

## Women's Rural Entrepreneur Network (WREN)

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**Focus:** WREN began by helping low income women start businesses, but it wasn't long before this work led into new territory. Today the mission embraces business development, creating and supporting markets for local artists, artisans, and rural entrepreneurs, arts and empowerment workshops for girls, education and advocacy around buying "local", Main Street revitalization, pursuing sustainable models for rural economic development and acting an access point for community and business networking

**Geographic Area Served:** The Women's Rural Entrepreneur Network is located in the small town of Bethlehem, NH in the northwestern part of the state. WREN has succeeded in revitalizing this small town. They have become the economic development center for the town. They offer activities that support entrepreneurs to build and grow their businesses. It is located on Main Street and as you go up and down Main Street you will discover that many of these businesses got their start at 2013 Main Street the office/incubator of WREN.

### **Funding Sources:**

WREN addresses the needs and aspirations of a diversity of rural people, including over 400 business owners. Their work connects people with one another, provides access to resources many couldn't afford on their own, offers learning opportunities, creates and supports markets for entrepreneurs, actively engages in Bethlehem's revitalization, and serves as a national model for rural economics and community development.

WREN chose to become a **membership** organization in the second year of operations reinforcing the notion of community. Through membership people invest in the work, feel a sense of ownership in the organization, and shape WREN's development. Members live near and far and in as many as 13 states. Members receive *The WRENzine* (published three times a year), a **weekly email newsletter**, discounts on classes and store/gallery purchases, and more - all while supporting the work of WREN.

WREN began in 1994 with 15 women participants, supporting their dreams of becoming business owners. Over the next decade WREN built on this success, growing in scope and mission. Today, the 'WREN Community' includes 900+ members - men and women living in New England and beyond - who benefit from and support WREN's many initiatives and resources.

**Key Services Abstract:** Networking and educational services are the main assets that WREN provides as the following list shows:

**Community Revitalization** - As part of WREN's commitment to community building, they work to make Bethlehem a better and more prosperous place. Bethlehem, New Hampshire was known as a "premier tourist destination" from the 1890s through the 1950s. But this ended as the travel patterns and expectations of Americans changed. Over the years, the town's grand hotels and businesses disappeared. When WREN relocated to Bethlehem in 1999, many of the store fronts were empty and little Main Street economic activity was evident. As WREN began to operate the retail store, they also put energy into bringing new life to our downtown. Thanks to a USDA Rural Development grant, they launched the "The Stars Come Out in Bethlehem" project. Convening residents, civic leaders and business owners, the group identified a number of short and long term revitalization goals. WREN began the Street Banner Project, a volunteer driven effort to create original, hand-painted banners for the Main Street. Today WREN supports the development of both summer and winter designs. WREN also partners with the Colonial Theater, the nation's oldest, continuously-operating movie house. The theatre, operates from May through October, offering independent and foreign films, as well as live performances.

**WREN BETA (Business and Entrepreneurial Technical Assistance) PROGRAM** - In 2007, to address the needs of the community, WREN developed the BETA program. WREN staff members are trained as instructors in the Core Four business planning course and as business coaches for this comprehensive program. The nationally known, award-winning Core Four curriculum is integrated with WREN's own brand of business coaching, marketing assistance and networking. The course covers successful strategies for business including marketing, financial management and operations planning. Classes are scheduled on a year round basis and instructors are available to help entrepreneurs as the need arises. Since September of 2007, 110 participants have graduated from the BETA program.

**WREN SUCCEED Program** - The SUCCEED program is designed to take entrepreneurs to the next level by addressing specific training needs that WREN has identified and that members have requested. SUCCEED gives participants a solid background in Business Communications, Financial Planning and Web Marketing. Group sessions of Business Coaching help to integrate class work with the real life issues of starting or running a business, and puts personal goals into proper perspective with business goals.

**Vendor-Readiness Classes** - To ensure that vendors are prepared to enjoy the maximum benefit of participation in the Local Works Marketplace and/or Farmers Market, WREN provides classes in packaging, pricing, marketing, customer relations and booth display. Ongoing workshops are scheduled throughout the year as need is identified. All business owners are encouraged to take advantage of these learning opportunities.

**WREN MARKET ACCESS PROGRAM** - "I have a great product or service, but where are the markets?" This is often the greatest challenge for rural business owners. Since 2000, WREN has made Access to Markets a key part of their mission. As is often done, WREN has used a "community" approach in addressing this challenge and have focused on developing opportunities that can benefit many simultaneously.

Wren Market Access provides real business world experience and technical assistance to first time entrepreneurs and existing businesses, giving them the opportunity to sell or promote their products through the various aspects of the program. The Market Access program has assisted hundreds of entrepreneurs. WREN has learned much about self-sustainability; and has turned the retail store, gallery and farmers market into important sources of earned income for both members and the organization. It is an important element of the holistic approach to incorporate training, coaching, networking and market access into the services offered to members.

**Local Works Marketplace** - When the retail store (formerly known as WrenOvation!) opened in 2000, it had 52 vendors; today the store supports over 200 product-based businesses. Products are reviewed for store readiness. The review includes assistance with product packaging, display, marketing, pricing and quality control. The store program provides more than the typical retail experience; sellers are offered valuable, honest feedback. Local Works also provides a venue for buyers seeking unique locally made products. Products are taken on consignment, with 60% of the sales price going to vendors and 40% towards supporting the store itself. Since opening, the store has generated over three-quarter million dollars in sales and serves as a retail anchor for Bethlehem's Main Street. The store is open 7 days a week from 10 am to 5 pm.

