

***Faith, Support and Camaraderie Define Entrepreneur Group
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The barren room is stark; nothing but white walls, white ceiling panels and white fluorescent lights. But there is colorful action going on, something so special that an outsider can only stare in admiration.

Jeremiah J. White Jr. is sitting at a table speaking to five women who dream of owning successful enterprises. It's been a long day for White, who is the director of Philadelphia Development Partnership.

All day, he has extinguished whatever fires may have arisen at the office and has ignited the flames for entrepreneurs, and at 7:30 on a Thursday night, White is still at it, with an enthusiasm that is contagious.

The level of entrepreneurial spirit is high and White uses it to stress his points for optimal success and economic development in the city. "You have the opportunity to come together and assert sisterhood," he said. "If you don't start, if nobody is speaking out on the issue, no one will hear you." These women are listening intently, soaking up every word of encouragement and motivation.

Intimacy seems to be a requisite here. Sitting under two personal portraits of blues and jazz legends B. B. King and Dizzy Gillespie, the women of the Christian Business Legacy Group (CBLG) - Marcia E. Stubbs, Sherry Hill, Sophia Avery, Angela Gracey and Debbie Brown - are used to pouring out their hearts to each other, telling their stories of fear, angst and frustration with running fledgling businesses, along with the euphoria associated with having their own. Each lady entrepreneur brings faith, trust, support, understanding and camaraderie to these Bi-monthly meetings, which fall under the Community Capital Works program, one of the many services Philadelphia Development Partnership offers.

CCW is a business-education program and more uniquely a peer-lending group, which helps micro-enterprises gain capital and procurement. Launched in 1998, CCW has put out 42 loans to micro-enterprises with no defaults. Loans range from as little as \$500 to \$5,000. Its peer-lending concept is unparalleled with any other entrepreneur program in the city because its decision to loan out money is based on the character of a person, not his or her credit history.

When a member requests a loan, the entire group must vote on whether that member is ready to commit, which means having a business plan written and explanations to how the money would help an aspect of their business.

However, White points out that not every entrepreneur comes to Community Capital Works expecting to get a loan. "We have a lot of people in the program just for business education," he said in another interview. "They can go to a family member and borrow \$1,000. But they don't have the foggiest idea of how to run a

to run a business.”

Avery, who is a partner in Stress Management Care, which conducts holistic workshops, training and distributes natural products and the treasurer of the group, admits that she thought about putting a loan application in, but decided against it because she wouldn't be able to justify it to herself, or her fellow members. There is a sense of accountability to one another. If a member defaults, the entire group's credit is cut off until the loan is repaid.

Hill, the group's resource officer, and Gracey, the chairwoman, have both borrowed loans and paid them back. However, they say what is most important is the learning and support they get from each other.

Nightfall is fast approaching and most of these women have full-time jobs to get to in the morning, but the threat of the late hour does not deter them from speaking about their aspirations for business. They each possess a fervent entrepreneurial spirit, determined to succeed, and unswayed by scathing images of failure. Though they have had their moments.

With starting a business comes ups and downs, and each woman has seen her share of frustration. For Avery, who quit her lucrative job as an underwriter for Fortune 500 companies to pursue her entrepreneurial dream, it was explaining to family members and close friends why she chose happiness over financial success.

“I thought about it for about a year before I actually came to the point where I thought I should quit. I came out of college and went on interviews and got a job, like most people, in a field that I had no interest in but it paid okay. After eight years I realized that after eight years, if I don't change the lifestyle I developed it would require me to stay in the position I was in and I couldn't handle it.”

Successes have been plentiful for this group. Hill's business, the Christian Entertainment and Fellowship Network, has received plenty of media attention. Her Christian singles social “club” has been featured on “Visions” the *Tribune*, the *Inquirer* and WHAT-AM.

Stubbs runs Outreach, Collaboration and Integration Services, which provide behavior management workshops and community-based crisis management, among other health and human services. Stubbs, who works full-time, has received lucrative contracts. CBLG will be sharing their stories in upcoming City Council hearings on micro enterprise and economic development. They also hosted a well-attended holiday networking event last December.

In this group, successes are celebrated and set-backs are treated as that, setbacks.

Avery has facilitated over some of the CCW groups. "From what I've seen of the groups you have a lot of people who come in and out but there are core people, and the ones that stay in are the strong groups, which are the ones that find the business support within their particular group," she said.

There are 22 groups spread throughout the Philadelphia region and in Chester. Each group acts as a governing board, with its own bylaws and board of directors. One group may have written in their constitution that each member will supply references for the other. In the event of a member business not doing well, another group may decide to purchase that member's product so they can stay afloat. In CBLG, the women act in fellowship, praying for each other in business, personal and financial issues. What works for one group may not be sufficient for another, but the end result is the same: unequaled support in a nurturing learning environment.

"I think that is the key to the whole program and the key to having a strong group, is finding some value and having a functional group that actually does something for each other," continued Avery.

"Encouragement is also the key," added Stubbs. "Because there's the ebbs and flows of development and staying with it and personally you're trying to do one thing, and professionally you're trying to do another and then it all looks like it collides together."

The women agreed that encouragement and unyielding support is the source of their unique relationship. They can laugh when the times are good, offer and heed advice and cry on each other's shoulder when times are rough, the staying power of the peer lending groups is cooperation and collaboration. It is easy to be in the room with these women; it's clear they have profound respect for each other and care about each other's needs. There is no competition, no negative conversation, only love and support come from their hearts and mouths.

"Just knowing that someone else is going through what you are going through is such a relief," said Avery, who also works as a business consultant and sells real estate. "It can be emotionally draining being a small business owner and just knowing someone in my group has probably been down the path I'm going and can offer advice from experience, it's valuable."

Peer lending groups offer a proof of opportunities and information. They give each other confidence boosters when a member is unsure of herself or her product. Brown, who runs a gift shop of handmade and natural items out of her dining room called Impeccable Taste, a name she's had in her head since high school, said when she came to her first meeting of CBLG, she was pleasantly surprised at

surprised at the enthusiastic support she received.

"I brought some of my things to show them what I was about. I just came and said this is this...they were buying things right off the bat! When I went home and told my husband and said I sold all this stuff and they want more things," said Brown who is the group's loan officer, "I was so excited and nervous at the same time...I was never part of any group. I met Sophia because I used to do home shows and she was at one and she thought of me when this group was coming together.

"They patronize me and I appreciate it," continued Brown, who is looking to buy a storefront. The networking comes full circle as each of the women remark on how they've helped each other with their businesses. For example Brown vended at one of Hill's events. Gracey gave Brown product buying information, Avery helped Hill and Stubbs with the manuals and brochures and the support goes on and on. Avery said what she appreciates most about Community Capital Works compared to other entrepreneurial programs is the group factor.

"It's not all theory," she said, "you are in a group setting and governed by your peers, and then there's also the small business loans approved by your peers."

The opportunity we have to participate in a leadership role in the City Council hearings, I think that's kind of like a fruit of reward," said Gracey.

"I think it speaks to the unity of our group and to what we've been able to accomplish in the group and actually I think it's a fulfillment of our mission statement because this is an opportunity to do just that: to have an impact beyond ourselves, to be able to change even if we stopped our businesses, like Jeremiah said, and just closed shop next week, we have the opportunity to be real agents to make an impact and that's what we're about so I'm really proud of that. I feel like it's a reward or fulfillment to the reason we're together in the first place."