

# Hub nonprofits cultivate small business owners

**Michelle Sedaca**

These days, sunshine greets Yvonne Jones as she enters her recently opened Halisi Day Spa & Salon in the Crosstown Center in Roxbury.

A self-described “sunny person,” Jones says her business’s bright, golden logo reminds her “to stay bright and think positive.” Inside, cheerful orange walls and meditative music create a sense of serenity within the 2,100-square-foot space.

The days used to bristle with tension for Jones, who worked as a property manager for private and public housing developments in Boston for the past 20 years. Through her spa, she now provides release for others with a variety of tempting choices including Swedish, hot stone and deep tissue massage.

“It was my lifelong dream to open my own business,” said Jones, a longtime Boston resident originally from Jamaica. Her journey towards realizing that dream and opening Halisi — which happens to be her daughter’s middle name and means “original, precise, exact” in Swahili — began after attending the Massage Institute of New England in 2001. Working at a day spa for five years helped her hone her massage skills.

In addition to massage, Halisi offers a wide array of pampering treatments such as facials, manicures, pedicures, waxing and hairstyling. The spa’s small staff includes four massage therapists and a manicurist/pedicurist. Also on board is Jones’ longtime friend Zory Jenkins, who serves as a hairstylist and cosmetologist, providing waxing and nail services to customers.

Jones’ experience in the spa industry before starting her own business was key, according to Deidra MacLeod, a small business technical assistant at the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation (DBEDC), a nonprofit dedicated to small business development and affordable housing.

“Gaining relevant experience before opening a business is ideal,” MacLeod said. “For example, if you are opening a coffee shop, it’s important to know what it’s like to be on your feet at 6 a.m.”

Participating in a course at the Center for Women and Enterprise (CWE), a Boston nonprofit that offers business training to female entrepreneurs, and receiving assistance from DBEDC helped Jones navigate the complex terrain of starting her own business. CWE caters to both novice entrepreneurs and existing business owners through varying levels of trainings, such as “Planning for your Startup” and “Keeping the Books.”

The course Jones took at CWE educated participants about how to develop a business plan, an essential document that describes the company’s services and products to

potential investors and/or lenders. At DBEDC, she received one-on-one counseling from MacLeod, who guided her through preparing the necessary paperwork to apply for bank loans.

Aspiring business owners are ready to seek assistance from DBEDC once they have a solid idea of what type of establishment they would like to open. At that point, a counselor can assist clients by evaluating whether their businesses can survive the competition.

According to MacLeod, most people who want to open their own businesses lack a background in business. DBEDC provides the tools to learn the fundamentals.

MacLeod worked closely with Jones to ensure that she had the following documentation to apply for loans: a business plan; financial projections calculating the amount of money that will be spent and the amount of money that will be earned through sales; a budget, including start-up expenses; a credit report; and a personal financial statement summarizing what you own and what you owe.

In addition to helping clients assemble the proper paperwork, DBEDC identifies suitable banks where prospective owners should apply for loans. MacLeod explained that most banks won't lend to start-up companies since they don't have a proven track record of raising profits; as a result, DBEDC helps locate banks amenable to new businesses.

Once the loan application is finished, DBEDC acts as a liaison between the client and bank by translating any financial jargon to the client.

In Jones' case, with MacLeod's assistance, she applied and received loans from DBEDC and the Boston Private Bank & Trust Company. After the application process is completed at DBEDC, clients typically receive the loan in three weeks. At Boston Private Bank, the loan is allocated anywhere from within a few weeks to several months, according to Sarah Lamitie, vice president at Boston Private Bank.

Boston Private Bank offers loans to small business owners through its Community Partners Small Business Loan Program, which partners with technical assistance organizations like DBEDC that help clients apply for loans.

"Start-ups are a challenge. We do a thorough review of the business plan and projected market, and look for a way to say yes," said Lamitie.

In addition to guidance through the loan application process, MacLeod works with clients to effectively track their finances, meaning that clients choose a system of recording their transactions, either by manually filing receipts or using a computer accounting program like QuickBooks.

DBEDC also offers marketing services and referrals to legal agencies. Through one-on-

one counseling, clients finetune their market savviness by answering questions like what customers currently frequent their businesses and what kinds of people the clients want to target as potential customers. The counselor also helps to identify appropriate places to advertise, such as specific newspapers.

Finally, the client learns to effectively leverage promotions and discounts to increase sales. For example, MacLeod said, since November is usually a slow month, a jewelry designer might be wise to plan ahead and offer sales then, to keep revenues up before the busy holiday season.

When starting one's own business, entrepreneurs typically require legal assistance on issues varying from having their leases reviewed to filing copyrights to protect product designs. DBEDC fills in the gap by referring clients to legal agencies.

For Jones, the technical assistance offered by CWE and DBEDC — and specifically, MacLeod's advice — has proved invaluable.

“She has been my backbone,” Jones said.

Armed with her sharpened business savvy, Jones forecasts bright days for Halisi. She believes Halisi's location is a major asset.

“Before, people from Mattapan, Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods had to go to the suburbs [to visit a spa],” she said. “Now, they don't have to, because I am down the street.”

Halisi also stands out as a minority-owned business. Jones described customers' surprise upon entering the spa and learning that a woman of color owns the business.

“[Halisi's] a very classy place. There isn't any other in the area. If you travel around [nearby neighborhoods], from my experience, there's nothing like my ambiance,” she remarked.

Jones attributes her hard-earned success to abiding by her grandmother's advice to never give up or say you can't.

“Those words aren't in my vocabulary,” she declared. “Live your dream and work at it.”