



women mean business in dauphin

INITIATIVES CREATE A CULTURE OF SUPPORT FOR ENTREPRENEURS

By Jim Timlick

A grow-your-own mindset comes naturally in Dauphin.

While agriculture has long been an economic building block, the city of about 8,500 people in the heart of Manitoba's Parkland has cultivated an increasingly diverse economy, with flourishing manufacturing, tourism and retail sectors.

Perhaps nothing better exemplifies its economic maturation than the spirit of female entrepreneurship that has blossomed in recent years. Women have launched more than a dozen enterprises in Dauphin and the surrounding area over the past year alone, thanks in part to a trio of new initiatives — the Rural Women's Entrepreneur Network, Unity: Women's Maker Collective and a Business Incubator program.

Dauphin economic development manager Carissa Caruk-Ganczar says the initiatives are an outgrowth of the city's annual Take the Leap conference, which was created a decade ago to promote rural entrepreneurship.

"That project really sparked an uprising of new entrepreneurs," she says. "As part of that, we kept asking, 'Where do we go from here?' We felt there had to be more to it than one day of the year to help foster this collective entrepreneurship that we were seeing."

Last August, Community Futures Parkland and the City of Dauphin launched the Rural Women's Entrepreneur Network in response to a number of enquiries from business owners who were seeking opportunities to network and share experiences with other entrepreneurs. To date, more than 70 women have signed up. They take part in monthly meetings where they are provided with free- or low-cost training seminars and advice on how to overcome the barriers they face.

"We were really surprised to see the level of uptake that we did with this program and we know there are so many more women out there who are not part of the group yet," Caruk-Ganczar says.

At about the same time it created the network, Dauphin Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation unveiled Unity: Women's Maker Collective, a social enterprise in which women learn how to make artisanal goods such as candles and knitted items while developing business skills, including how to sell the goods they make.

"It's really about how do you give someone the opportunity and the skills to understand how you get into entrepreneurship and what are the skills they can gain to go on to further employment," Caruk-Ganczar says.

The third initiative was introduced in October, when the City of Dauphin, the

Dauphin and District Chamber of Commerce and Community Futures Parkland rolled out the Business Incubator program, designed to get new businesses off the ground. Within weeks, more than a dozen entrepreneurs — most of them women — signed up for the 12-week pilot program. It offers online training in basic business skills, guidance on how to set up a business, tips on creating a business plan and face-to-face meetings with local experts to discuss everything from finances to marketing.

So far, the program counts 15 graduates, many of whom have established home-based businesses or are investigating the possibility of opening storefront operations.

The Business Incubator exceeded expectations from the get-go, and its success has prompted the city to start looking at locations where it might be offered on an ongoing basis.

Another pleasant surprise for organizers has been the sense of synergy that has developed between all three initiatives.

Caruk-Ganczar says some Unity participants have already expressed an interest in the Business Incubator program and several Rural Women's Entrepreneur Network speakers have taken on mentorship roles with the other programs.

"It's created a whole new culture of support for women business owners." ■

To learn more, visit www.sayyestodauphin.ca.