



Article & Photo By Chris Fuller

Being an entrepreneur is a tough proposition, no matter where you are. In rural areas like ours, it can be even tougher. Appalachian Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) works to connect women engaged in entrepreneurial efforts, providing access to business support services that they might not be able to find, afford, or access otherwise. AWE has developed several local networks throughout western North Carolina, including one in Rutherford County which supports a number of Rutherford Woman entrepreneurs.

Hill's Hardware and General Store in Rutherfordton has been a downtown mainstay since 1947, and is now operated by third and fourth generation descendants of the founders. "Remember when you came to town with your grandpa on Saturday morning to buy plow points and seed for the farm? Come in and take a trip down memory lane," says co-owner Martha Hensley. Tradition notwithstanding, for a store to stay in business for nearly 65 years, it has to change as the times change. Being involved with AWE has helped Hill's with that transition.

Hensley says AWE has helped Hill's Hardware establish a clear sense of direction. "Instead of trying to be all things to all people, we now concentrate on our past and stick with certain categories of products," says Hensley. "As we buy items to put in our shop, we have to have a focus, and a theme. In our case, we look for anything nostalgic, anything kitchen-related, such as canning supplies and kitchen gadgets, and anything related to lawn and garden decor. We also
RUTHERFORD WOMAN

encourage local craftspeople by featuring handmade soaps, handmade jewelry, jams and jellies, candles, and other locally produced items." AWE's guidance has helped Hill's Hardware develop an idea of their target market and customers, and tailor their approach to meet their needs.

Hensley credits AWE Project Manager Betty Hurst with providing a sense of enthusiasm "Betty was always at our meetings providing encouragement and pushing us to do new things. With her help and direction, we reset our shelving units and gondolas to give more of an old-time hardware look to our business. We don't want to look like a strip mall anymore, we want to look like what we are, which is a 65 year old hardware store which stocks hardware, as well as lawn and garden supplies and gifts."

As a live-in caregiver to her 96 year-old grandmother, operating a home-based business works well for Lori Byers. Her company, Monkeyshine Soap Crafts, began with Lori's interest in lost southern

traditions. Her great-grandmother and grandmother made lye soap in the back yard in a wooden bucket. Lori makes hers at home, using teas, oils, spices, and other unique ingredients, including many which are locally produced. "I try to make my soaps as not just something to bathe with, but as something artistic as well," says Lori.

Working with AWE has helped Lori expand Monkeyshine's marketing and gain information to
JULY | AUGUST • 2011



Monkeyshine Soap at The Big Crafty in Asheville

help grow the business. "Some of the outlets where my soaps are sold have opened up as a result of Betty's influence and the information exchanged in our group meetings," Lori says. "I'm also investigating some grant opportunities that I learned about through AWE. It's helped me to identify my market, as well as connecting and sharing ideas with other businesswomen."

AWE is a project of Asheville-based HandMade in America, where Hurst serves as Director of Rural Entrepreneurship. AWE connects and supports rural western North Carolina women with creation and growth of their small businesses. "A few years ago, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation approached us and asked if we would be interested in developing a program aimed at creating pathways out of poverty," said Hurst. HandMade determined that western North Carolina needed a way to support very small businesses in rural areas.

AWE-member businesses gather for monthly meetings, where they discuss their needs, identify resources to meet them, and work one-on-one to meet the challenges of running a business. "Some of these are retail businesses, which obviously have a greater presence, but often they are a craftsperson working in their home without a retail storefront," said Hurst.

AWE provides technical and operational support to these businesses, tailored to fit their specific needs and help them succeed in the marketplace. "For example, one of the big needs is help with Social Media Marketing," said Hurst. This summer, AWE will offer Social Media training for network members in a lab setting, providing hands-on experience with these tools.

For more information about AWE, call 828-252-0121 x 302, or visit them online at www.AppalachianWomenEntrepreneurs.org.

The following women-owned businesses participate in the Rutherford County AWE network:

Centered and Balanced: Therapy for patients living with chronic illness/chronic pain diagnoses and/or symptoms
124-A S. Powell St., Forest City • 828-382-0171

Glass Girl Studio: Jewelry Crafts and Colorful Cats . Glass bead maker, painter, collage artist. • 828-657-5180

The Hem Shop: Sewing and Alterations
139 Central St., Rutherfordton • 828-288-0377

Mary Ann Ferrin: Handmade Dolls, Sprites and Cordials
828-287-1425

Hill's Hardware & General Store: Gifts, DIY Tools, and Hardware Items. 184 N. Main St., Rutherfordton • 828-287-4105

Monkeyshine Soap Crafts: Handmade Herbal Soaps
531 Thompson Road, Rutherfordton • 828-202-5696

SOS - Software & Office Solutions
Software training and business support services • 828-619-0767

Tin Roof Hand Crafts: Crocheted Garments, Rustic Frames, and Herbal Products - maryinthecountry@gmail.com

WHAT NOW?

Have Questions about Medicare or Retirement?

We Have the SOLUTION!

Local Help to Educate and Guide You Through:

- Annuities • Financial Planning • Retirement Planning
- Individual Major Medical • Life, Dental & Health Insurance
- Medicare Advantage • Medicare Part D Plans
- Medicare Supplement • Long Term Care Planning
- Final Expense Insurance • And More
- We Also Offer Life Planning and Educational Seminars

Call Today, and We'll Find a Plan that's Right for You!



2270 US Hwy 74-A • Ste. 524 • Forest City, NC
828.289.2187 or 828.606.8844
 email: tashby@cytechusa.com

