A growing number of people involved in new or expanding businesses are using AERN’s new center in Choctaw County, according to Nancy Gibson, executive director of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce and Community Foundation. The center first opened its doors in the chamber office in Butler in April 2005.

And nobody, Gibson says, has made better use of the resources than Elizabeth Young, owner of The Hot Spot, 112 Melvin Road, Gilbertown, Ala.

Young, a registered nurse, has a daughter with health problems. By starting The Hot Spot she believes she has, well, hit the spot because of the more flexible schedule owning her business allows.

Young’s research led her to believe there was a need for a clothing store in Gilbertown marketed to middle-income families. “I started looking for clothing lines that would fill that need,” she says.

Finding the name brands and coming up with prices that would make her business work was a big challenge. “That’s when I heard about the AERN program at the Choctaw Chamber in Butler,” she says.

With Gibson’s help, she soon made contacts with the merchandise mart, which opened many doors for The Hot Spot. “Before I know it,” she says, “I have clothing reps contacting me and setting up appointments to visit me during August. I have been working on the paperwork to attend my first market.”

Gibson says things appear to be working out well for Young and her new business.

“Right now,” Young says, “I am gearing up for the busy school season. We carry a wide variety of back-to-school outfits and a women’s line in sizes 3 to 20,

Family business: From left owner Elizabeth Young and her mother Virginia Young fill the racks while son Brandon holds daughter Saniyah.

men’s 34 and up, girls’ 4 to 16 and a baby line starting at 12 months.”

The side benefit, she says, is that the business has become a family business. Mother is able to bond with daughter, who sleeps as Mom makes a sale. Son Brandon is getting firsthand experience in business ownership by assisting with deliveries and keeping an eye on sister while Mom greets clientele.

“My mother, Virginia Young, is extremely supportive,” Elizabeth says. “Mother will open up for me when I must take my daughter, Saniyah, to the doctor.”

She is looking forward to coming home from market “with loads of new lines, styles and colors … and to expanding inventory to include an accessory line, something my customers have been requesting.”
For years, economic and community leaders across the rural South have pegged the solution to sagging employment figures and staggering poverty rates: use innovation to solve problems regionally.

This year’s Summit on the Rural South, hosted June 12-14 in Point Clear, Ala., by the Southern Growth Policies Board focused on ideas that might give traction to the long-understood solution of rural stagnation in the South.

The SGPB, based in North Carolina, is a nonpartisan public policy think tank formed by the governments of 13 Southern states, including Alabama. This year’s conference was hosted by Alabama Gov. Bob Riley, who served as the organization’s conference chairman. Annette Watters, AERN Co-director, attended the meeting.

During the three-day event, Riley spoke frequently about the pressing need for cooperation between rural communities and their states.

“The prosperity of the rural South is crucial to the prosperity of the South as a whole,” Riley emphasized. “There have been dozens of studies on what to do about the rural South, and many Southerners are working hard to create opportunities for our people . . . . We know what needs to be done.”

The highlight of the Point Clear conference was the release of the 2005 Report on the Future of the South entitled “The New Architecture of Rural Prosperity.” That report synthesized information from town hall type meetings across the South with more than 2,000 community leaders and focused on specific ways to develop economies along regional lines, “without regard to traditional or state boundaries,” according to SGPB.

While dissolving regional boundaries may seem a simple solution, this year’s conference disclosed many barriers to making such an idea work.

For instance, many rural leaders and their communities still hold firm to a competitive mindset of economic development. They believe the only measure of success rests with the number of industries located in their cherished industrial parks.

The reality, of course, is that few rural cities have the workforce or government incentives to draw major job providers. In that sense, rural cooperation must be viewed as more than an option; it is essential to economic growth.

Along with the rural South, there are hundreds of rural areas in other geographic sectors of the country. If the South doesn’t accept the idea of practicing rural cooperation, other areas of the country will “out compete” the rural South. In fact, that has already begun, some authorities believe.

Along with the idea of regional cooperation, the SGPB conference paid particular attention to the need for entrepreneurship among future business leaders. Many people in the rural South don’t even consider the idea of self-employment, in large part because they aren’t given the tools to carry out a good idea. Alabama’s AERN program is an example of a program that puts the appropriate tools in easy reach of rural people.

Access to capital is one of the greatest needs for entrepreneurs in the rural South, but some, though by no means all, local banks have been hesitant to provide loans to small start-up companies.

During the SGPB conference, leaders suggested nudging governments to encourage private enterprise through a change in banking regulations. Leaders also made it clear that the answer to increased entrepreneurial development cannot come solely through government regulations.
AERN Website

AERN’s popular website (http://aern.cba.ua.edu/) provides a way for clients to get the latest and most useful resources without having to go to a university or major reference library.

“Our website has several purposes,” says webmaster Karen Chapman, who is also a librarian at the Angelo Bruno Business Library at the University of Alabama. “It serves as a way to promote the services of AERN. It puts the most useful business information at our clients’ fingertips. And it serves as a portal for additional information, through links, that we’ve found to be valuable to people in business or thinking about starting a business.”

Chapman said the most popular features on the site are the training programs presented primarily by the business reference librarians of the UA Bruno Business Library. These programs are offered live, in classroom settings, then the summaries and other features of the program are posted on the site so people who could not attend may do so virtually. Also, those who did attend can take a second or third look at parts they found the most useful.

“We also have on the site several tutorials for online databases offered through the Alabama Virtual Library and for using web tools such as Internet Explorer and Google,” Chapman said. “We have plans to offer online tutorials for using the AERN-supplied reference books.”

Chapman says she and others who prepare information for the site try to post the most current information and to make navigation as easy as possible.

The front page offers entry to six different sections of the site. The six sections are a masthead (details of the Bruno Library and people responsible for AERN); an information section about AERN and its services; a guide to information resources offered by AERN; selected business resources available on the World Wide Web; a section devoted to making one’s computer more useful and powerful (free software, for example); and a special feature entitled “Ask a Business Librarian.”

In this latter feature, a specialized business librarian will provide answers to questions at no charge, usually within two business days. Chapman says she hopes more rural Alabama people will make use of the service in the future.

Chapman says she and her associates expect to increase interactive services on the site in which users can manipulate hypothetical business data to find ways to apply it to their own situations. Eventually, these interactive services will feature audio and video, she said.

“Web-based learning will become more and more important to the business person,” says Chapman, “and we will do our part in that process for the AERN partners.”

Chapman received degrees in history and mathematics from the University of Memphis and an MLS and MBA from the University of Illinois. She has received numerous awards in business librarianship and enjoys her work with business entrepreneurship in rural Alabama.
Another key solution is renewed focus of partnership between higher education and Southern rural communities. Community colleges and universities must serve as catalysts and innovators for these communities. However, leaders warned that educators must involve local people rather than dictate solutions. Higher education partners should perform primarily as facilitators, leaders said. The AERN program embraces this philosophy wholeheartedly.

Finally, the SGPB conference spent a great deal of time focusing on community development, not just economic development.

“… The report focuses on widening the view of economic development beyond industrial recruitment to include community building activities – like civic engagement, workforce development… entrepreneurial support, and education – as part of the actions that create, expand, and recruit businesses to the rural South,” the SGPB said.

In essence, communities must spend less time chasing big industries and more time bettering themselves. If rural communities will pay more attention to developing workforces and improving education, business and industry will be more interested in investment in them, the conferees concluded.


Jonathan McElvy