BUSINESSMONDAY B

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A SEA of employment

Chester County Self-Employment Assistance Program helps residents start businesses

By SAMUEL NARISI
Staff Writer

Marie Price decided last August that she wanted to start her own business.

So when she lost her job in November, after 12 years working as title clerk for different car dealerships, she was fortunate to find just the help she needed.

When she visited the unemployment office after being laid off, Price learned about the Chester County Self-Employment Assistance Program, which provides unemployed county residents with free entrepreneurial training.

Price signed up and was put in the program the next day.

"It worked out great," said Price, who now owns and operates an auto tag service in Highland. Though she works long hours, she now has the satisfaction of doing what she wants – and doing it for herself.

"If you don't like your job," she said, "It's like, 'Oh my God,' you feel like you have a concrete block around your neck."

The SEA program, run by the Chester County Economic Development Council, along with Kutztown University Small Business Development Center, consists of nine three-hour, once-a-week classes with about 10 to 15 students. Topics range from networking and market analysis to accounting and business law.

In addition to the classes, trainees also receive individual consulting during the program and follow-up appointments after it ends.

The program is open to Chester County residents who intend to start a business in the county.

To be eligible, individuals must currently receive unemployment benefits and likely exhaust those benefits by the time they find full-time employment. The program allows participants to waive the requirement that they seek employment in order to collect benefits, letting them instead dedicate themselves to becoming self-employed.

In the past year, 29 people have completed the program, 17 of whom were successful in getting a business started, according to CCEDC Program Assitant Courtney O'Donnell.

"And that doesn't account for the ones that are still working toward starting a business," she said. "There's a high success rate with this program. More than half come out and start their own business."

The types of businesses started by participants in the program varies greatly, O'Donnell added. Ventures started this year include such diverse operations as multi-media consulting, contract welding and software development.

"I think the class itself exposes you to all the different kinds of companies and ventures there can be," said Paul Jacobs, who completed the SEA program early this year. After working in marketing for 10 years, he now runs a business in West Chester that provides tax assessment consulting to local and city governments.

"Having worked for a large corporation, I never put together a business plan," Jacobs said. "The program gave me the kind of background and direction that I think people need when they are starting a new venture."

In addition to what she learned in the classes, Price said she also benefited from sharing the experience with a group of people in situations similar to hers.

"They (the instructors) ask 'What did you accomplish this week?'" she said, so people in the class could be familiar with each other's progress. "It's nice to grow together."

Price added that the once-a-week format gave her enough

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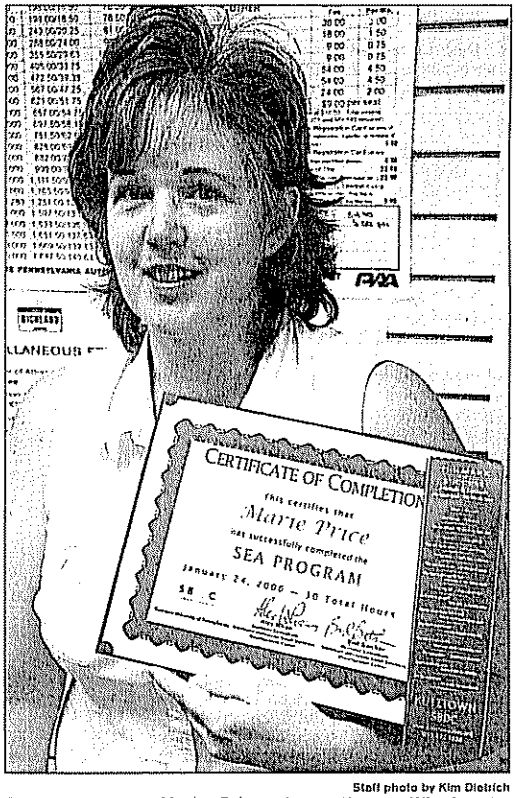

Staff photo by Kim Diehich

Business owner Marie Price shows the certificate she received for completing the SEA Program business course.

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flexibility to focus her time on getting the business up and running, allowing her to start full-time just a few weeks after the class ended.

Many who completed the program said they got something out of it that is, perhaps, even more important than the skills they learned – the encouragement to actually achieve self-employment.

"It helped give me the confidence I needed to go ahead and push the envelope and do my own business," said Charlie Bafelice, who completed the program in June and now operates a service assisting other businesses with deliveries and transportation.

"I honestly thought the classes could have been longer," he said. "I enjoyed it that much."