On June 27, an Open House at Fayette’s Historic Depot marked the establishment of the tenth AERN resource center in Alabama as Fayette County joined Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, and Wilcox counties as a member.

Co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen were on hand with about 40 Fayette County officials and guests to open the new facility and explain how Fayette County residents can use the important business building information resources provided by The University of Alabama. They will also be eligible to attend ongoing workshops and have access to UA staff for their business planning and for advice.

Chamber of Commerce President Amy Andrews and Executive Director Anne Hamner welcomed guests to the new center, which is housed in the depot. Hamner said using the depot as the resource center site would mean that users will be able to use the facility during normal business hours.

“The University is pleased to add Fayette County to our AERN family,” Watters told the group. “Being a member of AERN will give Fayette County entrepreneurs the latest information and best techniques for establishing and growing businesses.”

Hanninen added that membership in AERN also gives Fayette County residents a direct line to other University’s services and training such as

Annette Watters, center, co-director of AERN, cuts the ribbon at the Fayette Historic Depot on June 27, establishing AERN’s tenth site. Watters is flanked by co-director Paavo Hanninen (left) and Rep. William Thigpen (right). To the left of Hanninen is Bill McCollum, chamber member, and next to him is Amy Andrews, Chamber of Commerce president. To the right of Rep. Thigpen is Sheriff Hubert Norris. About 40 visitors attended the ribbon cutting and open house.

Mayor Ray Nelson holds up a copy of Business Plans Handbook, one of many reference books available to Fayette County residents as a member of AERN.

Photos by Richard Andrew Mullins

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Both human and AERN reference resources played key roles in the startup of a new restaurant that is drawing rave reviews in the southwest Alabama town of Butler.

Nancy Gibson, executive director of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce, which houses AERN’s computer and reference materials, put three investors in touch with a person who was visiting in the area.

That person happened to be her 28-year-old son Richard Lee. But Lee, it turns out, was no ordinary visitor. He brought with him four years of culinary school training in Charleston, S.C., plus two more years of college courses in restaurant and hotel management. Before you could order two hot meals to go, the investors had hired Lee as their manager/chef.

Six weeks later, Choctaw Countians wouldn’t know what to do without Old Buddies, a restaurant that serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner and is open 6 a.m. till 9 p.m. weekdays and 10 till 10 on Sundays.

Already Lee is talking about expanding the restaurant that can serve 68 and adding television in time for the football season.

Many items on the menu, such as pasta specialties and Philly cheese steak, are unavailable at most small town restaurants. Old Buddies offers build-your-own pasta dishes and a low-fat menu of grilled and steamed items.

Fifteen people are employed at the restaurant, which also has a drive-through window.

“The computer and reference books at the Chamber were especially helpful,” Lee said, “but instead of the usual timetables, we had to compress months into weeks and weeks into days to meet our deadlines for opening on Father’s Day, June 18.”

One of the books Lee used contains several chapters on restaurants and checklists of more than 700 items dealing with restaurant facilities and operating policies and procedures. The computer and printer were also helpful in getting menus ready and placing orders with purveyors for everything from food to beverages to trash pickup.

Old Buddies

New Restaurant Opens…in Butler

Old Buddies Chef/Manager Richard Lee and assistants Tonya Jenkins and Patrice Johnson work food preparation in the kitchen at Old Buddies, a new restaurant in Choctaw County that benefited from AERN resources in its startup.

Old Buddies has a varied menu and its most popular meal is lunch with a variety of meat and vegetables specialties.

Old Buddies is located on Highway 10 in Butler in the building occupied by Flaherty’s Restaurant for 14 years.

Hamner said that in the first month a number of residents have used the new facility and she expects more as word spreads throughout the county.

Each AERN site receives a computer and printer from the University and a library of the most useful business reference books covering such topics as how to start a business, how to buy an existing business, expanding a business, financial tips, startup legal information, zip code demographics and much more.

AERN, or the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, began in 2001 with four counties and has steadily added others in cooperation with existing organizations such as chambers of commerce and community development organizations.

Guests Dwayne Worsham and Matthew Turner enjoy a meal served by wait-staffer Wanda Steward at Old Buddies in Butler, Ala.
The restaurant startup was especially gratifying to Gibson, not only, she said, because it was her son in charge of getting a restaurant up and running but because it was her first AERN experience with a restaurant startup.

