In Alabama’s Black Belt many beautiful and historic sites dot the landscape. Marion, a town of about 4,200 people in west central Alabama, is one such place with historic structures that delight the eye.

And in a beautifully restored brick building with elaborate landscaping in the heart of town, Tallulah’s—a gift, specialty, and variety shop at 217 Washington Street—is leading a revival in Marion’s business growth.

“We started strong and it has really exceeded our expectations,” says Tallulah’s owner, Jennifer McMillan.

Opening its doors in the summer of 2003 in Perry County’s largest town, Tallulah’s was one of the first retailers to come back downtown, leading the way for a flurry of new businesses in the heart of town.

“Tallulah’s is really a benchmark for the area,” McMillan says. “About five other businesses have opened on the block since we started here.”

Tallulah’s sells a variety of items to a diverse customer base. It is a coffee shop where the aroma of Community Coffee, dubbed the official coffee of Louisiana, floats through the air. But it is also an art gallery where paintings cover the walls. Tallulah’s is also a bookstore filled with books, short stories, and poetry of regional interest.

In another part of the store, Tallulah’s sells children’s clothing and toys. And in another it sells items such as fine home furnishings, linens, handbags, candles, fine stationery, small outdoor furniture, and men’s items. Tallulah’s also has a wedding registry and prints announcements.

“We are fortunate to be so well received in Perry County and Marion, but we also have customers that come from places like Selma, Birmingham, Montgomery, and even out of state,” McMillan explains.

In starting up and expanding, McMillan says she and her business partner, Buffy Taylor, received a lot of help from AERN resources at the Perry County Chamber of Commerce.

“Buffy and I, we had dreams of starting a business on our own,” McMillan says. “It’s hard to do, even with a business background, to prepare a business plan. But the resources really helped us out.”

McMillan says that she was able to access books and Internet resources at the Perry County Chamber of Commerce that provided demographic information on Perry County. But she first received help during a visit by Paavo Hanninen, director of the Small Business Development Center at the University.

“First of all I went to a seminar with Paavo at the Perry County Chamber of Commerce,” McMillan says. “There I received help with our business plan and advice about getting funding.”

McMillan went on to write a business plan and to get the financial backing she and her partner needed. Taylor, who has an art education, planned the art/sculpture gallery and artistic direction of Tallulah’s. Taylor displays some of her own work in their gallery, along with the work of other notable artists such as Autauga County’s Charlie “Tin Man” Lucas and Seale’s Butch Anthony.

John Martin, who has been director of the Perry County Chamber of Commerce since March of 2005, says his office is pleased to be able to provide AERN services such as loan guides, Internet resources, financial books, and small business literature.

His office provides technical advice and assistance to about 20 business operators and potential business people a year, a good number, he says, given the size of Marion and Perry County.
AERN staff members joined forces with chambers of commerce in Monroeville, Butler, and Selma in April to present new ideas in retail sales to approximately 30 eager participants.

A full story of the seminar was carried in the Monroe Journal, written by editor Mike Qualls, who also furnished photos and provided helpful background information for use in Alabama Outreach.

Paavo Hanninen, director of University of Alabama’s Small Business Development Center and an AERN founder, directed the seminars, which were entitled “Sharpen Your Retail Edge: Tools and Tips to Broaden Your Retail Base.”

Other presenters were Susan Tucker, owner of Tucker Massey Marketing in Tuscaloosa, and Dr. Sue Parker, retired University of Alabama College of Human Environmental Sciences faculty member.

Tucker concentrated on customer service principles and tips as vital keys to building any business and as a way to get more foot traffic and repeat foot traffic. She cited research showing that it costs five times as much to attract new customers as to retain existing customers and to increase the purchase volume of loyal regulars.

She also said that while you vary your sales pitch depending on the customer, you never stop selling and serving each customer that comes in the door.

Parker gave tips for using eBay to move merchandise that might not move well from shelves. At each seminar she asked for a show of hands of people who had bought things on eBay, resulting in about half at each site raising a hand.

McMillan acknowledges that the work you have to do for yourself in getting ready to go into business is hard, but she is grateful for the AERN assistance.

And she hopes Tallulah’s “will be around for many years to come.”

Kevin Rainey
Staff Writer, Community Journalism Network
The University of Alabama

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She also gave tips on how to use digital photos and lively descriptions of products for sale, products that only need a wider audience to be moved, she said.

