

# **Entrepreneurial Organization of the Month**

## **Chester Bridge Foundation, Inc.**

**Location:** Chestertown, Maryland  
**Executive Director:** Mike Thielke  
**Funding:** Mostly private donations; some state and local support

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## **Building Business on the Bay**

In 1997, a shipwright and his supporters embarked on building a reproduction of a colonial period vessel called Sultana.

Chestertown, Maryland, and surrounding areas provided school children and volunteers to undertake this massive project – all the while absorbing colonial history and shipbuilding skills. And 10,000 people showed up for the Sultana’s launch in March 2001.

“This was my first entry into social entrepreneurship,” said Mike Thielke, participant in the Sultana project who is now executive director of the Chester Bridge Foundation, Inc. “From this project, I learned how to raise money, better communication skills and how to sell ideas. And I learned a lot about patience. (Social entrepreneurship) is a whole lot different than being in the business world.”

Thielke, a former entrepreneur himself who spent time in various large companies, should know.

Now, as director of Chester Bridge’s Chesapeake Marine Trade School and Chesapeake Entrepreneur Program, Thielke spends his days combining entrepreneurship with community development.

“I have a burning sense that certain things are meant to happen,” he said. “You can’t force things on a community. This is where the patience comes in.”

## **Challenges on the Chesapeake**

Maryland’s eastern shore is not a stranger to thriving businesses big and small. From early 18<sup>th</sup> century settlements to modern day towns and cities, the Chesapeake Bay has offered opportunities abound with its prime waterfront location.

Thielke admits that the area has never been a big draw for large manufacturing companies. Rather, local livelihoods have been made in the waterman industry. In the past few decades, declining numbers of crabs and oysters have had a major effect on the decrease in jobs.

“We needed to create an alternative for people so they could stay here rather than leave for jobs elsewhere,” Thielke said.

The Chester Bridge Foundation, Inc., was actually started in 1969 to provide summer activities for middle school children. After being inactive for several years, Chester Bridge was charged up again in 2001 to serve as an umbrella fiduciary organization for community initiatives.

This nonprofit has a mission of satisfying socio-economic needs and concerns such as job training, economic development and moderate-income housing in a six-county area: Caroline, Cecil, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot.

The two main community initiatives under the CBFI umbrella are the Chesapeake Marine Trade School and the Chesapeake Entrepreneur Center, each with its own advisory board distinct from Chester Bridge leadership.

### **Marine Trade School**

A list of marine industry workshops from the Chesapeake Marine Trade School reads like a boat mechanic's dream: Boat Structure, Diesel Engines, Plumbing/Head Systems, Inboard/Outboard, Boat Handling and Seamanship, Marine Welding.

Founded in 2001, the school serves to reverse the trend of a declining number of skilled tradesmen and mechanics needed to service the commercial and recreational boating industries, industries that have been an integral part of the traditions and cultural heritage of the region for nearly 300 years.

"We are trying to affect an industry," said Thielke. "And it's not always an easy industry to work with."

The local recreational boating industry has offered plenty of moral support for the marine school. However, funding support has been less evident. Right now, the school runs on private donations with no support from state or federal sources and a small amount from local and business arenas.

But, as Thielke points out, the State of Maryland recently stepped up to help outfit a new 15,000 square-foot facility that will house the school. A local developer will include the building in a new maritime center, as well.

"The school is filling a critical need that exists for boatyards and marinas throughout the whole United States," Thielke said. "There are boats everywhere, not just on the Chesapeake. And there is a shortage of labor to maintain them."

The current Marine School offers 5-week workshops, primarily for skill enhancement of those already in the industry. Skills taught are geared toward recreational boating industry, but, as Thielke said, "The skills are transferable. A diesel engine is a diesel engine."

The new facility will be a full-blown vocational school – certified and with job placement.

So far, reception of the Marine school has been warm. Thielke has even partnered with the Marine Trade Associations of Maryland and the American Boat and Yacht Council.

"Both employees and employers alike have been very gratified," Thielke said. "We are striving to make it good for the students. If they don't have a positive experience, our chances of success are diminished."

### **Entrepreneuring on the Eastern Shore**

A second piece of the Chester Bridge puzzle is the new Chesapeake Entrepreneur Center.

Fresh from a ribbon-cutting ceremony in May 2005, the Center is a small business and microenterprise incubation facility.

"We want to nurture the entrepreneurial spirit in this area," Thielke said.

The Center provides training programs and support services to improve the odds of success among local business start-ups and established companies.

For example, in the fall of 2005, the Center offered a seminar on dealing with customer complaints, put on by a local Chamber of Commerce. Other seminars have included "Does your

business stand out from the pack?” which helped entrepreneurs identify or create Unique Core Differentiators – special things about products or services that compel customers to buy from a certain business.

Support services for general members of the Center include access to a service provider network, use of seminar and conference rooms, and choice of two annual seminars for \$129 per month. Tenant members can join for \$329 per month and receive a workstation, computer/printer and DSL service, use of conference and seminar rooms, phone equipment and broadband Internet and access to the service provider network. Additional fee services include postage and messengers, switchboard, secretarial and bookkeeping.

The Center will also focus on a youth component – they’ve already set up shop in high school classes and intend to add middle school children to their programs next year.

“The youth program is an integral part of creating a new entrepreneurial spirit,” Thielke said. “This program will help discover future talent for the local business community in Kent County.”

In the fall 2005, the Youth Entrepreneurship Program begins with a 12-week course for Kent County’s top high school students. During the course, students will create an extensive business plan and give a presentation that explains and defends their plan to a review panel of business and community leaders.

Thielke said the latest project is a partnership with the Kent Family Center to form an initiative that offers skill training for Kent County’s low-income families. The Kent Family Entrepreneurship Program is a collaboration that leverages resources from the family center’s basic education curriculum, designed to create opportunities and advancement for families and youth. The pooled resources will allow the family entrepreneurship program to offer additional training for low-income families seeking to increase household salaries.

And once the Entrepreneur Center is better established, Thielke hopes to have more funding sources to provide businesses with capital.

Thielke and his team have their work cut out for them with demand for their services growing at a fast pace, creating a new entrepreneurial spirit on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake.

-By Lisa Bauer, 09/05

**For more information on...**

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to [www.ruraleship.org](http://www.ruraleship.org)

... the Chester Bridge Foundation, Inc., the Chesapeake Marine Trade School and the Chesapeake Entrepreneur Center, go to [www.cbfi.org](http://www.cbfi.org)

... the Sultana project, go to [www.schoonersultana.org](http://www.schoonersultana.org)