

Entrepreneur of the Month Lillie Warren, CEO, Excell Home Care

Home:	Sparta, Georgia
Age:	47
Family:	Married, 4 children
Education:	Registered Nurse
Business:	Excell Home Care
Primary service:	Licensed home care provider
Mission:	To give high quality nursing care in a manner that edifies the client and glorifies God.
Employees:	70
Annual Income:	\$975,000 (in 2002)
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Nurse turns Entrepreneur -- Caring Business is Born

In the small town of Sparta, Georgia – like so many similar areas -- residents have seen a diminishing pool of doctors and care providers. The hospital closed, and only three physicians remain, not all of them full-time.

“I thought, ‘What are our senior citizens going to do?’” said Lillie Warren, a Registered Nurse who opened Excell Home Care to serve the 12 percent of area citizens who are 65 and older.

Warren practiced nursing for 15 years in a home health agency. In the early 1990s when Medicare cut back on home health, her employer moved. At that same time, she found out she was expecting a child and decided her career needed to take a different tack.

As she sat at home with a new baby, Warren wrote a curriculum to train Certified Nurse Assistants (CNA). She started CNA classes in 1996, when Welfare to Work programs were popular.

Based on an abundant supply of CNAs coming out of her classes, she opened the home care agency in 1997.

Warren had time, plenty of energy and enthusiasm, and talent – but no money.

“I broke every rule when I started this business because I put everything, even payroll, on my credit card,” she said.

Start-up capital became the biggest challenge.

“I went to banks for loans in my navy blue business suit, and the first thing they all said was, ‘Where is your husband?’” she said.

Warren then approached the Georgia Small Business Administration and found out that Hancock County was an Enterprise Zone, eligible for tax breaks and other financial incentives. SBA helped her get a \$10,000 loan for equipment such as computers, a fax machine, and a copy machine.

Still without working capital, Warren worried about the future of the business – until customers began flowing in from rural Hancock County.

In 1998, business was booming so much that she didn't have time to bill patients, so she hired a secretary. By 1999, she had 100 patients and 30 employees. Today Excell Home Care earns nearly \$1 million per year with 250 patients and 70 employees.

"I had no business experience before starting this job," said Warren, wife and mother of four. "But I'm the type of person that if someone tells me that I can't do something, I get an adrenaline rush and just go out and do it."

Nursing a Company to Fruition

Excell Home Care is a licensed home care provider. The business offers no nursing services but rather companion and personal care services, such as bathing, dressing, cooking, and cleaning. However, Warren does have two registered nurses on staff.

"We even build fires to keep their houses warm and take jugs of water to them," Warren said, adding that most patients are senior citizens living alone.

Excell CNAs visiting the clients become like family members to them, Warren said. She still admits and meets every patient in their care.

"I try to keep my hands on most things going on in the business," Warren said. "My mother always told me, 'There's only one way to do things, and that's the right way.'"

Warren's days are spent doing administrative paperwork, admitting new clients, boosting public relations and teaching classes. Her skills have grown with the business.

With a nursing degree and no business background, Warren said she spent the early days learning the ropes.

"The advantage I had was that I have no problem asking stupid questions," she said. "I talk to people everywhere I go. Every meeting I attend, I come home with a friend. Some people call it networking, I call it friendship."

In Excell's incubation period, Warren spent time on the phone and meeting in person with various business support organizations. In addition to providing money for equipment, the SBA also helped her write a comprehensive business plan.

Warren also turned to the Georgia Department of Children and Family Services. DCFS allowed her to train their clients as CNAs. With these young women, Warren had a success rate of more than 90 percent.

"We become friends with (DCFS clients)," Warren said. "They call me for help and advice, and we are there for them."

For the Health of the Community

The success of her CNA training program translates into big community impacts from this small business.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2000 survey, only about 30 percent of Sparta citizens 25 and older have high school diplomas or the equivalent. The unemployment rate was about 4.6 percent in the year 2000. And more than 30 percent of households in 1999 had incomes of less than \$10,000.

Hancock County and surrounding areas lost nearly all industry to the foreign labor market, and citizens struggle to find employment in this rural setting.

"We are a totally rural area," Warren said. "You have to drive 25 miles to get a McDonald's hamburger."

In this atmosphere, transportation – for clients and employees – is a constant problem. So is finding and keeping nurses. Excell cannot afford to pay salaries found in urban areas.

Warren's business has fought a bleak economic outlook through training and mentoring young people. Aside from supporting local functions such as career days at high schools and sponsorship of local teams, Warren's CNA classes fill a void for area youths.

She sees the CNA classes as not only employment, but also a way to boost confidence of young women. While there is no GED requirement for becoming a CNA, Warren always encourages her students to get a graduate equivalency.

"I love to see these girls become successful in anything they do," Warren said. "It really makes me feel good."

And Warren has witnessed several success stories.

"We have CNAs who took our classes in 1996 who had never worked but today are still employed. They had been on public assistance for years and only took the classes because they were forced to do so. But they soon discovered the advantage of earning their own money," she said. "We try to stay in touch with our grads and offer them our continued support."

She's also applied for a federal Workforce Incentive Act grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to help train youth between the ages of 19 and 21 to be CNAs.

In addition, a local veteran's home is looking to recruit young men as nurse assistants, and Warren sees potential in offering her classes as a lifeline to jobs and security.

Positive Attitude Breeds Better Business

Warren attributes her success to hard work and long hours, but also to a deep sense of caring and a good sense of humor.

"My mom was a missionary at heart," she said. "If someone in the neighborhood needed to be fed, she would do it. I saw that big heart of hers and thought, 'If you do things for other people in your life, you will not want for anything.'"

Warren's infectious laugh and willingness to laugh at herself have also become important tools.

"I never take myself too seriously," she said. "I have a notebook with Daffy Duck on it, and I look at it to remind myself of the humor in everything. I always have things to laugh about."

But the success of Excell Home Care is not a laughing matter. With continued growth, Warren has plans for expansion. She hopes to someday open a personal care home for assisted living. In typical Lillie Warren-style, her plans include acquiring a beautiful southern antebellum home – rather than a more institutionalized setting – and taking only a small number of clients. These folks, she said, would have the opportunity to live in a comfortable, homey environment.

Warren also plans to continue to work with young people. When her husband retires from his job as a school principal, he will join her. They would like to obtain a non-profit branch of the business in order to secure more grants and donations for community building projects.

You can sense the smile on her face as she dispenses this advice for other entrepreneurs: "Know that you can achieve what you set out to achieve. But you have to eat, sleep and drink it. Think out everything in advance. You have to believe in yourself and believe in your dream."

-By Lisa Bauer, 07/03