Hanninen said the chamber partners in each city—Sandy Smith in Monroeville, Nancy Gibson in Butler, and Claire Twardy in Selma—did an especially good job of getting representatives from ongoing businesses to attend the seminars, making for lively exchanges.

Tucker recommended that businesses post their mission statement in full view so customers may “share the vision.” Tucker also said it is better to have a real person answer the telephone than to put callers through a voice mail labyrinth.

Other tips by the presenters:

- Hand-written notes are rare and are treasured by customers.
- A quarterly e-newsletter is a good idea.
- Use e-mail to stay in touch, but don’t bombard customers with trivial information.
- Make payment options easy and obvious.
- Accept as many credit cards as possible.
- E-commerce is the wave of the present and future as we move toward a paperless society.

All presenters advised businesses to have an online presence. Parker explained the need in terms of basic information, as well as providing options for expanding business on eBay.

There is an unlimited variety of items that sell well on eBay, Parker said. Items range from clothing to cars, from office equipment to farm equipment, from home furnishings to fixtures, and from jewelry to trinkets.

Business-to-customer auctions are projected to grow faster than customer-to-customer sales, Parker said.

A box lunch prepared by Dayna White, owner of Dayna’s Sweet Shoppe, an AERN client, was provided to participants at the Monroeville meeting. White’s business opened on May 5.

Grandfather Became Inspiration for New Business

“I remember as a young girl growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, traveling to Starkville to see my grandfather who was a baker,” says Dayna White, owner of one of the newest businesses in Monroeville, Dayna’s Sweet Shoppe.

“I loved seeing him and he would have some special treat waiting for me when I got there. I loved the way this made me feel and I enjoy passing on the same feeling to my customers,” she said.

Baking had been a successful 20-year hobby for White until she met seriously with Sandy Smith, executive director of Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce, and looked over several detailed business plans made available through the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network.

“They showed me how much money I would need to pay expenses, buy supplies, pay employees, and cover utilities,” she said, explaining how AERN helped. “I looked over three or four business plans and settled on one I thought fit the best.”

On May 5, 2006, the doors opened for Dayna’s Sweet Shoppe. Business hours are Monday through Thursday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., on Friday. Decorated cakes make up most of her business, with birthday cakes providing the greatest volume. Wedding cakes, she says, give her the highest revenue per item.

She also specializes in confections, other candies, and sweets.

A ribbon-cutting was held on May 5 for Dayna’s Sweet Shoppe, 1315 S. Alabama Ave., in Monroeville. The new shop offers custom cakes and confections, as well as boxed lunches. Front row, owner Dayna White, third from left, and Monroeville Mayor Anne Farish. In back are Bryan Jones, Les Prouty and Dennis Kress. Others shown are members of the Mockingbird Court, high school students who help with chamber activities. (Photo by Josh Dewberry)

“When I was 19, my father sent me to a six-week course in Mississippi for baking. This taught me some things and I have continued to add to what I learned then,” she said.

Since 1984, White had been taking orders from friends and many acquaintances made through a word-of-mouth network. In 2004, a week before Hurricane Ivan hit, her family moved from Mississippi to Monroeville. Her husband had just been hired as the music and youth minister of a local church.

(continued on next page)
She was aware of the first Mockingbird Market, now an annual event, scheduled the first weekend of November and wanted to rent a booth, but she and her family were busy checking on parishioners following the storm. White had also just started a job as administrative assistant to the CEO of Monroe County Hospital, so she passed on the opportunity.

But last fall she didn’t pass on it and her booth was successful enough for Sandy Smith to ask her to consider taking her hobby to the next level. “A lot of folks were asking me, ‘Where’s your shop?’ and I told them I was doing this out of my house,” White said.

“The college [AERN] was very helpful with information and showing me choices for getting a business started. And Sandy was able to walk me through it,” White said.

As for long-range goals, White wants to bring people in for lunches. She said she started this when she opened, but wasn’t ready for the volume of customers who came for meals. In order to handle the schedule for her bakery—she was part of the four-person staff—she had to put the diner plans on hold. “We will open back up for lunch in August,” she said.

Her vision for the diner is a retro general store look, and she is already making some changes to the store’s interior. She sees an opportunity for the bakery and the diner to draw leverage from each other. “This was already happening,” she said, “we just couldn’t handle the volume for both if we were going to meet our schedule.”

While the folks at “the college” and Sandy Smith didn’t know White’s grandfather, the baker in Starkville, all three comprise the team that has helped White’s sweet dreams come true.

Richard Andrew Mullins
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