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SCORE helps open doors

BY RICK PLUMLEE
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Ben Tyson, a 22-year-old computer-based entrepreneur, was hearing that venture capitalists would want up to 80 percent equity in his startup business to fully fund it.

Mary McCune has been a motivational speaker for a decade, but she knew she needed a different approach to attract new clients.

In recent months, the Wichita chapter of the Service Corps of Retired Executives, or SCORE, lent a helping hand in both situations.

Roger Douthett, a SCORE counselor, advised Tyson in May not to give up more than 20 percent equity in his business, Time Trails Inc.

"They were instrumental in making sure we didn't step off the cliff," Tyson said.

McCune had been struggling with marketing herself to the corporate world. SCORE counselor Bill Ellison met with her in June.

"Bill gave me the words to say, how to present myself in a corporate way," McCune said. "He just completely helped me to overhaul my business."

SCORE is a national volunteer organization that was formed in 1964 and is funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration. But SCORE has evolved into also utilizing executives who are still working to counsel the nation's small businesses.

"Most everybody who does our workshops are not retired," Ellison said. "They're practicing attorneys, bankers, tax accountants. They donate their time."

Workshops are held at Office This, 4031 E. Harry, on the third Saturday of each month. The fee is \$45 for those who pay in advance, \$50 at the door.

The all-day session covers a wide area of topics, including developing a business plan, financing, marketing, insurance and taxes.

But the workshop also gives those attending a point of reference to realize how much they don't know about running a business. After the workshop, they're encouraged to hook up with an individual counselor.

And best of all, there's no charge for that counseling.

"People walk into our office and they have all this stuff floating around in their head," Ellison said, "but they haven't put it down in writing.

"We try to get them started and organized."

But the one thing SCORE won't do, Ellison said, is the work for the client.

"They have to do the work," he said. "We try to be mentors. Our goal is that when they present that business plan, it's professional looking, it has good cash flow, it makes that banker excited about considering them for a loan."

'Dreams and passion'

Nationally, SCORE has more than 12,400 volunteers, many of them serving as counselors who worked with nearly 358,000 clients in 2008, according to the organization.

SCORE's 77-county Wichita district has 40 volunteers, including about 15 counselors.

In a little more than a year that Ellison has been a SCORE counselor, he has met with about 40 clients.

"You meet with all kinds of people with all kinds of ideas," said Ellison, who becomes Wichita's chapter chairman on Nov. 1. "They have dreams and passion.

"Some of them don't know exactly if they want to be in business, but they have an idea."

Douthett has heard many of those ideas in his seven years as a SCORE counselor.

"Some of the best work we do is keep people from going into business," he said. "I had a woman who said she needed to buy a building for more than \$1 million, but all she needed was one corner of that building for her business.

"Others have a pretty good idea of what they need. I had two guys the other day who wanted to start a hamburger joint. They had it all covered."

Success and failure

One of SCORE's strengths is the varied background of its counselors.

Ellison was a plant manager for Sherwin-Williams in Andover. John Willoughby, who headed SCORE's Wichita chapter for the past two years and is now the district director, is a retired dean of academics for Southwestern College in Winfield.

Clair Crandall, a SCORE counselor for 18 years, whose background includes feedlots, oil and gas, spent 15 years as president of Berry Tractor.

"I've had some success stories and some failures," he said. "It's hard to get people to change their lifestyles.

"I had a company a few years ago, the owner was in terrible shape. I wrote down eight things he needed to do. He didn't do any of them."

The owner sold the business and filed for bankruptcy.

Douthett has spent 35 years in development and implementation of computer software.

That's why Douthett was the first person Ellison called after Tyson sought SCORE's advice.

Time Trails, which Tyson started in March, is creating an Internet technology to map the history of the world online.

"What we do is utilize Google Earth as a platform to do historical animation as an educational tool," said Tyson, who has six part-time employees and hopes to have technology up and running in about six months. "It's time-based animation.

"The business model is completely unique — time, space and advertising."

His father, Karl Tyson, a computer programmer, joined him in the venture. Together, they had the computer angle down.

Finding investment capital was an issue.

"We tried the banks, put our toes in the water," Tyson said. "Just as we thought. Intangible assets, high risk, new business model. We got nothing."

SCORE, as well as the Wichita Technology Corp. and the Kansas Small Business Development Center, helped Tyson "crystallize" his business plan and get on the right path for financing.

The doors have begun to open.

Time Trails was selected as one of the 11 companies to present business plans to investors at the Great Plains Capital Conference in Wichita last month.

"A lot of times we're just a clearinghouse for where they should go to ask the right questions," Douthett said. "The other day I had a guy want to know about exporting. I sent him to where he needed to go."

Change is a constant.

"I call a business plan a living document," Ellison said. "You have to keep revisiting it each quarter, and things change."

McCune knew she was well overdue for an update when she approached Ellison for help.

"Twenty seconds after I sat in front of people, the door was closed," said McCune, a Pratt resident. "I got a breath of fresh air from Bill."

And her business has picked up.

"I listen to everything that boy says," McCune said. "If he say jump, I say how high?"

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