"This was an exciting venture," she said, "and presented quite a learning curve for me as well, which will prepare me for the next one when it comes along."

As with any business, Lee said, the harder you work the better things go. "I come from parents who love to work and they passed it on to me."

His operating philosophy? "Every meal that goes out of the kitchen has my stamp of approval on it."

And he wants the restaurant to play an important role in the community, too. He will look into forming a partnership with Choctaw County High School to offer job training for students who might not be able to attend culinary school but can get the equivalent career training by working with someone locally who has that experience.

It All Started With A Tattoo

In 1999, Willie Harris, II, ran into James Joiner, manager of Kids Foot Locker in Montgomery. The meeting with Joiner gave Harris the “business bug” eventually resulting in Harris starting his own screen-printing operation, Cotton House, LLC, in Selma.

Joiner noticed a tattoo on Harris’s arm and commented on its creative design. He asked who designed it and Harris said it was his design. Joiner suggested they start a T-Shirt clothing line called Hip Hop Phaeva and this began Harris’s journey toward self-employment, a journey that was helped along the way by the staff at Selma/Dallas County Chamber of Commerce and AERN’s business start-up reference and resource materials.

Harris had been managing a Foot Locker shoe store, but the simple discussion with Joiner became a turning point for Harris. A partnership of sorts began between Harris and Michael Jones, Sr., owner of OPM Merchandisers. Harris would work as an apprentice for him and, in turn, he would sell T-shirts to Harris at a low price.

During off hours, usually after an 8-hour day, Harris was given access to Jones’s printing equipment to fill orders of his own. “I would clean the shop, fold shirts, and help out wherever I was needed. I learned a lot about the business under Mr. Jones,” Harris said.

Most of Harris’s orders came from on campus at Alabama State University in Montgomery, the place he met his wife, Natasha. Natasha joined the Regular Army and did two tours in Iraq. Now a Reservist, she helps Willie run the business.

Harris’s creative designs quickly became popular with the sororities and fraternities at Alabama State. His artwork became known for its unique style and was quickly becoming recognizable and in demand.

Harris’s apprenticeship period was running its course as he became more confident and knowledgeable about the business. He began to see a market for many other groups such as church choirs, businesses, and, what is now his “bread and butter,” family reunions.

He started out trying to do everything on his own without all the start-up information and he wasted some time and some trips to the courthouse and the bank, he said.

“I had most of the steps, but not all, and I didn’t have them in the right order,” Harris said. “It wasn’t until I met with the nice lady at the Chamber of Commerce, Tina Price, that I had a good checklist to work from. She was patient with me and gave me some good tips as to what to do, and what not to do. She let me know that first I must get a business license before I start a business account.”

Harris commented on how easy it was to draw up a business plan with Price’s help and the new software AERN had installed at the Chamber of Commerce.

“This mapped everything out for me.” Harris said. “It helped me get Cotton House off the ground.”

Now two years plus into his business, Harris attributes his success to the early preparation under the tutelage of his friend Michael Jones and the start-up information from AERN and the Chamber as well as to the creative designs that are constantly running through his head.

Natasha and Willie Harris proudly show their creative work at Cotton House, their screen printing business in Selma, Alabama.

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And the business is growing he says, despite having competition from other businesses in Selma. But he feels he still has the same advantages he started with—a solid business plan, a level of creativity not found in his competition, and the uniqueness of his designs. He also said he enjoys working with his clients on the design to ensure they will be satisfied with the product they are getting.

Harris said family reunions make up more than half of his business in the summer and he has worked four large ones this year, two from Selma, one from Montgomery, and one from Orrville.

Family reunions in the South have always been a big deal, he said, bringing as many as 200 or more home to Southern roots from all over the country. This Black Belt secret has become mainstream knowledge with the popularity of the Madea family reunion movies.

Harris contacts customers through fliers and word of mouth, but he is looking at budgeting marketing money and creating a website, among other strategies. This way he can get on the Internet and open up his customer base.

It appears Harris has caught on to something people value in family reunion T-shirts. Time will only tell, but it looks like Cotton House may become “king” in Alabama, thanks to AERN, the Selma/Dallas Chamber of Commerce and a friend who noticed an interesting tattoo.

AERN is part of the Center for Business and Economic Research at The University of Alabama’s Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration. In its fifth year, AERN supports the growth of entrepreneurial activity throughout rural Alabama.

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