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Oregon helps laid-off workers start own businesses

by Jonathan Brinckman, The Oregonian
Thursday June 11, 2009, 7:25 PM



Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian

Carrie Wong's Salem company, Extreme Chocolates, is going strong with three full-time employees seven years after she was laid off and enrolled in the state's Self Employment Assistance Program. Here she zests some orange for an Orange Cardamom Creme Brulee.

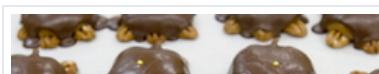
Management consultant Mike O'Daly lost his job in February when Gulf Pacific Inc. made drastic cuts. After unsuccessfully looking for work for three months, O'Daly enrolled in little-known state program that lets laid-off workers use unemployment benefits to launch their own companies.

He's glad he did.

"It was time for me to take control of my own future," said O'Daly, 54, whose new company, Mercury Business Solutions, has its first two first clients. "This will get me going."

O'Daly is one of 102 Oregonians currently enrolled in the Self Employment Assistance Program, which lets people collect unemployment benefits without looking for work, as usually required. The state program, one of only eight in the country, has never been busier.

"Interest always goes up in recessions, but it's really rocking right now," said William "Pat"



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Sanderlin, an analyst with the state Department of Employment who coordinates the program. "This keeps people fed with their lights turned on while they pursue their dream."

The self-employment program is tiny, currently enrolling less than 1/10th of one percent of the approximately 111,000 Oregonian's collecting unemployment. Those in the program get no extra money for training or business costs, and are not allowed to extend their benefits beyond the normal 26-week period.

They do, however, get a chance to fully dedicate themselves to starting a business, and any business earnings are not deducted from unemployment checks. "It's just a bare bones thing," Sanderlin said. "But for people who are really motivated, it's an opportunity."

To enter the program, an unemployed person must have a worker-profile score showing poor chances of getting a job and must be approved by the Small Business Development Centers, a network of 19 centers throughout the state that provides business training and mentoring.

Program enrollees have a month after admission to submit a business plan that has been approved by one of those small business centers.

Carrie Wong is one of the program's success stories. She enrolled after she was laid off in 2001 from a \$75,000-a-year job at a Portland entertainment business. She launched Extreme Chocolates, a Salem dessert and confection company that now employees three fulltime workers and -- when orders pile up -- as many as 20 part-time workers.

"The program allowed me to take a risk," Wong said. "There was not a lot of opportunity for a 44-year-old woman with my experience, but my Mom had been a chef so I knew a ton about the food business."



Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian

Chocolate treats, called Golden Turtles, made by Carrie Wong and her staff at Extreme Chocolates in Salem.

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Wong credits much of her business acumen to Jimmie Wilkins, who recently retired as the director of the Small Business Development Center in Salem. "She absolutely helped me learn the skills to run a business," Wong said. "When she didn't have the answer to one of my questions, she would find someone who did."

Wong represents an ideal outcome because she not only removed herself from the pool of job seekers, but she built a company that created more jobs. "When jobs just aren't out there, this program provides an alternative," said Rod Simmons, manager of the employment department's WorkSource Oregon office in McMinnville and a former program coordinator.

James Simon hopes to be as successful as Wong. Simon lost his job as a motorcycle mechanic when the Harley-Davidson dealership in Roseburg closed last Christmas Eve. After failing to find work as a cook, Simon entered the program and opened Old School Iron Motorcycle Co., which repairs, services and custom builds motorcycles.

"I'm not that busy right now, but I'm just getting started," Simon said. "Signs are being hung next week, my storefront will open in September, then things are going to change."

No formal measure of success exists for the program. Sanderlin queried the 560 people enrolled in 2006 and 2007 and got 130 responses. Of those, 86 percent said they had been able to launch a business and 69 percent said their business was still going in February 2009.

"We just make the program available and get out of the way," said Sanderlin. "The punishment for not doing well is to fail."

O'Daly, of Mercury Business Solutions, doesn't think he will fail. While he already knows how to be a businesses consultant, the thing he hasn't done before is market himself. But he said he's getting better.

"I'm learning how to do this whole sales thing," said O'Daly, who gets \$487 a week from the state. "It's like playing guitar, practice makes perfect. This program gives me a safety net while I practice."

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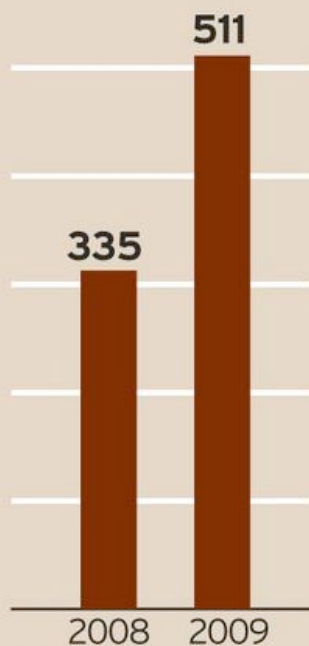
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Startups

Oregonians enrolled in the state's Self Employment Assistance Program.



Note: Data is 12 months to May 31, of each year

Source: Oregon Department of Employment

THE OREGONIAN