

## **Program helps people tap inner vision**

**Self-employment The CEO project provides guidance to participants as they pursue creative ways to make money**

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GRESHAM -- Even when she was young, artist Eileen Reeser of Gresham was constantly inventing things -- a jewelry board to keep necklaces from tangling, a portable box to organize business cards, a peg to clamp her watercolors at the correct angle.

She would make them for herself while she worked a range of jobs from running a nail salon to installing switches for the phone company.

But about three years ago, her sideline took center stage. Reeser, now 52, realized that a divorce, a move to Oregon and a breakup with her fiance had left her on a financial cliff. Temp work and selling her paintings would not be enough to sustain her into retirement.

"I realized I couldn't depend on anyone but myself," she said. "I needed to stop relying on others for my well-being and financial security."

Reeser invented a tray that stores baking soda in a refrigerator without taking up shelf space. And she discovered "Creative Earning Options for Low Income Persons," known as the CEO project, which tries to help people escape poverty by starting their own companies.

With a \$400,000, 17-month Jobs for Low Income Persons grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the program is trying to show "that self-employment is a viable option for low-income people," said Joan Pasco, project manager for the East County One Stop employment program.

Pasco organized the CEO project with Easter Seals Oregon, whose mission includes helping disabled people find work. So far, about half of the program's 49 participants are disabled.

Participants have to have an existing idea for a business. The program breaks them in with a two-day boot camp covering business basics and continues with two years of workshops and mentoring.

There is a fee of \$500, but it comes in the form of a zero-interest loan that can be paid back at \$10 a month over three years. It gives participants an investment in their education, and it helps them build a track record of repaying a loan responsibly, Pasco said.

The businesspeople can build credit through the program and later apply for larger loans.

Initial loans aren't going to entirely fund an expensive new business, but they give people experience with bills, discipline and managing money, Pasco said. "Some of the people in the program really haven't had that experience," she said.

People in the program tend to fall into three main groups: inventors such as Reeser; typical small-business people and self-employed professionals who work from home.

"Employers are saying 'I don't have to provide cubicles. I don't have to provide equipment,' " Pasco said. They "are starting to say . . . 'Can you deliver it on this date? We don't care how. You can do it at 3 a.m. You can juggle your 3-year-old. We don't care how you do it; we just want a result.' "

So far, the CEO program's most outstanding performers include a landscaper, a janitor, a marketing consultant and a florist, according to a recent program report. Others include a fudge maker, a midwife, an art therapist, a person who sets up Wi-Fi Internet access, a person who sells vintage slips and other clothes to boutiques and on E-bay, and the inventor of a hiking chair for people with disabilities.

Reeser's idea was inspired by the fact that many people keep a box of baking soda in the refrigerator to tame smells. But people always forget to change it every few months, she said, and it takes up shelf space. She decided what people need is a clear tray that sticks underneath a glass shelf and spreads out the baking soda.

After a quick trip to Home Depot, she had the plastic and suction cups for prototypes, which she gave to friends and neighbors to test. Their feedback led her to a breathable fabric packet that holds the baking soda so it doesn't make a mess.

The first 1,000 prototypes were made by a Beaverton company; now, they are made by an overseas contractor.

So far, she says she has sold about 3,500, mostly through the Internet ([www.deodorex.com](http://www.deodorex.com)) and through Fred's RV World in Sandy. Her next step is catalog sales.

So far, the greatest interest has been from owners of recreational vehicles interested in preserving space. Reeser sees potential customers in office assistants who have to deal with smelly break room refrigerators, housekeepers for residential hotels, boating supply companies and average homeowners.

"My product will go anywhere a refrigerator goes," she said.

The CEO program was "a godsend," Reeser said, especially because of the one-on-one mentoring she received from a volunteer marketing specialist who phoned her, e-mailed her and met her on lunch breaks, urging her to stay on course and develop her business plan.

"She told me that no company is going to survive without sales, so you've got to find the right market niche and customer," Reeser said.

Reeser still works nights, waiting tables at Gresham's Outback restaurant. But that leaves her days free to work on selling her invention.

"That tray, to me, with only 15 years left to retirement, represents the quality of the rest of my life," Reeser said. "That's why I knew I needed to develop this and I had to succeed."

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