

Support, education are keys to growing business niches

By SCOTT E. PACHECO

Even the brightest entrepreneurs need some guidance to turn their great ideas into dollar signs.

That's where Launch Pad, the career guidance component of the Toppel Career Center at the University of Miami, and Dr. Susan Amat steps in.

Launch Pad, begun in August, provides resources to those with ideas, energy and an entrepreneurial spirit.

"We're nine months in and things have been phenomenal," said Dr. Amat, executive director of Launch Pad. "We've had a lot of great coverage and support."

So far, more than 300 ideas and businesses have been submitted through the program, which gives people the support and guidance they need to move ahead with an idea. Dr. Amat said one person already has come up with a design for a new spaceship and has obtained a few patents.

She said fields like social media and healthcare have garnered a lot of interest from participants.

"We're doing as much community outreach as possible with the limited resources we have," she said.

Dr. Amat has been singled out for her accomplishments in helping develop business niches in a troubled economy by Christine Barney, chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Small Business Committee and chief executive officer of rbb Public Relations.

"Miami has always been an entrepreneurial community," Ms. Barney said. "The Launch Pad provides an exceptional resource to entrepreneurs so they can get it right the first time."

Dr. Amat said in a tough economy she has seen an influx of people who are still employed but want to jumpstart their options ahead of a possible layoff.

"We've seen people who knew they were going to get laid off," she said. "When they got laid off they already had their business up and running."

Efforts from people like Dr. Amat are going to be needed in the current recession.

Alan Carsrud, former executive director of the Eugenio Pino and Family Global Entrepreneurship Center at Florida International University, said it's going to be tough for new niches to be carved out at this time.

Mr. Carsrud left his post this month to become the Loretta Rogers Chair of Entrepreneurship and professor of Entrepreneurship & Strategy at the Ted Rogers School of Management at Ryerson University in Toronto.

"Traditional engines in South Florida are not recovering yet, import/export, logistics, hospitality and banking," he wrote in an e-mail. "My guess is they will be slow to recover, especially those dependent on discretionary income. My guess is



The Launch Pad Executive Director Dr. Susan Amat, second from left, with student entrepreneurs at the University of Miami. At center are Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, and his wife, Suzy.

the cruise industry will limp along despite what you hear from the local industry.

"It is clear the retail sector is going to remain sluggish and I see no new niches there taking off."

But both Mr. Carsrud and Dr. Amat agreed on healthcare as a source of potential.

"I am hopeful that firms in the software sector who are aimed at healthcare information, etc., will be a growth area, but that depends on how the President's health care agenda fares in Congress," Mr. Carsrud said.

One area that local creative industry and film ambassadors have been pushing is the local independent and homegrown film industry.

Even though Florida's film industry received a boost when the Legislature agreed to increase the film- and entertainment-industry incentive from \$5 million to \$10.8 million in the state's 2009-2010 budget, the overall incentive still pales in comparison to other states.

That's where Kevin Sharpley and Patrick de Bokay come into play. Steven Siegel, chair of the Greater Miami Chamber's Creative Industries Committee, nominated the two for their efforts in growing the local film industry.

Mr. de Bokay "is providing a platform for local independent filmmakers to develop their craft and in doing so the local film industry," Mr. Siegel said.

As CEO of Miami World Cinema Center, a not-for-profit film studio, Mr. de Bokay pushes the organization's mission of enhancing and supporting "independent creative cinema making in South Florida."

In giving filmmakers the tools and the support to make their aspirations a reality, Miami World Cinema Center focuses on offering hands-on education programs, nurturing talent that is here through public relations and other means and helping with the production process from beginning to end.

The bottom line is "let's keep

them here, let's allow them to make their movie here so they don't go somewhere else," Mr. de Bokay said.

Mr. Sharpley has made his presence felt in bringing people together, Mr. Siegel said.

"Kevin's impact has been to work to coalesce the many tal-

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ented people down here who are in this industry into a cohesive group."

Mr. Sharpley is the president and CEO of Kijik Multimedia Productions Inc., chairman of the community building committee for the Miami-Dade County Film and Entertainment Advisory Board, and chairman and executive director of CineVisus, an "independent film group dedicated to the further advancement and unity of South Florida's independent film community," according to the group's Web site.

"Since our incentive is only \$10.8 million [and] Burn Notice takes about half of that - that leaves half - not a huge nugget for big-budget films to come in," Mr. Sharpley said. "But it leaves it open for projects internally."

"Where I see growth is people who are invested here."



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Kevin Sharpley has worked to bring together the local film industry.

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