Grand Openings in Monroeville and Butler Successful

Grand openings and open house activities were held at new AERN centers in Monroe County and Choctaw County in April, attended by members of the University of Alabama AERN team.

Choctaw County’s grand opening was held on April 20 at the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce and Community Development Foundation offices in Butler. Executive Director Nancy Gibson said about 30 people attended.

Monroe County’s event was held on April 26 at the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce. About 60 people attended, according to Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroe Chamber.

Both directors described the turnout as good and called the openings a success. Both said they received good coverage by local newspapers.

Directors Paavo Hanninen and Annette Watters and Todd Hines and Paul Brothers of the Bruno Business Library represented the University at the two grand openings.

Gibson says Butler’s open house netted several prospective users of the new resources that all AERN centers receive from the University when they become part of the network.

“There is good support for growth and addition of new business in the county,” Gibson says. She said the open house attracted several people who are taking advantage of the AERN resources related to writing business plans and securing finances from local banks.

In Monroeville, the grand opening “went great,” according to Smith. “We had a good turnout of city and county government officials and others. The open house gave

AERN grand opening at the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce and Community Development Foundation offices in Butler

Audrey Haskin, representing Congressman Artur Davis, with Paavo Hanninen at the Choctaw County grand opening

Paul Brothers, Sandy Smith, and Pat Brady at the Monroeville open house

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A side light of the event in Monroeville, Smith said, was that it turned out to be something of a UA alumni meeting, with a number of alumni turning out to see what their alma mater was doing to help Monroe County businesses.

With the two new centers in Monroe and Choctaw counties, AERN expands to nine counties. The others are in Dallas, Greene, Hale, Marengo, Perry, Sumter and Wilcox counties.

AERN centers receive a computer loaded with business software not usually available in a community. They also get a set of business reference books specially selected by the AERN staff and Bruno Business Library specialists. Bruno Library librarians are also available for business questions and training on-site and in Tuscaloosa.

In early June, Hanninen and librarian Todd Hines will go into greater depth in training sessions on the use of the AERN services for local business owners and potential owners in Choctaw and Monroe Counties. For more information call Smith in Monroeville at 251-743-2879 or Gibson in Butler at 205-459-3459.

African Americans make up more than 25 percent of Alabama’s population but own only 6.7 percent of the state’s small businesses, according to the most recently available U.S. Census records. And in rural counties, where minority population often exceeds 50 percent, the disparity is even greater. Only 16 of Alabama’s 67 counties have cities with 100 or more black-owned businesses.

To help address the problem, which is nationwide, three federal agencies sponsored a Listening Forum in Clarksdale, Mississippi on May 25. AERN Directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen attended the forum to learn how AERN might help more minorities in the nine-county area own their own business. They also manned a booth featuring the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network program.

US Department of Agriculture’s Rural Development Agency and US Department of Commerce’s Minority Business Development Agency co-sponsored the forum with the Delta Regional Authority. Some 250 people from Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kentucky attended.

“The sponsors were interested in hearing directly from those who stood to benefit most from their services and resources,” Watters said. “The meeting was designed to improve services and access for minority business owners and potential owners.

Watters and Hanninen were able to discuss the AERN program at some length with Pete Johnson, the director of the Delta Regional Authority. The UA team showcased a display about the AERN program that received a good bit of interest from the participants, both governmental and private sector.
One of the visitors attending AERN’s grand opening in Monroeville on April 26 was Velvet Dean West, originally from the Birmingham area but now living with her family in Uriah.

West wasted no time in putting the new AERN resources to work on behalf of her goal of establishing a wireless Internet business in Monroe County.

“I used the new AERN computer just yesterday,” she said in a telephone interview on May 27. “I was excited when one of the examples for a business plan we found right away was for a wireless Internet business.”

She says she is at the stage of refining her business plan and applying for loans. Her husband Daniel also works in the computer field.

“Velvet came to our office seeking help with her business plan,” said Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroe County Chamber of Commerce. “It did not take us long to realize that she and her husband were far ahead of most of us when it comes to using the Internet for business.”

Smith introduced West to some of the merchants on the town square and she has helped several of them set up websites for their businesses.

West and Smith are convinced there is good opportunity for a company in the area to help local business use the Internet to improve and expand their businesses. Already West has made many contacts through the chamber, she said.

But while she is an experienced webmaster, setting up websites is not West’s main business goal. She hopes to establish a wireless Internet service that would offer customers not only the usual high speed Internet connection to the World Wide Web and for e-mail, but also for the relatively new feature of the Internet known as VOIP, or Voice Over the Internet Protocol. In other words, she wants to set up a business that allows customers to use the Internet for telephone service, as well as the other services normally associated with high speed Internet.

She believes there is great demand for her proposed business, as most Internet customers in her area use dial-up and many Monroe County telephone users find themselves having to use long distance to connect with others within the county. West’s system would be powered by a 900 megahertz broadcast signal, an expanding means for providing both high-speed Internet and telephone service for underserved areas.

The advantages of such a service, she said, are that it doesn’t require telephone or cable lines, offers quick installation with good range and speeds comparable to DSL and cable, and promises lower initial investment for customers, along with other advantages, including VOIP at about the monthly cost of regular Internet service.

West says she has talked to many people in the area “who want our service.”

One of West’s motivations to get into business is related to her Christian faith. “After we get the network,” West said. “We will offer free broadband services to churches. We already help many of them with computer repairs and setting up websites. We want to get the Holy Spirit involved in our business. We want to help residents who are unable to attend church to be able to see and hear services over the Internet. There are lots of shut-ins who cannot attend church.”

West’s father, the Rev. Douglas Dean, is pastor of the Little River Baptist Church in Uriah, one of the smallest churches anywhere with its own website, designed, as you might expect, by Velvet Dean West. You can e-mail her at velvet@spirit-net.net or call her at 251-862-5344.

See the Little River Church website at http://www.frontiernet.net/~jkrdddew thermostat.
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