

## **Traveling the Entrepreneurial Road**

There's a lot of information in this book that takes time to digest. You'll probably want to read it a few times to absorb the messages. If you follow the advice and your business choice is sound, you are on your way to a new, exciting way of life. Don't expect your path to be easy; a new business takes hard work and commitment. You will grow as you learn and be enriched with new knowledge and skills.

To further inspire you, here are some entrepreneurs' stories that run the gamut, from a man's kilt manufacturer in Seattle, Washington, to a concierge and errand consulting business in Apex, North Carolina. Read of their battles, victories, and success secrets as they travel their entrepreneurial roads.

These stories focus on business owners who for the most part have used the services of the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) and Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) across America to successfully start and grow their businesses. There are three from Nevada. I was so impressed with them all that I couldn't choose which one to include, so they all became a part of this book. The final story is a tale of sheer persistence and lessons learned from the school of hard knocks. It highlights some familiar battles that many entrepreneurs experience and will no doubt relate to. However, this story is different. Where many would have quit, this couple turned what could have been a story of failure into a remarkably diversified business with a niche.

My intent in this chapter is to encourage you to follow your dreams and consult with professionals; the rewards are bountiful. These businesses are not large, yet each person and their partners had a vision, had the desire to succeed, and had identified unique niches that needed filling. Enjoy and be inspired.

## **Las Vegas SBDC Clients Are All Winners**

In a city renowned for gambling, where losers far outweigh winners, the Nevada Small Business Development Center beats those odds hands down. Here are the stories of three winning entrepreneurs who readily credit their success to the support and help of the staff at the SBDC. Passionate about what they do, each business owner derives inner rewards by solving people's problems.

## It's Simple.biz

A stay-at-home mom living in rural Montana with an eighteen-month-old child, Susan Jamerson was devastated when her husband suddenly died of a heart attack. With fifteen years documentary filmmaking under her belt and now widowed, Susan tried procuring government filmmaking contracts, but the process was difficult.

She had lived four blocks from a SBDC office but had never noticed it. By working with the center, she discovered a grant was available to help people in rural communities through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Innovative Research Program. Susan's idea started to take shape.

After traveling to Nevada to meet with various agencies, she moved to Reno, started Jamerson & Associates LLC, and secured two USDA grants—a first-time accomplishment for a Nevada business.

After performing in-depth market research and holding focus groups for a year, Susan produced a video, *Starting a Business in Nevada*, funded by the Nevada Commission on Economic Development. The second grant funded the building of her website, [www.itssimple.biz](http://www.itssimple.biz). The site, which took two years to build, officially launched nationally in October 2003.

The site is packed with resources and every tool a new entrepreneur could ever need. It is most comprehensive. Susan's aim was to produce a portal to help people in rural areas who didn't have access to mentoring or formal training facilities. Still new to cyberspace, the site boasts 125,000 visitors a month.

As her business developed, Susan has worked hand-in-hand with SBDC and SBA offices across America, working particularly closely with the Reno and Nevada offices. "Michael Graham, the deputy state director of the Las Vegas office, has been my mentor," says Susan. "In fact, he changed my life with his advice. The SCORE counselors and SBA staff are all my partners."

Susan and her new husband purchased and renovated a building and have two employees. There are future exciting plans to partner with SBDCs to launch online distance training in three states, with the goal of going national.

A real winner who earned her jackpot, Susan was honored in 2003, receiving the U.S. Small Business Administration's Nevada Small Business Research Award. Don't miss her website at [www.itssimple.biz](http://www.itssimple.biz).

## **Housing Helpers®**

After moving from Denver, Colorado in 1999, Don Twining started Housing Helpers after his research showed Las Vegas to be the second-fastest-growing city in the United States—a winning decision. Don has had ongoing help, guidance, support, and financing from the SBDC and SBA, and his annual sales have amazingly increased, going from \$10,000 to \$130,000 a month. His original staff of three, including his partner and wife Susan, has increased to thirteen employees.

Initially a roommate matching service, Housing Helpers now offers a wide range of services catering to people on the move. Free long-term housing relocation and rental finding assistance—including apartments, condos, and houses—furnished corporate and vacation rentals, and a full-service real estate company round out a smorgasbord of relocation services encompassing Denver, Boulder, Las Vegas, and surrounding communities.

A year after Don started, he found a wealth of help and hands-on support through the Nevada SBDC. “By following Michael Graham’s advice on signage and attending the sign expos he sent me to, choosing and retaining the right employees, and other business strategies, my business dramatically increased,” says Don. “My recently installed exterior sign is forty feet high and cost \$40,000. I’m positive that it will more than pay for itself in the first year.”

