

Problem solvers: Collin small business center finds solutions

PAULETTE MASON IS A problem solver.

The inventor and former mural artist proved that in 1994 when she found a fix for the cracked and dilapidated sidewalk in front of the Coca-Cola memorabilia shop she ran with her husband in Big Spring. Working for six days in the west Texas heat, Mason painted and formed the cement so that it looked like decorative brick. People loved the way it turned out and the one-off project soon became a business, with customers lining up to have their sidewalks and patios done.

That sudden success led to another problem, though. How would she let people know about her business?

"My initial thought was that we have a great product and service, but I don't know how to get it out there," Mason said. That's when another problem solver entered the picture. The Collin Small Business Development Center (SBDC) has been helping businesses like Mason's in Collin County since 1989.

The Collin SBDC was just up the street from Mason's daughter's home in Plano, so she stopped in on a visit to the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. Mason quickly realized the center and its consultants had the know-how to help her build her business.

The center helped her establish a website and a marketing plan, which gave her the platform to expand her business and eventually move it to Collin County. Artistic Masons, now

in Allen, has 12 full-time workers, two part-timers and an intern, and business is booming. The company specializes in resurfacing, as well as brick and stone repair with custom color and texture matching.

"Now that we are experiencing this huge growth, we are relying on SBDC to give us direction on how to manage the growth and increase it through website development, social media and advertising," Mason said, adding that she has taken several SBDC training courses over the years.

Collin SBDC knows how to grow along with small businesses. The SBDC works with start-ups as well as established small businesses that have as many as 499 employees.

Collin SBDC Director Marta Frey gave the example of a small grocery store chain the center is working with. The chain already has four stores in the metroplex and is trying to determine the best locations for more stores.

"They want to figure out where to put the next seven," she said. "That is the kind of larger small business we can help with research on starting up in a new area."

The SBDC does market research, helps identify financing options and provides business-oriented training on areas as diverse as accounting, contracts, search engine optimization, social media marketing, financing and the legal aspects of starting and running a business. One of the things SBDC Business Advisor Alex Plotkin enjoys

most, though, is one-on-one counseling.

"I view my role as helping identify their problem and using my experience or resources to help them solve that problem," Plotkin said.

Plotkin's experience comes from his years as a small business owner. He likes to tell his SBDC clients that he has bought businesses, sold businesses, started them from scratch and closed them down, learning the process as he went.

"I had to figure things out by trial and error," he said. "Once I learned (services like the ones through the SBDC were) available, I was happy to share my experience with other people."

That small business spirit seems to be a driving factor for all of the center's advisors. Frey worked in her father's engineering firm before moving on to small business development and entrepreneurship. Advisor Keith Otto knows the ins and outs of raising capital and designing business models thanks to his years in financing and his own small business-consulting firm. Advisor Kelly DeWitt has worked in banking, sales, marketing and owned his own business brokerage firm for more than a decade.

Although each brings different experience and skills to the table, they understand the dream of small business ownership.

"If you are willing to take the risk, the rewards can be very great," DeWitt said, pointing to both the financial benefits and the legacy small business owners can leave.

Mason has certainly benefited from starting her own business, but she doesn't want to rest on her laurels. With the SBDC's help, she is creating a social media presence for Artistic Masons.

"It's a big learning curve for me, but I know I can go to the small business development center and they will have someone who can help us out in that area," she said.

Another problem solved.

Visit www.collin.edu/sbdc for more information about the Collin Small Business Development Center. More information on Collin College is available at www.collin.edu. ■



Paulette Mason, the owner of Artistic Masons in Allen, has benefited from the Collin Small Business Development Center's insights and training. Collin photo/ Nick Young