For many business owners, including many not on the Gulf Coast, Hurricane Ivan delivered a knockout blow. But for Scott and Robin Thames of Frisco City, the hurricane provided an opportunity to get into business for themselves and to meet a need in their community.

The Fillin’ Station, a full service/self service gas station and convenience store on State Highway 21 South in Frisco City, reopened for business on March 10. Local residents are showing their appreciation by coming in to let the new owners know they are appreciated. Until it was closed in 2004 because of the hurricane, the store had been a fixture in Frisco City since the 1950s.

The town’s mayor and many other well-wishers were on hand for the ribbon cutting on March 10.

Robin says she and Scott bought the closed store as-is and fixed it up, with new paint, complete renovation, including a new entrance, new windows, and a new metal roof. They are proud to describe it as a family business and said they used all local companies to make the needed repairs, keeping the money at home.

For example, Ronnie King of King Glass in Monroeville put in the new windows and Tom Dunning of Hamner Inc., added the new roof, which is made of metal and is slanted, whereas the old roof was flat.

Robin said it took about six months after they bought it to get it into shape for opening.

Now they are using the honeymoon period to find out what their customers want from the Fillin’ Station. “Everyone is so pleased to have us reopen the business. It really fills a need in our area. We want to make sure we have what they need when they drop by.”

Robin says the fact customers can pump their own gas or have an employee pump it for them makes them different from most convenience stores. Whether pumped by customer or employee, the price is the same.

The two owners divide the duties at the store, with Scott essentially operating the store while Robin subs for him and keeps the books.

Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroe Area Chamber of Commerce, said the new business is a shot in the arm for an area that needs new business. She said Robin and Scott became
Sister and Brother Announce Expansion of Family Business

With help from two AERN partners, and boosted by their own spirit of entrepreneurship, two funeral home operators have expanded their business and held a successful open house to present their new services to the public.

The two entrepreneurs are brother and sister, Jacqueline Studdard-Weatherly and James H. Studdard Sr. The family had one funeral home in York, Sumter County, but saw the need for another in Butler, Choctaw County, 30 miles away.

The family has been in the funeral business since 1942, Studdard-Weatherly said, so the expansion to Choctaw County made sense. James R. “Professor” Weatherly and Addie “Mom-Mae” Weatherly were the firm’s family founders.

Between them, brother and sister have 60 years of licensed funeral experience and both have completed the Mortuary Science program at Jefferson State Community College.

Studdard-Weatherly talked about what led to the new facility in Butler and praised the assistance she received from Valarie Ezell, AERN’s representative in Sumter County, and Nancy Gibson, AERN’s representative in Choctaw County.

“I had known Valarie Ezell at the Sumter County Industrial Authority for several years,” she said. “When the bank asked for a business plan with my loan application, I went to Valarie for help.”

They wasted no time. “We got together at 8 o’clock on a Sunday morning and we worked on the plan past midnight,” she said.

Then Valarie took the work home with her on a disk, edited it, made extra copies on her printer and created a portfolio. “I am very optimistic that the expansion is going to work,” she said.

Studdard-Weatherly said she had kept pace with industry trends through professional magazines over the years, but she said the additional materials Valarie had as an AERN member really helped, especially “Business Plan Pro 2005,” which guided them in the business plan.

The big day to introduce the new business came on January 7, 2006, when Weatherly-Studdard Memorial Chapel, Inc., opened its doors for the public to get a look.

With help from Nancy Gibson and the Choctaw County Chamber, they welcomed an overflow crowd for the dedication of the 2,800-square foot facility at 111 Vanity Fair Avenue, Butler.

“The open house was a huge success,” says Nancy, who has developed a specialty as an impresario for annual meetings and open houses. “The program included ribbon-cutting, invocation, blessing of the business, welcome from Mayor Ben Smith, music by LaToya Fluker and her son Gregory, and remarks by Ron Mason of the Choctaw County Chamber and by owners Jacqueline and James.”

AERN Q & A with Paavo Hanninen

Paavo Hanninen is well known to readers of the AERN newsletter. In fact, he has been mentor to many of you. He wears several hats but the two most important are director, along with Annette Watters, of AERN, and director of the Small Business Development Center, both in the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration at The University of Alabama. We asked him to answer some basic questions we have heard from potential entrepreneurs over the years.

