Jennifer McMillan and Buffy Taylor almost seem surprised at the success of their gift shop in Marion. The shop, named Tallulah’s, opened July 1, 2003. “It’s wonderful. It’s overwhelming. It’s going great,” McMillan reported of the new business. “The shop has exceeded our expectations,” she said. “We are where we thought we would be in our third year of operating.”

Before they opened Tallulah’s, McMillan, an accountant, and Taylor, an artist, carefully researched and completed their business plan. They employed the resources of the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Center in the Perry County Chamber of Commerce as they put their plan together.

Diane Harrison, executive director of the Perry County Chamber, had called McMillan and Taylor to inform them about the AERN business planning resources available through the Chamber. The businesswomen used the AERN reference library to build their plan.

“The AERN center is a real encouragement for people starting a business in a small town,” Taylor said. “Having a shop of our own has been a lifelong dream for both of us,” McMillan said. “We knew what we wanted to do but had no plan. The resources at the AERN gave us the opportunity to take a realistic, detached look at our business in its entirety. We were able to build a comprehensive plan outlining every conceivable aspect of our business that has served as a guideline now that we are up and running.”

Tallulah’s, located at 217 Washington Street, anchors the northwest corner of the courthouse square in historic downtown Marion. The shop is in an 1830s building that formerly housed a grocery store, according to McMillan. Depression-era photographer Walker Evans immortalized the shop when he spent time in nearby Hale County in 1936, she said.

Taylor, whose family roots in Marion reach to 1812, said she and McMillan wanted to make their town better. “We wanted to do something that would make the town more aesthetically pleasing,” Taylor said. “We wanted to encourage other businesses and help bring revenue into town. We did this to try to help rejuvenate the community.”

McMillan and Taylor’s shop is the first business in a half-block long building that is being renovated. They believe Marion is poised for business growth. Across the street from Tallulah’s, another historic block of storefronts has been renovated. It reportedly will house everything from furnishings to textiles to quilting supplies.

“We hope we can help resurrect the downtown by encouraging other businesses,” Taylor said.

McMillan and Taylor carry a wide range of items in their shop. “One feature of the store that we are both proud of is that we offer one-of-a-kind items made by local and regional talent,” McMillan said.

Broadly stated, the shop offers coffee, art and unique gifts. More specifically, (continued on page 3)
The Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization in Greensboro houses the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network site in Hale County. In August 2002, HERO moved into its business development center at 1120 Main St. and moved the AERN center with it.

In addition to the AERN business promotion, clients at the HERO site have access to vocational counselors who can help entrepreneurs understand educational needs, staffing needs, salary ranges and more.

The AERN center is located at the front of the HERO business development center and is visible through the large windows that face Main Street. “It is one of the most high traffic areas on HERO’s campus,” Bryant-Greene said. “We have a lot more traffic and use here than where it was previously housed.”

In addition to the AERN business planning resources, clients at the HERO site have access to vocational counselors who can help entrepreneurs understand educational needs, staffing needs, salary ranges and more.

The HERO staff is being encouraged to use the resources of AERN. “You need to tap into staff so there is total buy-in of the possibilities of small business development,” Bryant-Greene said. She has used the AERN resources herself to start a motivational newspaper – The Good Shepherd.

Dallas County AERN moves to Selma and Dallas County Centre for Commerce

The historic Carnegie Library in Selma is once again serving its community. After being vacant for almost three years, the century-old Carnegie Library has been refurbished and renamed the Selma and Dallas County Centre for Commerce.

The Centre for Commerce, 912 Selma Ave., now houses the Dallas County Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network partnering organization, the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce.

Claire Twardy, executive director of the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, said that the chamber moved into the Carnegie Library together with the local Economic Development Authority, Tourism, and Leadership Selma/Dallas County.

“We all promote Selma in one way or another, so it was just a wise move to come together,” Twardy said. The Centre for Commerce allows the four groups to share staff and resources.

In addition to bringing the promotional entities of Dallas County together, the move allowed the AERN work center in the chamber to have its own space. In the former chamber offices, the AERN work center was housed in a conference room and was unavailable when people were meeting in the room. Now business researchers have space dedicated to AERN that is available during chamber office hours. Twardy said the setting provides a more private atmosphere in which clients can work.

