

Entrepreneurial Organization of the Month

Chilton Rogers, Appalachian Regional Development Institute (ARDI)

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Meaningful Business Development in NC's Appalachian Mountains

Even with her college degrees and impressive resume, Chilton Roger's heart is still in the mountains.

She grew up in the South Carolina Low Country, but her family would retreat to the mountains in western North Carolina to beat the summer heat. She also began her undergraduate degree studies at Appalachian State University in rural Boone for her undergraduate studies before leaving to get degrees from the University of North Carolina and George Washington University.

But after a successful run in both public and private sector jobs, Rogers was drawn back to the mountains. She not only cherishes the rugged countryside of the Appalachian Mountains, but has deep appreciation of and faith in the entrepreneurial spirit of its people.

As assistant director of the Appalachian Regional Development Institute, she spends her time cultivating entrepreneurship and support for it as an economic development tool in an area with pockets of rural poverty.

Rogers is hopeful they can beat their economic woes as a community.

In September 2007, the Appalachian State Mountaineers beat Big-10 team Michigan in one of college football's all-time biggest upsets. Rogers was out of town but caught the last four exciting minutes live online.

"We whipped 'em!" she said, with no attempt to hide her pride of not only the team but also this rural region. "That was wonderful, just wonderful."

ARDI: Creating an Environment for Entrepreneurship

In the early 1990s, the former dean of the business school at Appalachian State started the Appalachian Regional Development Institute as a regional resource for community and economic development.

Rogers joined the team as assistant director in February 1999.

ARDI focuses University resources on issues of regional development with emphasis on the development opportunities and problems of western North Carolina. It also provides a broad range of training and continuing education programs, including workshops, courses, seminars and conferences.

With a demonstration grant from the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, Inc., in 2004, ARDI kick-started a broad and strategic approach to entrepreneurial economic development.

“Really, what we are doing is trying to set up an environment conducive to the development of entrepreneurship,” Rogers said.

She explained three ways in which ARDI accomplishes this feat: mobilizing local leaders and elected officials to support entrepreneurship as community and economic development strategy; presenting a series of entrepreneur workshops; and creating a network for entrepreneurs to have continued support and resources.

Rogers said for the first part of their three-tier goals, they got lucky.

“When we started the program, we had a new economic development director in Watauga County who was very open to exploring entrepreneurship and small business development,” Rogers said.

But they also worked hard as a team and accepted the realization that bringing in manufacturing or big box stores would not solve their economic problems.

“We’re just not set up for recruitment,” she said.

Western North Carolina is fairly isolated – two hours from a major city and with no airport or rail services. The solution was closer to home, in the hands of local community leaders and entrepreneurs.

With local leaders on board, ARDI set up the Watauga County Entrepreneurial Development Partnership, set forth as a series of workshops to inspire entrepreneurs. They partnered with professors at Appalachian State to design and facilitate workshops. These were meant to serve not as full-scale courses but rather short introductions – heavy on inspiration -- to the entrepreneurial mindset.

Three, three-hour interactive workshops start with idea development and a crash course on business planning, culminating with what Rogers describes as “a very exciting” gathering of aspiring entrepreneurs and mentors exploring business concepts.

During the first two workshops, students learn about local and state resources; market investigation; characteristics of entrepreneurs; “the books” – financing, cash flow analysis and balance sheets, assets and liabilities and costs; and other basics.

The final workshop pairs local business leaders with workshop participants in an entrepreneurial free-for-all, where ideas are flung around like Mountaineer footballs.

“This final meeting is really exciting. There’s just so much concentrated, focused listening and sharing,” Rogers said. “It’s just a room of great energy.”

Interestingly, mentors do not get compensated for their time.

“Where we live, there is a strong sense of community, of participation and giving back,” Rogers added. “These entrepreneur mentors want to help and their compensation is just giving back to their community.”

After the three workshops, participants review what they’ve learned and develop next steps.

Now in their fourth year, the workshop series has been so successful that in 2005, Watauga County chose to start sponsoring them, offering up County building space. Rogers said approximately 50 people usually sign up for the workshops, with about 20 who end up finishing the third course. With the County and University support, workshops are offered for free to all participants.

The third leg of ARDI’s entrepreneurial program is called the High Country Business Network, a regional support system for small business and entrepreneur development that provides networking and educational opportunities to the region’s aspiring and established business communities.

Meeting every other month and rotating around the 8-county region, the Network offers casual get-togethers with food and cash bars to encourage face-to-face sharing as well as expert speakers to inspire and answer questions.

Rogers added that another ARDI project under development is the High Country Business Resource Alliance. Modeled after the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center's state level Business Resource Alliance, the High Country Alliance's goal is to bring together all people who provide small business services. The Alliance offers networking meetings as well as a comprehensive database.

"I want to include school principals, town managers, Cooperative Extension, bankers ... you name it!" she enthusiastically added. "We don't want people to get lost and beaten down while they're searching for the right resource. It's about building relationships and breaking down barriers."

An Entrepreneurial Citizenry

Rogers' own career path has meandered like a mountain stream, but she's also stayed true to her entrepreneurial spirit. After law school, work at promoting small businesses development through a state government technological development authority, a more cerebral stint at a think tank, and co-owning a car dealership for 11 years, Rogers happily returned to the mountains.

"When everything shook out, I moved back here and just started talking to people I knew. Everyone pointed me to ARDI," she said, adding that she loves the fact that she sees tangible results in her work. "I'm kind of a mish-mash of theory and practice, but I'm more of a practitioner. I like to develop models and then DO them."

And her Appalachian region home is in need of successful models.

As Rogers explained, "There is a big push in how to keep rural regions vibrant and alive."

Having seen industries – and jobs – come and go, the people of isolated Western North Carolina have always had to be entrepreneurial, Rogers said.

"The residents have traditionally been farmers, raising cattle or growing tobacco long ago, but doing things on the side to supplement those incomes is not unusual," she said.

Most clients at the ARDI are local people or transplants who are trying to take advantage of the area's tourism dollars. The beautiful scenery draws not only summer visitors, but also winter skiers and a population of people with second homes.

"Watauga County is the third most expensive county to live in in this state," she said, adding that the Economic Development Commission did recently purchase land to expand the county's industrial park and build affordable housing. "With that there are some challenges for business owners, including a lack of retail space. Land prices are just astronomical."

But entrepreneurs still come to ARDI with budding ideas for retail businesses, restaurants, micro-breweries and even non-profit groups. One client started a hedge fund. Another 14-year-old boy investigated how to set up a business around his love for ducks. Clients have developed games for home-schooled children and started food-oriented businesses.

"Value-added food products are popular," Rogers said. "There is a food incubator/commercial kitchen called Creative Food Ventures that opened in march in Ashe County that is pretty busy."

It's important to Rogers that local residents have an opportunity to grow and collect competitive wages while not having to move away.

Rogers has her work cut out for her and the ARDI with ambitious future plans that include setting up a program in youth entrepreneurship and creating more global business awareness in this idyllic rural setting.

But she's quick to point out that any accomplishments and visioning are the result of a focused team effort.

“There’s a confluence of a lot of things happening in this region,” she said. “It’s not just ARDI and not just me. My role is a facilitator. I like to be a catalyst and then move on to the next level.

It’s great fun to work here where I can see people get excited about their passions. It makes for a much more empowered citizenry. It’s good for this region and for the country.”

-By Lisa Bauer, 10/07

For more information on...

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org

... the Appalachian Regional Development Institute, go to www.ardi.appstate.edu

... the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, Inc., go to www.ncruralcenter.org