Q. I’m interested in getting a loan to start a new business. What are the most important things I must show and tell my banker?

A. First, keep in mind that banks are not generally in the business of providing START-UP capital for small businesses. Most small business start-ups are self-funded or obtain funds from other types of private sources—such
as family, neighbors, and other private investors. Once a business is up and running for a couple of years, that is the point at which banks really start to get involved. But regardless of the source of your start-up cash, the primary concern of your funder will typically be proof of your ability to repay the loan. And in a business start-up situation, with no track record of the business’s sales and profits, the place to start is writing a concise, fact-based business plan. Basically, what are you selling, who will buy it, how much will they buy, how much will it cost you to make it, and what will be your profit after a year or so of operating the business. Proof that you have a history of experience in the type of business you are starting is also critical (see next question). And finally, you can’t outrun your credit history and past credit decisions. Before beginning your efforts to get financing, obtain a copy of your credit history and credit score. If you have problems in that area, you can begin to work on them. You can be sure that your lender (particularly a commercial lender) will take a close look at your credit before making a decision.

Q. I know it’s important to have some business experience before starting my own business. What are some practical ways to gain that experience in small towns? Is it ever too early or too late to start getting that experience?

A. Other than personal perseverance, relevant experience in your start-up of choice is the single most important factor in the success of your business. The simplest way to do that is to get a job in the type of business you would like to start. If you are already doing that, then ask your boss to give you more responsibility and different tasks so you can learn as much as you can about the business. And health issues aside, it’s never too late to learn something new that may help you get your business idea off the ground.

Q. I’ve heard it’s important to have good advisers. Where do I find them and how can I know they know what they’re talking about and have my best interests at heart?

A. Your team of advisors should include your banker (whether you got a loan or not you should have a relationship with a banker—see above), your attorney, your accountant, and your insurance agent. Other valuable sources of advice could include your local chamber of commerce professionals or technical assistance providers such as your area Small Business Development Center. To locate quality advisors, talk with other successful business owners in your community and contact professional organizations that focus on the particular specialty you are looking for (e.g., legal work). Just as you would do when buying a car, shop around a bit. Talk to several service providers in each field. And have a well-defined package of services or questions you are seeking answers to so you can compare the information and pricing you get from each provider.

Using Business Tools: AERN Staff Conducts Workshop for Partners

Partners from the counties that are part of AERN attended a special training session March 3 at The University of Alabama. This workshop is held annually on the campus and is one of several conducted throughout the year by the AERN staff.

Attendees heard from several members of the AERN staff who also hold positions at the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration at The University of Alabama. They included Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, AERN project directors; and Todd Hines and Paul Brothers of the Bruno Business Library.

Among the topics covered during the morning were review of the most useful sources available via the Internet and specialized business research tools, including a new Encyclopedia of Small Business available through the Alabama Virtual Library. Business librarians also led the group in advanced uses of the AERN library sources, such as potential market calculations.

After lunch new reference books available for AERN partner sites were distributed and discussed, including reference books about small business plans, financing small businesses, what goes into computing a credit score.

AERN Staff: Todd Hines, Paul Brothers, Annette Watters, and Paavo Hanninen.

Workshop held at the Bruno Library, The University of Alabama. Pictured are Sandy Smith, Phillis Belcher, Jay Shows, Tommie Syx, and Pat Brady.
New reference books presented to AERN partners. Pictured are Pat Brady, Nancy Gibson, Sandy Smith, Jay Shows, and Phillis Belcher.

consumer demand demographics, and guides to starting an eBay business.

AERN partners attending the workshop were Phillis Belcher of the Greene County Industrial Development Board in Eutaw; Jay Shows and Pat Brady of the Demopolis Chamber of Commerce; Sandy Smith of the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce; and Nancy Gibson of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce.

The next training workshops will be conducted by Paavo Hanninen, AERN director, and other retailing professionals on March 14 in Selma, on April 4 in Monroeville, and on April 25 in Butler. If you are interested in attending a workshop, you should call the appropriate chamber of commerce. Telephone numbers are on page 4 of this newsletter.