The Carnegie Library is a wonderful setting for the Centre for Commerce, according to Twardy. “It is an architecturally beautiful facility,” she said. “It’s a great building for visitors to walk in to. It says that history lives in Selma, Alabama.”

Among the existing architectural details that greet visitors are the original woodworking, carving, and skylight. During renovation, workers removed a dropped ceiling that had covered a skylight 45-feet above the lobby for about 35 years. And Twardy has added her own touch to the Centre entry.

“I have a degree in graphic design from the University of Georgia,” she said. “There are some beautiful arches in the lobby of the Carnegie Building. One arch had been enclosed and it just screamed ‘mural’.” So, she painted one. It depicts a rural pastoral-river scene, in keeping with the landscape of the area in 1904, when the Carnegie Library was built.

After the public library moved in 1975, the building was used by the Dallas County School Board until they outgrew it in 2000.

“We were glad we had the opportunity to utilize it and have the community enjoy it again,” Twardy said. “It is so interesting. People just drop by to see it because they remember enjoying the library as a child. They have great memories just coming in the door.”
Experience contributes to entrepreneurial success

When starting a new business, experience is essential, according to Paavo Hanninen. Hanninen is co-director of the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network and director of the University of Alabama’s Small Business Development Center. His job is to advise small business owners and those looking to start a small business.

The first piece of advice he offers entrepreneurs is to acquire knowledge of the business field before investing time and money in the venture. And Hanninen can reel off a list of successes and failures that can be directly linked to knowledge, or lack thereof, of the business field.

“AERN has contributed to the start-up of several businesses, including a retail gift shop and a computer services firm as well as others business,” Hanninen said. “In most instances, the entrepreneurs had previous experience in their field of business interest.”

But experience isn’t all it takes to be a successful entrepreneur. Hanninen urges entrepreneurs to put together a detailed business plan. The resources at each AERN center have been selected by Hanninen specifically to assist in that task.

Tina Price, of the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, told the Selma Times-Journal (see article on this page) how she helps people use AERN computers and software to complete a business plan. She noted that the 17-step computer program designed to aid in constructing business plans is easy to use.

“I have worked with people who are very computer literate to those who have never touched a keyboard before,” Price told the Times-Journal. “It all comes down to persistence. If you want something, you have to spend time working on it.”

Hanninen also urges entrepreneurs to surround themselves with a team of experts. “You need a good accountant, attorney, banker, and insurance agent on your side when you’re starting a business,” he said. Beyond the experts it takes to run a business, Hanninen suggests entrepreneurs have a stable of informal advisors. “It’s good to regularly run ideas or problems by other business people or leaders in the community. They may have dealt successfully with such a problem in the past,” Hanninen said.

There’s no magic involved in starting up a business, according to Hanninen. But there is a great deal of hard work and perseverance needed. “If you plan carefully, know your business and surround yourself with good people, your business has a much higher likelihood of success,” Hanninen said.

Tallahah’s (cont. from pg. 1)

Tallahah’s carries fragrances, candles, linens, books and custom imprinted invitations and announcements. Regional books, such as those by award-winning Alabama author Mary Ward Brown, are sold at Tallahah’s.

In December, Tallahah’s will host a book signing by Brown and Alabama Troubadour author Karren Pell. There’s a children’s boutique within the store that stocks several lines of upscale children’s clothing, European wooden toys and children’s books.

Tallahah’s is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The phone number is (334) 683-2477.
The AERN Members and their Contact Persons

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Sumter County Industrial Development Authority
Ms. Felicia Jones (205) 652-9303 Livingston

Greene County Industrial Development Board
Ms. Phillis Belcher (205) 372-9769 Eutaw

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Ms. Eva Bryant-Greene (334) 624-9100 Greensboro

Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce
Ms. Kathy Leverett (334) 289-0270 Demopolis

Selma Area Chamber of Commerce
Ms. Claire Twardy (334) 875-7241 Selma

Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission
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