

Successful Area Entrepreneurs Tell Their Stories

OSKALOOSA – The Exchange for Entrepreneurs held a special event at On The Green recently where successful business owners shared their stories to nearly 20 in attendance. Exchange member Rob Taylor said, “We as business owners and business dreamers are always learning from those who have been down a path similar to ours, learning from both their successes and failures. The journeys of these two successful women is not only fascinating but provides lessons from which we can all benefit helping us to remember never give up on our dreams and passions.”

Jane Nicholson, Mahaska Drug owner, and Nanette Cunningham, 804 Décor owner, were the honored storytellers at the event. They talked to the group about how and why they got started in their current businesses and answered questions from group members throughout the evening. Though their experiences took them down different paths, their stories shared common themes: both were told they’d fail, both had the support of family, both believed and continue to believe one of the most important goals is making sure their customers are happy.

Nicholson’s entrepreneurial journey began when Oskaloosa’s Drug Fair announced it was going out of business. Osco Drug was buying regional Drug Fair stores but wasn’t interested in having a store in Oskaloosa, Iowa. “I didn’t want to see our community without a local, hometown drug store,” said Nicholson. She made the tough decision to buy the store and run it herself. Following through on that decision, however, proved more difficult than originally imagined. “People kept telling me I was making a mistake. I’d never make it. The banks wouldn’t even talk to me (about getting a loan). It was at a time when having a woman own and run a business was rare.” After talking with her mentor, the former Drug Fair owner, and soliciting private funding, Mahaska Drug was born. At the time, it was just a third of its current size but when Easter’s Supermarket closed, Nicholson bought the rest of the building expanding her business to its current ‘more than just drug store’ success.

Cunningham said she knew she wanted to have a store with décor and gifts ever since she was a small child. “My degree is in business but I’ve always loved decorating and did that for a time,” said Cunningham. “I worked for my husband for a while, but being in an office and not being with people just wasn’t for me and wasn’t what I wanted. It was over dinner one night my husband and I were talking about my love of people and décor and how owning my own store is my dream and he offered me an opportunity through the building Cunningham, Inc. had just purchased.” Cunningham said she heard a lot of negative comments and received little encouragement except from family. They told her a store with home décor just wasn’t suited to Oskaloosa. Still, she knew it was the right thing for her and wanted to jump in and make it go. With that passion, 804 Décor was born and has turned into the success she dreamed it would be. She now has customers from all over the state, many area regulars, and loves the exchanging of information between what could be viewed as her competitors. “If I don’t have something a customer is looking for, I say Mahaska Drug might have it or Shady Lodge might have it. We support each other and the community that way.”

Both agreed the Oskaloosa of today is more positive than it has been in years past and provides a good home for good businesses, established and those yet to be realized, and commended The Exchange for their endeavors and willingness to provide the support network every new business needs.

Taylor said The Exchange is always looking for new members, though it is not a traditional membership organization. “There are no applications to fill out or dues to pay. The only thing needed is an entrepreneurial curiosity. We are a community of individuals whose entrepreneurial dreams are still

being built. Our goal goes beyond coworking – though that remains part of our focus – into the realm of assisting each other with any aspect needed to grow his or her own business. We offer structured opportunities to build on existing skills and learn new skills while sharing resources and experiences in an effort to strengthen and empower Mahaska Community Entrepreneurs.”

The Exchange meets every Friday morning for Coffee & Conversation at Smokey Row beginning at 7:30 a.m. Periodically, special events and mini-programs are also scheduled. The next is “Vectors, Pixels, DPIs, OH MY!” scheduled for February 24. The Exchange’s 2017 calendar and additional information can be found on their web site, www.TheExchangeOskaloosa.com.