Two years ago, Willie Harris, a full-time firefighter with the Selma Fire Department, decided that he wanted to open his own business. But like many new or aspiring proprietors, he had a lot of questions when it came to the first steps. It was then that Harris discovered the resources that the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network (AERN) has to offer. In Selma, AERN services are provided by the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce.

“Willie came into our office via word of mouth,” says Tina Price, executive administrative assistant at the Selma chamber. “Starting a business was a dream and vision of his. He explained his vision and we started working on his business plan.”

Harris has now been in business for about two years. His small business, Cotton House, LLC, provides screen printing and embroidering services on T-shirts and other clothing from its location in the historic section of downtown Selma.

After working on a business plan with Price, Harris made the initial decisions regarding renting business space in downtown Selma. Price also introduced him to the owner of a neighboring advertising agency who has served as his mentor. Though Harris’ business is a part-time job, he says he truly loves what he does.

“I want to change the way people look at the T-shirt industry,” Harris says. “I am a very creative person and I try to put a lot of creativity into my designs. I try to be as different as possible.”

Harris believes that the AERN services provided by the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce have helped him succeed. Harris says AERN resources also helped him with some of the earliest obstacles that he faced.

“The connections they have, the people they can steer you towards, the resources … they are great,” Harris says. “The most helpful service is being able to network with so many people.” Harris says mentoring advice he received was especially helpful when he first started his business. Mentors helped him write his business plan, Harris says, and Price went over the business plan, pricing, and assets with him.

“The biggest challenge starting off was trying to find a building and getting the financing,” Harris explains. “They helped me locate a building, and Tina pointed me to the manager of a bank.”

Claire Twardy, director of the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce, says AERN is a great resource that the chamber can share in the city and county. The chamber has two computers dedicated to AERN and a wide range of Internet resources and literature to assist new small business owners.

“We are very fortunate to have these resources available for use,” Twardy says. “It is very beneficial for people starting businesses in our area, especially for people who have ideas, but do not know how to start a business.”

Annette Watters is the project co-director of AERN in the Center for Business and Economic Research at The University of Alabama. She said that AERN typically provides services such as business books, small business guides, and loan literature for their partners. All materials are owned and lent by the University. The Internet connection, local space, and consumable supplies are provided by the AERN partners.

AERN is part of the University of Alabama’s Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration. In its fourth year, AERN supports the growth of entrepreneurial activity in nine counties throughout rural Alabama. Currently the program is financially supported by The University of Alabama with additional grant funding from the federal government’s Delta Regional Authority. AERN targets nine counties in Alabama’s Black Belt (Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, and Wilcox counties) by partnering with local chambers of commerce or industrial development agencies to promote stronger economies in those areas.

Kevin Rainey
University of Alabama journalism student
Everybody has heard of talent scouts, big-league scouts, and, especially in these parts, football scouts and recruiters. But local art scouts, recruiters of local artists?

That’s right.

Black Belt Treasures, which officially opened its doors on September 30 after more than a year of setting up shop in a former automobile dealership at 209 Claiborne Street in Camden, owes its early success to a handful of art scouts.

“We hired four or five people to travel throughout the Black Belt and other rural counties looking for authors, painters, sculptors, musicians, quilt-makers, makers of handmade musical instruments, furniture and other crafts and unique foods,” says Jamie Wallace. “We were amazed at what they came up with.”

And although there was little but word-of-mouth promotion, when the grand opening occurred, “visitors from 15 states and Canada came through our doors,” says Wallace, a retired newspaper editor, chamber director, radio station manager and jack-of-all civic trades who now works part time for the Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission (ATRC).

Black Belt Treasures was the brainchild of ATRC executive director John Clyde Riggs, Wallace says. One year later, thanks to help from ATRC, The University of Alabama, Alabama Power Foundation, and others, arts, crafts and other products from 175 Alabamians are on display at the gallery.

Many of the artists would like to quit their day jobs and pursue their arts and craft loves full time, Wallace said. But few of them know very much about business operations and promotion. Small business practices such as those taught through the AERN centers will be very important for them, he said.

Although ATRC helped get the gallery going, it is now run as a separate 501c6 nonprofit corporation, Wallace said. Delia Brand is director. “Black Belt Treasures has experienced great success in our first month of operations,” Brand says. “Sales of all our products have exceeded expectations, and we are re-ordering from most of our vendors. They are excited about having a new venue in which to show their work without having to travel to art shows and craft fairs.”

