

Real World Experience - FKCC Students Turn Classroom Lessons Into Business Opportunities

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By Anne-Margaret Swary

A year ago, Bartosz Ilczuk was sitting in classes at Florida Keys Community College learning about marketing techniques and business plans.

Now the 23-year-old Key West High School graduate is running his own business, Keys Auto Spa & Detailing, while he continues to work toward an associate degree.

Ilczuk said he started attending the college's business program in hopes that he'd be able to start a small business someday. But he said his courses, combined with support from his professors and the Small Business Development Center on campus, helped him make that leap sooner than he planned.

Nine months since launching his company, he's been able to hire and train two employees while he runs the business and supervises their work. Keys Auto Spa on North Roosevelt Boulevard offers a comprehensive menu of car detailing services, including washing and waxing, interior and trunk vacuuming, leather reconditioning, headlight brightening, steam cleaning, window tinting, engine cleaning and windshield repairs, among others. It also details boats, RVs and motorcycles in addition to airplanes at Key West International Airport.

"Definitely there was a need for it," Ilczuk said of his business. "There are other places, but they are just not as professional and they don't provide as many services as we do."

Ilczuk said his college courses gave him knowledge he could use in the real world. His business law class was invaluable when it came time to signing a lease and other contracts involved in starting the business, he said. His accounting class allowed him to create a monthly budget for the business and manage all his expenses. And even his English composition class was useful when it came time for the Polish-born Ilczuk to write text for his Web site and brochures.

"I'm also taking a course right now in business management that can keep me focusing on new things," he said. "It's very important that we have new things, such as gift certificates and other things to help market the business and keep it growing."

Sweet ambition

Ilczuk isn't the only one of his peers to make the leap from student to entrepreneur while attending the college.

Student Kim Walls, 28, is working on launching a home-based business that specializes in fudge, called Sweetest Knights. She and her boyfriend/business partner Chad Knight hope to have the company running in time for Christmas.

"We both have been wanting to pursue entrepreneurship for a few years. It's just always something we wanted to do and never did anything about," Walls said.

The pair got the idea for the business last Christmas after making fudge for family and friends to give as gifts.

"Chad is amazing at making fudge," Walls said. And after making 30 pounds of fudge in two days on top of working their full-time jobs and caring for their 21-month-old son, they realized how easy it would be to turn Knight's culinary talents into a profit.

"I decided, 'Why don't I go back to school this fall at FKCC? I can enter the business program, really organize our thoughts, and maybe seek out advice from professors and other faculty,' " she said.

Walls, who previously studied psychology at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, admitted she was wary of attending a small community college.

"After going to a university, I didn't know if that would be the best choice," she said. "I was considering taking university courses online elsewhere."

She said she's glad she gave the college a chance, because it has far surpassed her expectations. Her courses include introduction to business, business law, financial accounting and principles of marketing.

"It's been a delightful surprise as far as my professors and classes," she said. "They really give you the hope that anyone can be a business owner. The sky's the limit."

So far the pair have developed a Web site and spent several months working on different flavors of fudge, which they plan to sell in local stores and gift shops and also online. Their varieties include chocolate, bourbon cherry, butterscotch, peanut butter, Key lime, pineapple coconut, raspberry cream and white Russian.

While they continue to tweak their business plan and work on acquiring the proper licenses, the pair are having fun experimenting with more varieties.

"Anyone who knows us has pretty much sampled some kind of random flavor," Walls said.

Resources for students

Both Walls and Ilczuk said they are thrilled with the support they have received from their professors, especially Brittany Snyder, who heads the college's business program and teaches many of its classes.

Snyder said she is equally thrilled to be working with students on their businesses.

"Each one of them is really utilizing a program or specific courses to meet their unique needs," Snyder said. "Initially we were really just focused on what would be necessary for her (Walls) to complete her degree. And now we're talking on a weekly basis about the business, what comes next."

The college offers a certificate in business administration-small business management and an associate degree in business administration. Bachelor's and master's degrees in management are offered through Hodges University on FKCC's Key West campus.

Another resource for college students is Key West's Small Business Development Center, which has its offices on the college campus. In addition to training and public outreach, the center offers free individual counseling for anyone who has an interest in starting their own business, according to Certified Business Analyst Greg Baumann.

"A large part of what we do in the individual counseling is business plans and marketing plans and feasibility studies," he said.

Baumann said the center, as an arm of the Small Business Administration, essentially offers entrepreneurs help with the entire startup process, including information on costs and paperwork associated with starting a business, how to apply for small-business loans, the incorporation process, filing documents, and acquiring necessary licenses from the city, county and state.

"Students are a small percentage, maybe 10 percent. Most of the folks we see are existing business owners in Monroe County or folks who want to start up [a business]," he said. "But there's actually been a lot of students who have had success opening a business lately."

Tasting success

Twenty-six-year-old Heidi Garbo is one of them. She launched her mobile food cart, Garbo's Grill, last year during her first year studying at the college.

"I wouldn't have been able to do it without FKCC. I wouldn't have known where to start," she said.

Garbo has chosen to audit her classes, meaning she pays tuition fees but does not receive a grade.

"She wanted to come in and not have the pressure of grades but still obtain the knowledge and experience," Snyder said.

Garbo has studied financial accounting, business management and Spanish so far, she said. And she also worked with the Small Business Development Center, which helped her develop her business plan and apply for a loan.

After her first year in business, she is able to sustain herself on the money she makes from the gourmet taco cart, stationed on Greene Street across from Peppers of Key West.

"I haven't had to borrow any other money from myself, a bank or my family since the initial investment," she said. "I budgeted correctly and my numbers are pretty right on right now. I'm making a living from my cart. And that's what I wanted."

She works from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays selling tacos, fish tacos, mini sliders, Black Angus hot dogs, Key limeade and fresh smoothies. She said she makes several sauces herself, using ingredients from Peppers across the street.

"I have great quality, fast, cheap food," she said. "It's not McDonald's on wheels."

Expanding a skill set

Student Jennie Wolf already had her own successful bookkeeping business but decided to start attending the college this fall to further her skills.

"I already have a bachelor's degree (in business and communications), so I'm really going back specifically to take an accounting course and another class," said Wolf, who started Gemini Business Partners LLC after being laid off from her hospitality job last year. "I wanted validation that I was doing the best I could for my clients and just kind of get a refresher."

Snyder said Wolf recognized a need to explore more niche possibilities within her home-based business.

Wolf said her courses have helped her to see the bigger picture and understand why certain accounting practices are beneficial to her clients instead of just going through the motions.

"I have always been on the other side of financial statements as a manager," Wolf said. "Now I've moved onto the side where I help other business owners run their businesses."

She said she loves the option of taking certain classes online but knows if she needs help, she can physically sit down with her instructor at the college at any time.

"It's easy to ask questions," she said. "It's hard to be new, especially when you're older, and she makes it very comfortable to come and ask questions."

Snyder said she has been able to use the real-life experiences of these new business owners in the classroom to teach other students in the business program.

"Their peers find this information more interesting and helpful," Snyder said. "And it's not always pretty. But that's the reality of starting your own business."