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### New entrepreneurs arise from bad breaks Agency educates, motivates: Those with financial difficulty get help in starting a business.

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*Staff*

This Valentine's Day, Kimberly Morrison is getting roses.

About 3,000 of them.

Morrison has, well, blossomed since her husband surprised her with divorce papers, and since her subsequent depression that some days made it hard for her to get dressed.

Once a stay-at-home mom, Morrison now runs a thriving floral shop in Peachtree City. She opened A Blue Lady -- named for the song "Red Roses for a Blue Lady" -- in August.

The 3,000 roses are for Valentine's bouquets.

Morrison, 44, credits her success to the Atlanta-based Women's Economic Development Agency, a nonprofit organization that helps women start their own businesses. In the past five years, the agency has helped to start more than 895 small businesses in metro Atlanta, among them moving companies, hair salons, clothing stores, information technology businesses and even an automotive oil recycling business.

"I wouldn't have this business if they hadn't helped me," says Morrison, who started her business in her kitchen last January.

WEDA takes financially precarious women and families and helps them become self-sufficient entrepreneurs. Also included in its client base are franchisees for Bruster's Real Ice Cream and Smoothie King. In all, the small businesses have created more than 185 jobs, in addition to the business owners', says Deandra Green-Campbell, executive director of the agency on Auburn Avenue.

"We have any number of success stories that serve not only as a testament to the power of economic self-sufficiency to transform lives, but also as an inspiration for others," Green-Campbell says.

Morrison opened A Blue Lady after attending WEDA's 14-week business development course for start-ups. Class fees are based on income and family size and range from \$110 to \$320.

"They took this dream and chopped it up" into workable goals, Morrison says. She then took her business plan to a local bank, hoping to get a small-business loan. The bank wanted her house as collateral, but Morrison and her ex-husband still owned the house together and it couldn't figure into the plan.

Through WEDA, Morrison heard about a U.S. Small Business Administration loan program that doesn't require collateral and offers loans in Georgia of up to \$50,000. With her loan, Morrison bought computer equipment, a van and a floral cooler, and set up her shop in the Kedron Village Shopping Center.

Morrison's regular clients now include doctors' offices, a nursing home, a church, schools, a hotel and country clubs. She also is on Fayette County's local organizing committee for the Tour de Georgia bicycle race, which starts in Peachtree City in April, and she'll decorate the hospitality tent and prepare hundreds of welcome bags.

Founded in 1992 as the Women's Entrepreneurial Center, a program of the Metropolitan Atlanta Coalition of 100 Black Women, WEDA became an independent nonprofit corporation four years later. Though it's a women-centric organization, it also serves men. And it offers its programs and services -- in business development and management, wealth building, and training and licensing -- in English and Spanish.

"They're educating a lot of women as to how to start a business," says Charlotte Johnson, a business development specialist with the Small Business Administration, which partly funds WEDA.

"Some have been laid off or downsized," Johnson says. "People are getting tired of that." WEDA's programs teaches them the basics. "It opens their eyes. It gives them the key to starting their business."

Amiah Matthews, 31, is a single mother of four who started her own trucking company, A-Redd Moving & Transport.

"I am determined to make this work," says Matthews, who lives in public housing in Union City.

She tried to start her business several years ago, but it foundered until she graduated from WEDA's course in 2004.

"It really put me on top as far as how to manage my company," Matthews says. "They're helping people get where they want to be in life."

Completing the course opened the door to funding from Fulton County's Housing Authority and Economic Development Department, she says. Matthews now owns two semi-trucks with trailers, and she employs five people: a dispatcher, two long-distance drivers and two residential drivers.

"My hope is to obtain a fleet," Matthews says. "My goal is at least 50 trucks."

In October, graphic designer Joey Johnson, 33, of Covington was able to quit her day job to take her business full time. (She isn't related to the SBA's Charlotte Johnson.) Before the WEDA course, "I had had so much trouble writing a full, official business plan," Johnson says. "I had all these pieces to a business plan."

Johnson grew up in a housing project in Wilmington, N.C., and says she has always been careful with her money and sought opportunities. She didn't hesitate to pay \$140 for the WEDA course, held on Saturdays.

"I can't even begin to tell you how much I got for my money," she says.

Johnson wrote a mission statement, learned how to identify her market, boned up on bookkeeping and, of course, completed her business plan, which enabled her to get an SBA loan and buy better equipment, including a laser printer. "Before then, I was going out to Kinko's to get proofs."

"Every time I get a new client, the passion comes right back," Johnson says. "It's really exciting."

#### WOMEN'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

- Number of business starts: 896
- Average annual business revenue: \$72,519
- In business within 12 months of program completion: 75 percent
  - within 24 months of program completion: 57 percent
  - within 36 months of program completion: 55.5 percent

Of those not in business:

- Intend to start in the future: 73.9 percent
- Changed mind (i.e. decided not to open business): 13 percent
- Business closed: 4.4 percent
- Web site: [www.weda-atlanta.org](http://www.weda-atlanta.org)

\* Information from Jan. 1, 2002, to Sept. 30, 2006

Source: Women's Economic Development Agency  
Photo

FRANK NIEMEIR / Staff

Amiah Matthews started her own trucking company, She currently has two trucks, but hopes to eventually have at least 50. The WEDA course helped her complete her business plan.

Photo

MIKKI K. HARRIS / Staff

Kristin Todd, 17, works on designing arrangements as her mother, Kimberly Morrison, operates her flower shop in Peachtree City. Morrison opened her business in August with the help of the Women's Economic Development Agency in Atlanta.

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