When Don needed a CPA to understand his needs and better structure the accounting, the SBDC provided an advisor to find the right accountant. When he needed to purchase an office building, the SBDC helped him to acquire a 7(a) loan through the SBA. That property has more than doubled in value.

Don credits his successful growth to extensive research, having a good business plan with the money to support it, and by setting daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly goals, which he writes down and revisits daily. “Goal-setting really works,” says Don. “I also work with the SBDC all the time. My next big challenge is knowing how to take the next big step to help us grow the business even more.”

With Don’s business acumen and willingness to work with and listen to professionals, it’s in the cards that his next step will be a winning hand. Learn more at [www.housinghelpers.com](http://www.housinghelpers.com).

## **Moms in Business Network**

Gina Robison-Billups's business filled a necessary niche quite by accident. While working in her family's entertainment business—and trying to juggle the demands of a baby and young family—Gina discovered the isolation and frustration of being a working mom. She also discovered that there wasn't a support system in place in Nevada to help. Deciding to start a working moms' network, Gina placed one small announcement in a local newspaper. Thirty phone calls later, the first professional organization for working mothers was born, the Moms in Business Network (MIBN).

When Gina was discouraged after a few meetings with low attendance, her mother suggested she try just one more month. At that meeting, Gina was offered a free booth at a women's expo, where she gathered names from two hundred interested women. This confirmed her research: help with the work/business/life/family balance was not readily available through other organizations.

In just a couple of short years, the interest in and growth of MIBN has been phenomenal. From fifteen people at the first meeting, MIBN now boasts over eight thousand members and subscribers from across the country, with the potential of another forty thousand members through one company currently being negotiated. MIBN members include entrepreneurial and employed mothers, foster and stepmothers, single dads, and stay-at-home-moms, as well as companies that support working mothers by providing membership benefits to their employees.

Membership includes a host of benefits, seminars, workshops, conferences, and discounts. Gina is now working with the SBDC Disadvantaged Outreach Program to develop a program to help women become certified business owners and apply for government contracts. She recently formed an alliance with the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NIFB).

The need for Gina's network is already nationally proven and her work recognized. She was named the 2003 U.S. Small Business Administration's Home-Based Business Advocate of the Year for the state of Nevada. "The SBDC is a huge source of support," says Gina, "They are my cheerleaders. Michael Graham and Hank Pinto think that what I am doing is so important, they won't let me quit. The people are amazing; they show a lot of pride and caring." Learn more about Gina and the MIBN at [www.mibn.org](http://www.mibn.org).

As millions of gamblers lose their shirts to Nevada casinos each year, the SBDCs work hard to ensure that their entrepreneurial clients are well educated against the risks and pitfalls of owning a business. Although the stakes are high, their failure rate is low and their clients are the winners.

## **Some Food for Thought: Family Food Distributors Inc.**

When Patricia Mendez met her husband John Rivas in 1999, they shared a common passion—food. Patricia had thirteen years' management experience in the food distribution industry, and John had owned a supermarket and his family a restaurant.

An immigrant from Ecuador in 1989, Patricia recognized a niche that needed filling: supplying nostalgic food products to Ecuadorian immigrants who missed their favorite homeland foods. John and Patricia's daughter Andrea were eager to start a family business.

With little money, they purchased their first vehicle, an old van for \$700. Initially a partnership, Family Food Distributors Inc. of Kearny, New Jersey, was now open for business. They began operations in February 2002 from their home. Within two months, the house became crammed with pallets of products. Patricia found a warehousing company that rented them affordable space for two to three pallets, which quickly grew to two to three truckloads.

Research indicated that competition was less fierce in outlying areas such as Connecticut, so they marketed to areas outside of the larger cities, selling into supermarkets, specialty stores, and travel agencies. "Smaller stores move as much product as large ones," says Patricia. "They are as important to us, and we give great customer service. We aren't and don't want to be the cheapest, but we do supply a complete line of products."

After two years, the warehousing company was moving, so the business had to move. In summer 2003, needing help and financing, Patricia met with assistant director Dennis Rasugu of the New Jersey Small Business Development Center in Newark. Dennis asked if she had a business plan. "No," answered Patricia. "What's that?"

Under Dennis's guidance, Patricia enrolled in an eight-week course at the Entrepreneurial Training Institute, learning valuable business skills and how to prepare a business plan. Upon graduation, she was assigned a mentor for