Shoppers have been surprised at the quality and variety of products, Brand says. “The Black Belt Treasures Gallery is an upscale shop offering the very best from our region in art, sculpture, pottery, woodwork, baskets, jewelry, books, food, and much more. Our website, www.blackbelttreasures.com, offers another convenient way to purchase many one-of-a-kind handmade Black Belt products.”

Wallace described some of the products for sale at the Camden facility and on the website. “We have a 92-year-old who makes handmade baskets and her daughter does pottery. Another artist does duck carvings that even at a premium price are in great demand. One craftsman makes rocking horses that sell for $600 apiece,” Wallace said. “He sold two on the first day of business.”

One very popular item is Black Belt Christmas gift baskets, especially appropriate for institutions like banks that want to do something for their best customers during the holidays. The baskets contain such things as spices, charbroil seasonings, pecan pies, coffee mugs and special coffees for the gentlemen and holiday seasonings and cookbooks for the ladies.

The gallery itself has something of the feel of an antique shop but with much greater variety of merchandise, Wallace said. One of most famous, and most expensive, items in the gallery is “Grandfather,” a creation of the man known by many as the “tin man.” This sculpture is listed at $8,000. A customer from Chicago is seriously considering buying it for his office, says Wallace.

Public radio and TV programs as well as newspaper articles have helped spread the word. “Our ‘poster girl’ for the gallery is, of course, Kathryn Tucker Windham of Selma,” says Wallace. Windham’s booth contains her many books and CDs of her public radio essays. Her presence alone has guaranteed the gallery wide attention and following, he said.

Artists pay a commission to the gallery, and that money is used to pay staff salaries and cover operational expenses. Seventeen counties are included in the co-op. They are Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, Washington, and Wilcox, which group includes all the current AERN partner counties.
AERN Aids Industry Recruiting Efforts

Recruiting new business is one of the most challenging duties of local officials. When everything falls into place and a new business makes the decision to locate in one of Alabama’s small towns, it is met with great excitement in the entire community. Just such an occasion occurred on November 3 when Monroeville officials welcomed International Sign & Design, with headquarters in Largo, Florida, near Tampa.

“This is one of our top recruiting success stories over the past few years,” said Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce. “We learned that ISD would be locating here, in our 30,000 square foot spec building, the day after Katrina hit in September. And now they’re here.”

Smith said economic and demographic data available to the chamber from AERN resource materials were extremely valuable in letting the company know about the area’s workforce, economic, infrastructure, and other factors. “This information is extremely important to our business recruiting package,” Smith said.

The new business will not only distribute its products from Monroeville, Smith said, but will also set up a manufacturing center. “At first it was to be only distribution,” Smith said, “but now they have expanded their plans to include manufacturing.”

Knowledge Is Power

Nancy Gibson, executive director of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce, believes knowledge is power and shared knowledge is the most powerful knowledge of all. That motivation led her to a new means of getting the word out about AERN resources that can help improve a business or help launch a new one: She is writing newspaper reviews of the key books in the AERN collection.

“I looked through the books and thought there surely is a lot of information here that our residents ought to know more about,” she said. So in between her many other duties, such as conducting annual meetings, taking pictures and writing features, she began sending her book reviews to area newspapers.

“In effect you become a business consultant when you work with your constituency,” Gibson said. She believes these reviews in the local paper are reminding people that they need to set up an appointment to come down to the chamber to see her and to do research on their business. Several new clients have made their way to her office as a result of her reviews.

“The reviews are mostly teasers to get people to thinking about such things as whether they want to set up a limited partnership, corporation, sole proprietorship, and so on. I don’t give too much detailed information,” Gibson said. “I give
“just a taste of things so people can decide if they want to become the next Martha (Stewart) or Emeril (Lagasse).”

Some newspapers have run all of her reviews, while others have run only a few. But the idea, she said, is not for her to get bylines but for residents to get useful business information. She has written about five reviews so far and plans to go through all the main books at the center, covering everything from franchising to taking products from the kitchen to the marketplace, from buying a business, to writing a business plan for a startup business.

AERN officials in Tuscaloosa liked her idea so much they are going to put Gibson’s reviews on CDs and make them available to all the AERN partners for use in their local newspapers.