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When **Lori Becker**, president of **Publishing Solutions Group** in Boston, formed her company in 2003, her pizza delivery man became a close confidant.

"It's very lonely. You work crazy hours," said Becker, 37. "You know your pizza guy really well."

Isolation is a significant issue many new business owners face, particularly those in Boston's inner-city neighborhoods, who are less likely to have networking time, contacts and know-how.

In search of an organization that would fortify her network of peers, Becker enrolled in **InnerCity Entrepreneurs (ICE)**, a nine-month-long Boston University School of Management-sponsored certificate program created to flesh out the business skills of established urban small-business owners.

"The reason I joined ICE is because I had come out of a different geographic area (Andover) where I had a really big network," said Becker, who is also a member of the trade group **Bookbuilders of Boston**. "When I started working in Boston, I didn't have it anymore. When I heard about ICE I thought, 'Wow, maybe I can get that network back.' For me that was my biggest challenge."

ICE emphasizes networking with peer-to-peer meetings -- where entrepreneurs discuss everything about their businesses from financials to the right way to fire someone -- and a private sector network of 40 local lawyers, bankers, venture capitalists, advertising and commercial real estate executives that entrepreneurs have access to during and after the program. This week, ICE, now in its third year, named a newly selected crop of 11 companies for its 2006 program.



KATHY CHAPMAN | BUSINESS JOURNAL

Andrew Wolk, left, helped found InnerCity Entrepreneurs to provide networking service and support to inner-city entrepreneurs, such as Frank Poindexter, president of Wally's Jazz Club in Boston.

ICE seeks out entrepreneurs who show strong leadership ability, have a stable business, interest in real growth and have been involved in community service. There are 9,000 businesses in Boston's inner city -- so far, 24 entrepreneurs have completed the \$1,500 program.

"A lot of these businesses are isolated. They don't have old-boy networks from Harvard Business School," said **Andy Goldberg**, director of programs and development for ICE. "The fact that they're not well networked on a social and professional level restricts their access -- it's harder for them to break into decision-making levels of major corporations. Whereas someone coming from **Boston University** or **Harvard** is starting with a leg up because they come from a more privileged background."

Tapping into a network of peers was a priority for **Jeff James**, CEO of **Red Galoshes**, a 6-year-old e-commerce service provider in Boston.

James is a 2005 graduate of ICE. He also networks through the **Massachusetts Innovation & Technology Exchange (MITX)**.

"Isolation is a huge issue. Even though you have people around you, you can't necessarily speak candidly with your staff. So when I had a CEO problem, I would make up my own solution," said James. "Now that I've gone through the program I have a much more robust Rolodex of people like me who are in the same situation."

With businesses like **Red Galoshes** and **Publishing Solutions Group** in mind, **Andrew Wolk**, co-founder and director of ICE, penned the program in 2003 after receiving a \$100,000 grant over three years from **Citizens Bank**.

"We are looking to create jobs and generate wealth," said Wolk. "We're a minority majority city now, more than half are Latinos and African-Americans, and a lot of them reside in inner cities. So if you really

think about what is going to be critical to the success of Boston, it is to find these businesses and build them up. We're helping them with networking and connectivity."

CBDesign President **Christopher Broughton**, 39, started his design business after 10 years at **Digitas** in Boston. Broughton, a 2005 graduate of ICE, now shares office space in a four-story Boston warehouse with James and Becker after the three met while attending ICE.

"As entrepreneurs we are insular," said Broughton, who also networks through MITX, the **Greater Boston Business Council** and the **Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau**. "It was nice to come together with all of our peers and realize that we're not alone."

Building strong peer relationships is key to a fledgling business's success because those are often the connections that lead to investors, attorneys and staffing possibilities, according to **Margaret Somers**, director of the **North Shore Regional Small Business Center** at **Salem State College**. Somers tells her clients to join at least one industry trade group and one local chamber of commerce, but says many businesses starting out do not.

"Very often, they don't have anyone to talk to," said Somers. "Networking is critical because managers of small companies work a huge amount of hours and are very focused on sales and often are isolated. To find friends and business associates that are a source of personal and business support is critical. People often say that management is a lonely job because there are some issues you can't share with your staff."

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