**The Gallery at WREN** - In rural northern New Hampshire, opportunities for artists and art appreciation are limited. Galleries are few and far between; funding for the arts is virtually nonexistent. In a reaction to this void, the Gallery at WREN was created in 2001 as a cultural outlet for the creativity of a community, a place where local artists could display and sell their work, where the public could learn about and appreciate art. Today a new show opens each month. Painters, photographers, sculptors and multi-media artists have exhibited their work. Artists receive 60% of sales; WREN puts 40% back into the operating budget. The mere presence of the gallery has helped revitalize the economy of Bethlehem.

**Local Works Farmers Market and Outdoor Marketplace** - To expand the market access beyond the retail store, and to initiate the process of getting the community to "think local and buy local," WREN now hosts a twice-weekly farmers market and outdoor craft marketplace from the end of May through mid-October. This is an ideal launching pad for beginning entrepreneurs to get visibility, publicity and to start growing their customer bases. The market experience itself is WREN at its purest connecting small entrepreneurs with the local residents and tourists, creating a focal point for the community, bringing more foot traffic to the village business district and increasing local prosperity overall. Vendors have the opportunity to sell locally grown and produced food, baked goods, flowers, plants and crafts in a relaxed outdoor venue. The 2009 Local

Works Farmers Market and Outdoor Marketplace is open every Wednesday, 3-6pm, and Saturdays, 9am-1pm, from the May 23 to October 10.

**Incubator Office Program** - One of the greatest challenges facing emerging entrepreneurs is affordable office space. WREN currently has three economically priced offices in the WREN Central building. Ten Health and Wellness professionals rotate use of two of these spaces; the third is used by a financial consultant. The presence of these businesses boosts the physical vibrancy of WREN and the economy of Bethlehem by bringing more customer traffic into the village on a regular basis.

**WREN's Technology Center** - For entrepreneurs and those living in a rural setting, so much depends upon access to and an understanding of technology. In 2000, the Technology Center opened as a place where members and the wider community could access hardware, software, and affordable training that they couldn't find elsewhere in northern New Hampshire. That same year, WREN received an AOL Rural Telecommunication Leadership Award for these services. Every year hundreds of women, men and children use the Center to access the Internet, work on projects, and other technology tasks. The Center offers beginner and advanced classes.

**Multi-Media Resource Studio** - In 2005, WREN was selected as one of nine grantees for the Hewlett Packard (HP) Microenterprise Acceleration Program. This award provided over \$150,000 in technology planning, equipment, and software, allowing WREN to completely update the Technology Center. WREN also launched the Multi-Media Resource Studio that offers advanced print and website development tools, including a digital photo shoot space.

**Business Directories** - WREN takes every opportunity to advocate on behalf of supporting the local economy and educates the public about the impact of keeping local dollars circulating within the region. WREN's **On-Line Member Business Directory** not only promotes members' enterprises, it also allows searching for the services and products desired. As part of the "Buy Local, Local Works" campaign, WREN has also published the **Local Works Business Directory**, a free 56-page handbook featuring business listings from over 230 member businesses. Designed and produced by WREN, the actual listings were written by the business owners themselves, with a minimal amount of editing.

**WRENzine** - WREN publishes a magazine, the WRENzine, three times a year. The WRENzine is a highly acclaimed publication where members are invited to write columns, publish photographs or share experiences; it also provides market access and advertising opportunities. Viewed by over 1500 households and businesses, it is considered by members to be one of the most important assets of their membership.

**e-WREN** - The weekly email broadcast is a resource for upcoming events, classes, news and more.

**Equity Awards for Low and Moderate Income Women Entrepreneurs** - Sometimes money makes all the difference, as WREN discovered in 2005 when two generous funders gave WREN \$13,500 to award to nine low or moderate income women business owners. Since then, as local partners, WREN has been able to provide 35 women with equity awards through the Citigroup Women and Company Microenterprise Boost Program and the Fairy Godmother Fund, an initiative of the Ms. Foundation for Women.

**Women's Investment Groups** - Many North Country women don't have retirement plans or savings. WREN hosts two investment groups (*Nest Egg* and *Gold Diggers*) that bring women together once a month to collectively educate themselves about investment opportunities and to develop a group stock portfolio.

**Networking Events** - The WREN Community knows what it is like to work AND play. Many of our WREN events are free and open to the public.

**The WINGS Program for Girls** - Created in 1997, the "Wings of the Wren" program is a way to share the richness of the WREN Community with girls of the region. Girls ages 8-14 are invited to take part in free workshops and adventures. In the process, they get to know themselves, each other and the women who volunteer to oversee the program. WINGS emphasizes the arts as a pathway for self-knowledge and creativity. All Wings events are listed in the WRENzine and on the WREN website.

**Key Benefits and Results:** The WREN organization has the benefit of being the hub of the economic wheel in Bethlehem New Hampshire. WREN operates as a close knit community that can offer collaborative space and a shared vision for the community.

They have received grants from the United States Department of Agriculture, the Economic Development Administration, and the Community Development Business Group. The challenge is to create new programs that will bring the funding into the community. Funders want new programs and after 15 years of success, they are looking for sustainability and a living wage for all participants in WREN.

Most of the people who complete their entrepreneurial education training, do not develop a full time business but rather a part-time addition to their income.

**Lessons Learned:** Businesses and individuals being bold and resourceful, networking, and being involved in activities in the supportive community can improve the economic capabilities of the entire community.

Leaders need to keep creating and always keep a positive spirit to developing entrepreneurial organizations.

WREN is a small non-profit and is finding it a challenge to be able to access the Recovery Funding. Funding is always a big issue with non-profits.