

MERIT trains people to start own enterprises

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

"How amazing a field of lavender looks," says Pamela Larsen, proud new owner, with her husband Kenny, of Larsen's Lavender and Bees located on their eight-acre property on Grand Ronde Road.

"It's a beautiful sight," she says. "It makes your heart feel the success."

The Larsens completed a class called Indianpreneurship, a 10-week presentation of information on how to start a successful Indian-owned small business. The program recently completed its third year in Grand Ronde.

Salem-based MERIT, or Micro-Enterprise Resources, Initiatives and Training, uses a curriculum from the Oregon Native American Business and Entrepreneurial Network, a Portland-based Indian non-profit providing cultural-specific business education and networking. The Grand Ronde Tribe was instrumental in the formation of ONABEN.

The class shares strategies for creating a business plan with options for funding.

"We teach the bootstrap method," says MERIT Program Coordinator Mona Edwards, meaning, "Starting a business without incurring debt."

Actions that spell success for those participating in the program, Edwards adds, include staying on task, continuing to move forward and doing necessary research. One example of research is understanding the target market.

Among all of the Tribal and community members who have taken the class – about 10 each year – many from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the local community and the Confederated



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Pamela and Kenny Larsen recently started their business, Larsen's Lavender and Bees in Grand Ronde, after completing the Indianpreneurship class.

Tribes of Siletz have started a business. Some four from the Grand Ronde Tribe and a couple more from the community and Siletz are still operating the businesses they started.

However, says Edwards, "Sometimes individuals get the information and don't act on it for a couple years. It's hard to know how many get started unless they contact us again."

One of those to start a business, inspired by the session this year, was Larsen, who "unofficially" opened the doors to her new business in February.

"In June," she says, "we'll start hitting the farmer's markets. We're going to try to get our name on the list of vendors for the monthly market for Tribal members at the casino. We'll be talking to Greg Azure at TERO to see what else we can get involved in."

Their products, made with lavender and bee honey, include natural

soaps, body butters, bath products and other similar luxuries.

The Larsens were fixing up their eight-acre home on Grand Ronde Road, the old Tribal Community Center, before the class. Many other things came together that contributed to the decision to get started.

"We have a lot of lavender," she says. "I like natural soaps. We're pretty crafty. I will retire in five years. Kenny is already semi-retired. We're hoping for a little business in retirement. I love lavender. It's a new market. We might as well try to jump in on it. It's been a slow jump."

Their revving up plans included planting 144 lavender bushes, four varieties, this spring. "These will be the mother plants," Pamela says.

Kenny has built a greenhouse for them. "He helps me with the heavy stuff," she says. "He makes the raised beds. He's handy with wood. He makes the molds for the soaps." He also attended the MERIT classes with Pamela.

Their goal is to plant five acres, maybe 10,000 plants, in the years ahead.

"We started with bees last year, and started thinking about making bees and lavender a business then. What the heck; why not?" Pamela says.

In the future, the business plan calls for six hives.

Three other members of this year's class were Bryan Langley,

and two of his children – Brayden and Kara – along with a community friend and his daughter.

As reported in the March 1 issue of *Smoke Signals*, Bryan and Brayden started iCallElk, an elk-focused business. Kara came along looking for general knowledge about business.

"Hopefully," Bryan says, "she will be able to use the information in the future."

Bryan says the timing was perfect. He didn't know much of what he was to learn in the class. "It was a very helpful class with business structures, financing, cash flow and income statements – all the things that go with running the business. I thought it was a very good class," he says.

"There were guest speakers one night. It was good to hear people who have been through the process, who started out really small and grew their business over time."

Others in the class were also useful to the Larsens. "Everybody had a different business," says Pamela. "Having a group there opened your eyes to a lot of things you wouldn't have even thought about."

And the instructors were top notch as far as the Larsens were concerned. "Mona and Kinji (Neskahi, with a heritage of San Juan Pueblo and Navajo Tribes) were wonderful and always there for you," Pamela says. Neskahi was facilitator and co-teacher.

MERIT teaches about 50 classes a year. The cost of putting on the classes depends on the program. In Grand Ronde, the program cost \$20,000. Funding for MERIT comes from government grants, foundations and corporations. Spirit Mountain Community Fund contributed \$15,000 in 2011 and \$7,000 in 2013. For this year's class, the Tribal Education Department also contributed.

The program has 10 weekly 2.5-hour classes plus online time through the MERIT program. Students use the online time to ask questions about homework, conduct research and seek direction.

"Startups range from services to products to arts and crafts," Edwards says.

"We're just starting to rock and roll on this," says Pamela. ■

Indianpreneurship



Submitted photo

An Indianpreneurship class graduated in Grand Ronde on March 12. MERIT, a micro-enterprise development organization in Salem, partners with the Grand Ronde Tribe to bring classes to Tribal and community members regarding how to start their own business. "Indianpreneurship: A Native American Journey into Business" was used as the curriculum. It was developed by the Oregon Native American Business and Entrepreneurial Network. Fourteen people attended the 10-week class that began Jan. 8 and ended on March 12. Those graduating were, back row (from left), Sarah Porter, Robert Porter, Kara Langley, Tyler Martin, Kenneth Larsen, Cory Meneley, David Garren, Christopher Bailey, Brayden Langley, Elisha Porter and facilitator Kinji Neskahi; and front row (from left), Donn Grishaber, Bryan Langley, Pamela Larsen, Marie Fleming and Khani Schultz.

Mothers of Tradition training set for May

The White Bison Mothers of Tradition training is returning to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde on May 20-22 at the Community Center, 9615 Grand Ronde Road.

The training's purpose is to increase awareness of how intergenerational trauma interrupted the culture, language, family ties and parenting practices among Native peoples.

Participants will learn how to apply cultural teachings to bring healing to children and relationships.

The training is free, but people must register to attend. Participants must make a three-day commitment and attend from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information or to register, contact Alcohol and Drug Counselor Karan Scharf at 503-879-2029. The training is sponsored by the Tribe's Behavioral Health Program and funded by a Meth and Suicide Prevention Initiative grant. ■