

BUSINESS

‘Streetwise MBA’ program helps small-business owners advance

By Diane E. Lewis, Globe Staff

Glynn Lloyd built City Fresh Foods Inc. into a business with \$2 million in annual sales over the course of a dozen years. But when he sought to take his ethnic catering service to the next level, he didn't know where to begin.

Lloyd, 38, found the answer at Inner City Entrepreneurs, a program founded by Boston University professor Dan Monti and Andrew Wolk, a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, who call their nine-month program “a streetwise MBA.”

“If there is one thing inner-city neighborhoods need is more businesses, not more nonprofits,” Monti said. “They need folks who will create wealth and then assume a broader set of obligations in the community.”

Monti and Lloyd said ICE gives companies with modest records of achievement the tools they need to expand. It's a form of urban renewal that focuses on promoting economic development and job creation by providing business support and a network of experts in marketing, finance, technology, or banking who act as coaches and, sometimes, angel investors.

The goal, Monti said, is to duplicate ICE in urban areas across the country.

As a 2004 member of the first class, Lloyd attended MBA-level classes at Boston University, met with corporate mentors, venture capitalists, other entrepreneurs, and ICE instructors who encouraged him to redesign his business plan by aiming for more institutional clients. They also recommended that he improve operations at City Fresh Foods, located in Dorchester, by building a leadership team that would allow him to spend more time developing a new line of business.



Last year, Lloyd landed a contract with Dimock Community Health Center's Head Start program and added several schools, boosting the company's revenue to \$4 million. He's also planning to open a family entertainment center in 11,000 square feet of commercial space. The center, an urban version of Chuck E. Cheese, is expected to open in Jamaica Plain in a few months. “ICE gave me the help I needed to jump to the next level,” said Lloyd, who relied on a member of the ICE corporate network to help him negotiate his lease for the center.

ICE began as a pilot program 18 months ago with \$110,000 in grants from Citizens Bank, Staples, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, NStar, and the City of Boston. The program, which has graduated 24 business owners since then, charges \$1,500.

“The course readings are from Harvard Business School, but the companies use themselves as the case studies,” said Wolk, who teaches social entrepreneurship at the Sloan School. “We're looking for small businesses that have promise, but need that streetwise MBA. They need contacts and they need support to grow.”

Steve Adams, the New England advocate for the Small Business Administration's advocacy office, described the program as "intensive, one-on-one training."

"ICE only accepts firms that are already established and want to grow," said Adams. "It's a business model approach, not a social service approach. And it brings in a pretty high level of expertise from BU, MIT, Babson, and other colleges."

So far, ICE grads have created 77 new jobs, said Andrew Goldberg, national director for ICE. He said the program, whose operating budget has increased to \$400,000 this year, is launching a spinoff in Worcester. "Money is very, very important to inner-city entrepreneurs, but market focus is just as critical," said Goldberg. "For example, many need to develop another leader at their firms, and become laser-focused on where the most profitable market segments are."

Take the Hispanic News Press, a Brookline firm that, for several years, has provided radio content to Bloomberg Radio and advertisers seeking a presence in Latin America. The owners wanted to break into the Spanish-language market in New England, but weren't sure how. So, Julio Nunez, a cofounder, enrolled in ICE.

Wolk suggested that Nunez narrow its business plan to focus on its tiny newspaper, *El Planeta*. "We knew there were 130,000 Hispanics in greater Boston alone, but we were grappling with how to enter the market," said Nunez, 34, of Brighton. "We had several businesses, but Wolk felt we should pick one," Nunez said. "He also said we should develop an alliance with a bigger company."

Last year, officials at Hispanic News Press sold a 35 percent share in *El Planeta* to Phoenix/Media Communications Group, which owns *The Boston Phoenix*. *El Planeta* is printed by *The Phoenix*, and offered to readers free. Under the agreement, *The Phoenix* receives a percentage of the ad revenue.

El Planeta has 85,000 readers in Boston and Providence, up from 5,000 in 2003. It expects to add 10,000 more by year's end. With interest in the Latino media growing, Nunez said, more advertisers are seeking out the newspaper. The company continues to provide radio content abroad.

Kelley Chunn, president of Kelley Chunn & Associates, a marketing firm, credits ICE with helping her focus on critical goals. She said she met Paul Capelli, a spokesman for Staples, through the program's private sector network. Capelli helped Chunn land a small advertising contract with Staples.

Chunn, 53, started her business 15 years ago, while teaching public relations and journalism at Northeastern University. She was working out of a 300-square-foot office in her Jamaica Plain condo when she entered ICE. She said the program encouraged her to move her business out of her home. Last year, Chunn signed a five-year lease and moved into 650 square feet of renovated space in an office building near Dudley Station.

"I would not have gone for the lease if I did not have the confidence that ICE gave me," she said.

Diane E. Lewis can be reached at dlewis@globe.com.

Reprinted by:

I | C | E

InnerCity Entrepreneurs
Diversity • Community • Growth

InnerCity Entrepreneurs

675 Massachusetts Ave,
9th Floor
Cambridge, MA 02139
617.492.2304