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Mastering the 'side hustle': New Albany bakery owner tells story of starting her business to budding entrepreneurs at small business seminar



Mississippi University for Women student Quincy Hughes listens during a business workshop seminar at Cochran Hall's Limbert Assembly Room Tuesday. "I'd like to start my own business, transitional housing, or halfway homes to help the homeless or others that are less fortunate," he said. Quincy is a senior art education major with a minor in psychology from St. Louis, Missouri. Photo by: Luisa Porter/Dispatch Staff

[Isabelle Altman](#)

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It was 1997 and Mary Jennifer Russell of New Albany was reeling because she'd just lost her first "real job" out of college. She swung from odd job to odd job, from substitute teaching to selling embroidered pillows for a friend's pillow business. And on the side, she baked and sold cakes.

It was what she called a "side hustle" -- one more way to bring in income when she was struggling just to afford gas and lunch.

But when she sold 10 cakes at once to a yogurt shop in Tupelo a year into her impromptu business, she realized she'd found what she wanted to do for the rest of her life.

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Mary Jennifer Russell

That was the story she told a small crowd of young business professionals and entrepreneurs at a small business seminar hosted at Mississippi University for Women Tuesday evening.

The seminar focused on strategies for aspiring entrepreneurs to start businesses that can stand the test of time -- especially the first year.

"The majority (who attended) were people who were just thinking about (starting a business) or have ideas to do it and needed to know where to start," said Emily McConnell, director of programs and events at the Columbus Lowndes Chamber of Commerce. "The seminar was great for that, just in encouraging them to do it, to get out there and try."

Nearly 20 years after selling cakes to the Tupelo shop, Russell's Sugarees Bakery employs 37 people and produces 1,000 cakes per week. It's been featured in publications from Oprah's Magazine to The New York Times. Russell herself was this year's Mississippi Small Business Administration (SBA) Small Business Person of the Year.

Her advice to entrepreneurs: Choose something you like and are good at and then set goals. Or, as Russell called it, "practice visioning."

"What do you want to see?" she said. "What do you want to smell? Really, really envision it with lots of detail."

She also talked about the importance of keeping up with numbers, finding a consumer base, working to improve the business even after it's up and running and making sure to take good care of good employees -- the "bread and butter" of any business.

Budding entrepreneurs

Her talk inspired more than one young entrepreneur in the crowd. Daisy Jones-Brown, who owns an organic hair and skin products business called Born Beautiful in Columbus, said she attended the seminar specifically to hear from people who started their own businesses.

"I wanted to hear their story and tips -- how they did it," she said.

She currently sells her products online and at markets. But she wants to do what Russell began doing after a year and sell wholesale to boutiques and salons.

Russell's story also stood out to Althea Travers, a Columbus stay-at-home mom who recently came up with the idea of starting a food truck.

"It's a little bit intimidating because I don't see (food trucks) a lot," she said. "But then I (thought), 'Why don't I see it a lot?'"

Some cities have them and some don't, she said. Maybe there's a niche for it in Columbus.

It's still just an idea, but the more research she does and information she finds out, the more she likes it. Like Russell's cake selling business in the '90s, it would be supplemental income.

Other speakers at the seminar included McConnell; **Chip Templeton, director of the Small Business Development Center at Mississippi State University**; and Julie McCaulley, an SBA process manager with BancorpSouth, who specializes in putting together loans specifically for small businesses.

McCaulley's talk particularly interested Quincy Hughes, a senior at MUW who wants to start a halfway house for people in need.

"I've already created a business plan," he said.

He's interested in knowing the ins and outs of taxes and other financial matters and specifically wants to know if SBA managers can help with starting a nonprofit, which is what his halfway



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house would be, rather than a small business.

Russell said the thing she wanted the entrepreneurs to take away most from her story is the "side hustle" as a good way to start a business. -- using the business to supplement an income until it's making a profit rather than relying on it entirely during the early stages when most businesses don't break even and rely heavily on loans from banks and investments. It was four years before she opened her own retail space. By then, she had finances she could show the bank and was able to get loans and start the bakery without too much trouble.

"It's easy enough if you start with low-risk," she said. "...It can be done. It should be done."