

TULSA WORLD

Following their dreams

LAURIE WINSLOW World Staff Writer

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More black women opt to run their own business

Charlyn Terry's high-end children's clothing boutique is a delectable treat for the eyes.

Dapples of fuchsia, tangerine, lemon, lavender, cherry and other colorful apparel and accessories greet the customer.

Called Jazzy Kidz, the store is a bright place and a joy to Terry, who opened the south Tulsa boutique almost three years ago after experiencing an "a-ha moment."

"I really kind of stepped out there with my gut feeling, which was a good one, and I just kind of made it happen," she said.

Terry's passion has become her business, just as it has for other Tulsa-area black women, whose entrepreneurial spirit is part of a bigger nationwide trend.

According to a Census Bureau report released Thursday, minority groups and women are increasing their business ownership at a much higher rate than the national average.

Last year, black women owned an estimated 414,472 companies, which generated nearly \$19.5 billion in sales, according to a fact sheet released earlier this year by the National Women's Business Council.

Between 1997 and 2004, the number of black women-owned firms increased by 33 percent and employment grew by 50 percent.

With an 89 percent survival rate, Oklahoma ranked the highest out of 10 states for having the best survival rate from 1997 to 2000 among black women-owned establishments.

While Terry's store is still in the "baby stages," as she likes to say, Gail Lartigue Crum's small business is a bona fide survivor after seven years.

Her Broken Arrow-based company, Tag Team Marketing, provides help with event marketing, marketing plans, image consulting and related services. She has a sister company in Atlanta.

Like many others who have followed their hearts, Lartigue Crum tells other women with a business dream to "just do it."

"If you have a dream and you have a zeal and you have a passion, do it," she said. "Don't

wait around. Plan it, start it and execute it."

Lartigue Crum has managed to cultivate many connections in the 11 years she has lived in Oklahoma.

Before starting her own business, she was a senior sales representative for the Oklahoma Eagle newspaper -- a job that introduced her to many businesses. By the time she finally decided to step out on her own, she had built up relationships and had a potential customer base of nearly 400 people.

If it weren't for those connections, she may not have felt as secure in trying to start a business.

"I love sales. I love relationships. I love networking, and it's easy for me to flow in other groups of people," said Lartigue Crum, who feels comfortable mingling with everyone from executives at big companies to small mom-and-pop businesses.

Lartigue Crum enjoys being able to promote her business. And as the owner, she said, she can turn down a project if it's not something she feels right about or believes in.

Virginia Steward simply enjoys the freedom of working for herself.

On a Thursday evening, customers may find her singing at her business, Sadie's Living Room & Coffee Shoppe.

Located at 108 N. Greenwood Ave., Steward's shop serves up cappuccino and live music, including jazz, on most evenings.

Steward started the business two years ago after getting divorced and finding herself without a coffee-drinking partner.

"One day I said, 'It's too lonesome. It's too sad to drink coffee by yourself.' So I decided to open a coffee shop and have a place where people would come and relax and talk and read the paper and books, and just hear some beautiful music."

She also has added a boutique.

But Steward is no newcomer to starting a business. Her coffee shop is near a hospice nursing service that she founded 10 years ago.

Steward also writes and directs a local soap opera, "Sadie's Coffee Shop," which is taped in her shop and which she would like to syndicate some day.

As for the challenges of starting a business, Steward doesn't focus so much on the day-to-day operations as she does on her dream for the Greenwood area.

The 1959 graduate of Booker T. Washington High School wants her business as well as those around her to bring more people back to the Greenwood area.

"I love Greenwood," Steward said. "I love the history of it. I grew up in Tulsa and knew it as

a thriving business district. This is what I see it doing again.

"It's busy now. There are people walking and driving, and they know that we're here. . . . As we work together, I think it'll bring Greenwood back to where it was in the good old days."

Most of the challenges for Colleen Payne-Nabors have to do with growing her company and staying competitive.

The Mobile Cardiac Imaging LLC business she started in 1998 has exceeded her imagination and expectations.

"When I started, my concept was to buy one mobile van and to be out in the field the rest of my life," Payne-Nabors said. "Now we have 19 employees, about four satellite clinics in Tulsa and a core office."

A nuclear technologist by profession, Payne-Nabors was working for a Tulsa cardiologist when she decided to put nuclear cardiac medicine on wheels and take it to rural communities.

"It wasn't an original idea, but it was original for northeastern Oklahoma," she said.

Payne-Nabors, who was the single parent of a 6-month-old son when she started the company, said she didn't have a lot of hesitation about the endeavor because she believed in what she was doing.

