### **Delena Clark**

Dee Clark grew up in Keeseville, earned a bachelor's degree in management and business and a master's degree in liberal studies, both from SUNY Plattsburgh. She joined the staff of the SBDC in 1998 and was named its director in 2001. She has extensive personal experience in starting and operating a small business. Clark and her husband, Bob, have owned and operated Clark's Greenhouse (Plattsburgh), Clark's Flower Shop and Greenhouse (Chazy) and the Plattsburgh Flower Market (Plattsburgh and Burlington). In 1995, the Flower Market won the Chamber of Commerce's Small Business of the Year Award. The Clarks have two grown daughters and one grandson.

*To contact the Plattsburgh SBDC, go to the website [www.nyssbdc.org](http://www.nyssbdc.org) or call 518-564-2042.*

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## SBDC Helps Helping Hands

from page 5

A little over a year ago, Bridget Benware, Christy Bezruczyk, Katie Calkins and Jessica Colburn, all young educators in the Plattsburgh area, discovered they shared a dream. All four are graduates of SUNY Plattsburgh, Bezruczyk and Colburn with degrees in special education and Benware and Calkins with degrees in speech pathology.

"The four of us had been working in the early intervention and pre-school field for several years and found we shared a vision for working with families," Bezruczyk said. "We had all provided services to children with special needs, in their own homes, and we had formed close professional and personal relationships."

Benware added, "We were talking one day and got very excited about our idea. The very next day, we started the ball rolling." One of them had seen an SBDC television commercial that featured a seed growing into a mature plant and they called the SBDC.

Colburn explained what happened next. "We met with business advisor Rich Gottschall, told him who and what we are and wanted to do, estimated our costs against what we might be making and discussed financing. We knew our jobs, but we had to learn the business and administrative end of it all. Rich really helped a lot."

Benware added, "We didn't have to buy products and didn't have a ton of overhead, since our first office was Katie's living room. We started out with donated items and the cash in our pockets." Calkins laughed and interjected, "My son and the business were born on the same day!"

Just one year later, Adirondack Helping Hands has its own office, a staff of 10, and a contract with the Clinton County Health Department to provide in-home early intervention and pre-school services to include speech therapy, special instruction, physical therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, 1:1 aide services and developmental screenings for children with special needs. The services are provided in the children's natural learning environment. Those needs might include a developmental delay in speech/language, cognitive, and/or motor skills; autism; apraxia; Down syndrome; feeding disorders; behavior modification programs; or traumatic brain injury.

Now they're working with SBDC again, this time to expand their business. With their plans for additional services, they need some funding and SBDC Director Dee Clark has helped them develop a more detailed business plan to use in applying for that funding.

"We were impressed working with Rich the first time," Calkins said, "and we're impressed with Dee now! She analyzed our business, synthesized the information we gave her, and gave us very insightful feedback on putting the whole package together."

These four young women (the oldest just turned 31) are grateful for the help provided by SBDC, thrilled with the success of their venture, and eager to expand their services to the community. The North Country will certainly hear more from them.

Adirondack Helping Hands is located at 185 Margaret Street, Suite 1000, Plattsburgh. To reach the office, call 518-561-6361.