Several cardiologists said they would do business with her if she could establish the mobile technology in Tulsa. Their letters of intent helped her secure the nearly \$665,000 she needed to buy the special van and equipment, Payne-Nabors said.

The company has evolved since its inception. Today, in addition to mobile cardiac imaging, it provides mobile ultrasounds, CT scans and bone density scanning. Her company has a full-service diagnostic center at 7018 S. Utica Ave., which just a few weeks ago added a new MRI machine.

Becoming a business owner came fortuitously for Joyce Phillips, who has owned Clothes Horse Inc., a consignment bridal wear and formal wear store, since 1999.

Her affiliation with the store began years ago when Phillips met the business' first owner and asked whether she had any bridal gown alterations she could refer.

Phillips, whose background is in bridal dress making, said the relationship continued even after the store changed ownership, and she kept on performing alterations in her home.

Her fortunes changed dramatically, however, when the store's second owner offered to sell Phillips the business for the unbelievable price of \$1. The owner didn't want to see it close, Phillips said, but because of an illness couldn't keep running it herself.

The offer came right after Phillips lost a job as the alteration manager of a national company.

"You have to nurture the things that are given to you in life because you never know what

they'll turn into," Phillips said.

At 58, Phillips said she is still growing and views every day as a learning experience.

Over the years, she has looked for every opportunity to hone her sewing craft.

As a younger woman, she practically worked for free helping a tailor sew cuffs on men's pants. Although that man has since died, he is still paying her to this day, Phillips said, because he taught her a trade that helps her make a living.

She also would check out library books about clothing construction and buy 25-cent dresses from rummage stores that she would take apart and recreate.

"I came from a generation that lived in fantasy," Phillips said. "I looked at television a lot as a child, and I always imagined myself or saw myself as a famous designer.

"I may not be that famous designer in New York or Milan or Paris, but I feel I am in my own community, and making people look wonderful has all come to pass."

Charlyn Terry's dream also has come to pass.

Her vision of opening a boutique began to crystallize when she spotted an empty storefront by her sister's salon.

"There was a hair bow place that had just gone out of business in the same empty space," she said. "I inquired about it . . . and it hit me like a ton of bricks. It was like an 'a-ha!' moment."

Terry loved to dress her two daughters, who are now 6 and 4, and liked being around kids in general, having come from a large family herself. She said she knew instantly what she had to do.

"In the back of my mind, I always knew this was my passion," she said, standing behind her store's check-out counter.

She left her job with State Farm Insurance Co., where she had worked for 11 years in various capacities, including a management position.

Terry recommends that people research a business before jumping into it, even though she didn't.

"I got lucky. I was blessed, but I think a lot of people couldn't do that on a normal basis," she said.

Having a supportive husband has helped a lot. When the business opened, the couple agreed that there would be some nights when Terry would work late at the store and he would be home with the kids.

Terry tries not to get tunnel vision in her daily life and neglect to go out with friends or spend

time with family.

She said that whatever she has lost from her corporate job has been replaced with something equally rewarding -- the appreciation of her clientele.

"I'm very close to my customers," Terry said. "When they come in, I usually know them by name. I love kids. I get hugs; I get kisses.

"And at the end of the day I feel like I have an extended family with my customers."

Resources available to aid business start-ups

Thinking about starting a business of your own?

Think hard. Think long.

Regardless of one's gender, age or race, starting a business takes work -- and lots of it.

Two-thirds of new employer firms survive at least two years, and about half survive at least four years, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration.

That's why people who've been down that road or work with individuals considering a similar path offer these tips and resources for the journey.

Follow your dream, your passion.

Figure out what it is you really enjoy doing, and then go for it, entrepreneurs say.

Make sure it's a passion, because you will never work so hard in your life, said Charlyn Terry, owner of Jazzy Kidz, which has been in business almost three years.

Terry gave up vacation time, sick days and other perks when she left corporate America to start a business. As the boss, she also is janitor, bookkeeper and accountant.

"You're the boss. You're it," she said.

A lot of people may see entrepreneurship as an easy way out or as a way to buy their own job. They don't quite understand the level of commitment required, said Rose Washington Rentie, executive director of Tulsa Economic Development Corp.

"It is not a job. It's a lifestyle," she said. "It requires a commitment 24-7. . . . You can't go into the office at 8 a.m. and expect to leave at 5 p.m."

Make a business plan.

Research the market to determine whether it can support your idea.

"A great business plan is key," said Colleen Payne-Nabors, owner of Mobile Cardiac Imaging LLC.

Ken Talley, minority business programs coordinator for the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, agrees.

"There's a high mortality rate for small businesses in general. It's critical to find out what you need to know about starting and owning and operating a small business, and that's why the business plan can't be overemphasized," Talley said.

Online copies of guides "Business Plan" and "Business Basics" can be downloaded from the department's Web site, www.okcommerce.gov. Click on the "Business Development" section and go to "New and Small Business Support."

"I always recommend that the person who is starting the business, who has the idea, actually develops the plan or begins the process," Washington Rentie said.

Those who want to learn more about business plans also can take a business ownership curriculum sponsored by the Greenwood Chamber of Commerce.

Offered three times a year, the 15-week program, "Business Matters -- From Dream to Reality," covers key aspects of developing a business plan, including legal formation, marketing, financial analysis, insurance and other topics, said Reuben Gant, president of the Greenwood chamber.

Enrollment costs \$50. Anyone interested in learning more about the curriculum can attend a free orientation from 10 a.m. to noon Aug. 20 at Oklahoma State University-Tulsa. More information is available from the Greenwood chamber at 585-2084.

The program attracts a mix of company owners as well as individuals thinking about starting a business.

"Some folks come in with a business concept and they're looking for assistance in getting it off the ground," Gant said.

Those who decide to take the program must agree to attend every class. A graduation ceremony is held at the end of the program, and participants receive certificates of completion, Gant said.

Among other sources, the U.S. Small Business Administration provides a wealth of information through its online site, www.sba.gov.

Locally, the Service Corps. of Retired Executives also provides help to small business start-ups, and it can be reached at 581-7462.

The Oklahoma Small Business Development Center, which has several offices throughout the state, provides one-to-one business counseling, economic development assistance and training to small businesses and prospective small business owners. For office locations, visit www.osbdc.org or call (800) 522-6154. In the Tulsa area, an office is located at the Broken

Arrow campus of Northeastern State University, 3100 E. New Orleans.

New and expanding businesses also can find information resources through the Small Business Center at the Tulsa Metro Chamber. Resources include work stations equipped with the latest in small business software, a library and business-related books and videos.

Secure funding.

"The biggest barrier to starting a business for a female or a minority is access to capital because historically that group doesn't come from wealth," Washington Rentie said.

Options include borrowing money, persuading friends to contribute or tapping a nest egg.

Commercial lenders such as banks provide the main source of funding for many start-ups, Talley said.

Banks that provide SBA-backed loans fall into two lender categories -- "preferred" and "certified."

Preferred lenders have the authority to make an SBA-guaranteed loan to a small business without obtaining government approval first. Certified lenders must present the deal to the SBA before they can issue the loan, Talley said. The SBA has a short window of time to respond.

Many lenders may only agree to loan 70 percent or 80 percent of the amount needed, which means the borrower will "have to make a cash equity injection to come up with the total," Talley said. "That kills a lot of deals."

Nontraditional loan programs also are available.

The Tulsa Economic Development Corp., for instance, receives funding from several sources to provide loans to small businesses that may be considered high risk.

"The problem we face is adequate capital to meet the demand out there because every day people are starting a business or growing a business," Washington Rentie said.

About 700 people a year contact the agency in search of funding. Of that total, roughly 10 percent -- or 70 -- complete the application, Washington Rentie said.

The agency's ability to provide loans often depends on how much it receives through the city's Community Development Block Grant program.

The agency cannot fund a loan beyond \$75,000 without a bank participating, she said.

TEDC also has a micro-loan program for small businesses that are considered higher risk. With that program, TEDC borrows money from the SBA and can make loans of up to \$35,000.

"If a borrower doesn't pay us back, we're on the hook to pay SBA," Washington Rentie said.

When considering a loan proposal, the agency looks at several things, including the character of the applicants. How well have they managed their personal finances? Do they have a criminal background?

TEDC also considers the capacity of the individual to make the business work, Washington Rentie said.

"We also look at the conditions of the industry they are proposing to do business in," she said. "Is there opportunity for another business to start and succeed in that area?"

Laurie Winslow 581-8466
laurie.winslow@tulsaworld.com

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Charlyn Terry, owner of Jazzy Kidz, stands in her south Tulsa children's clothing store. Terry left a corporate job to start the upscale retail operation where she views the customers as part of an extended family.
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Colleen Payne-Nabors, owner of Mobile Cardiac Imaging LLC, stands near the new MRI unit at her full-service diagnostic center at 7018 S. Utica Ave. Payne-Nabors says a great business plan is essential.

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