

# Entrepreneurial Organization of the Month

**Washington State University (WSU) Learning Centers**  
**Katherine Baril, Director, Jefferson County Extension**

- Home:** Jefferson County, Washington
- Education:** Law Degree, University of Puget Sound  
Master's in Administration, University of Puget Sound  
Bachelor's Degree, Boise State University
- Organization:** WSU Jefferson County Extension- Learning Center
- Goals:** The WSU Learning Centers have the following goals:
- Making higher education degrees locally accessible for time- and place-bound adults
  - Increasing opportunities for lifelong learning through non-credit, certificate and professional development programs
  - Enhancing the possibility of participation in higher education for those with limited income
  - Contributing to WSU becoming a national leader in distance education
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## Washington's Community Learning Centers: Entrepreneurial Innovation in the Public Sector

For one domestic violence victim in rural Jefferson County, Wash., a second chance came from an unlikely source -- the local County Extension office.

After leaving an abusive relationship, she went to a Washington State University Learning Center for assistance with continuing her education.

Staff at the center found funds for her to get a degree in social sciences through distance learning. A community foundation then helped her start the North Olympic Outdoor Woman's Program to reach out to and empower other victims of abuse.

Her positive experience with the Learning Center mirrors many others in this remote area on Washington's North Olympic Peninsula.

The 10 WSU Learning Centers supported instructional efforts for 824 students in the fall of 2002. In addition, the learning center staff conducted or hosted 655 continuing education or community service activities, serving 30,859 people from August 2001 to July 2002.

Learning Centers thrive on highly diversified, personalized programs that cater to each student's need and build a broad base of community leaders.

Extension Director Katherine Baril, stationed at the WSU Jefferson County Extension-Learning Center, said the centers stem from a concept that has positively shaped communities and even the Extension system at WSU: civic entrepreneurship.

WSU Extension leaders work with the public sector to generate more value from publicly funded assets. These civic entrepreneurs use resources in a novel way to make services more effective for citizens, in turn empowering them to share their individual gifts with the community as a whole.

Civic entrepreneurship involves taking risks to try out new ideas, but Baril is confident that the Learning Center core philosophy has made positive impacts.

“We have successfully created an innovation center that feels publicly owned and managed,” Baril said. “Innovation is a major driving force and a major result of our local programs. We are able to point to not only real college degrees in our community, but also new public partnerships, new businesses and new ways of resolving old problems. It’s probably unlike any Extension office in the nation.”

### **Providing Endless Opportunities**

A fairly recent innovation in WSU Extension, the Learning Centers opened their doors in the mid 1990s.

“We were hearing from the community that the word Extension didn’t hold much value for them, but they loved ‘the place with all the community learning,’” Baril said. “So we started to call the building the Community Learning Center. We had such a success that there are now 11 centers in Washington, and many other states looking at the model.”

The model consists of a combination of “high-tech” delivery methods of distance education and the “high touch” approach of on-site staff. Each Center reflects needs of the area it serves. And Centers partner with local agencies and programs to provide diverse opportunities. For instance, the North Olympic Center – serving about 25,000 people in Jefferson County as well as three other counties -- offers distance learning at sites around the area as well as courses at local public schools, community colleges, higher education facilities, technical schools and even county and state government offices.

Citizens can use learning centers to work toward a degree; hear speakers and attend forums; make linkages with other people and groups; get help writing grants or acquiring funding for project; or just gain access to computer labs and the Internet.

Baril said a group of local farmers have used North Olympic Center resources to start a farmers market. The group took a marketing workshop and developed maps of local farms for customers. They came up with a brand – Olympic Fresh – and did market research and surveys to legitimize their businesses. The market more than doubled in size in one year, and more than 20 new businesses grew from the project.

“The Center is an entire suite of learning opportunities for every age and type of person in the community,” Baril said. “For the first five years, we had no brochures to describe our programs, because we had no set curricula. If a person walked in the door, we asked them what they wanted to learn and figured out a way to say ‘Yes, we can give you that.’”

“It was a chaotic time of rapid learning and breaking through bureaucracy at the county and university level, but we felt strongly that we had to be learner-focused. We became a one-stop center for people who wanted to learn something new.”

Whether it was rain water recycling, innovative green construction, computer programs, a new business, or sign language, the Center said “Yes” to all potential learners.

“The degree part of our program had its first successes with women 35 to 40 years old who had jobs but needed their college degree to keep them or get promotions,” Baril added. “Many of them studied at 2 a.m. or on their way to work on the ferries. We had one woman who inherited an

old by-plane and now, with her college degree, she is a professional pilot and still lives in the community.”

Some examples of innovative programs at the North Olympic Center include:

- Being the only rural Clemente program in the nation, teaching college level humanities courses to low-income students
- Retraining unemployed loggers to do stream restoration and providing them opportunities such as computer or photography classes to help them find their talents
- Offering degree programs to place-bound students through distance education, and ensuring appropriate financial aid is available when needed
- Fostering development of community-based computer classes where residents teach each other computer skills and use those skills to help nonprofit groups and others in their communities
- Offering GIS (geographic information systems) training to tribal and nonprofit groups so they can learn to track salmon stream restoration
- Teaching a real estate training class that includes learning about local water quality and environmental challenges in the region

The wide variety of Learning Center offerings may make it a challenge to summarize in a brochure, but residents benefiting from highly individualized programming don't seem to mind.

“What makes these centers effective is the individual approach, our willingness to make it right for each learner, no matter if it's our program or someone else's,” Baril said. “It might be a work placement that we certify for expertise, it might be a scholarship for a student to go to college back east, it might be distance education. We try to be very entrepreneurial about Extension, creating lots of new programs and responding to needs.”

### **Education when the Global Economy meets a Rural Setting**

In a rural area where both highly educated retirees and life-long loggers share space, Baril's challenge in creating the North Olympic Center was to offer a place where economic gaps can be bridged and community connections fostered.

“When we started the center, we recognized that the community needed to go through a transition in the way they viewed life-long learning,” Baril said. “We were moving from an extractive industry culture where a man could support his family without a high school diploma to an information-based economy that valued the ability to work through complex issues. We knew that many of our folks – particularly our young – were not equipped to succeed.

“We recognized that the threat was to have impoverished communities next door to high amenity retirement communities with very little communication between the two. But we wanted better than that. We wanted to support the people that had chosen to raise their families here for 50 years – the backbone of our fire departments, schools and volunteer organizations.”

Baril added that although nearly half of 18 to 24-year-olds don't complete high school, Jefferson County has the highest educational attainment in the state, due to the influx of older residents coming in with post graduate degrees.

The Center's programs – such as the myriad computer offerings and the Clemente humanities courses for low-income residents – attempt to balance educational scales and avoid a split community of “haves” and “have-nots.”

Baril said that regardless of income-level, citizens in a rural setting provide unique personalities and opportunities when it comes to creating a center for further education.

“Rural people bring a long-term relationship with the landscape and greater accountability in their communities,” she said. “And they don’t just harp on one interest – they are wearing so many hats in the community that they bring multiple issues to the table. The conversation with rural folks becomes more holistic.”

New residents tend to have extensive experience, so the two can conflict or compliment each other – that’s where Extension’s facilitation role comes in.

A challenge of running a community center in low-population area is the lack of people to work on a vast number of problems and issues. And Baril added that the social dynamics in working with rural people can be quite different than those from urban areas. Rural residents tend to thoroughly talk through an issue before making decisions so as not to create winners and losers.

“Urban residents tend to want clarity and a decision, not realizing that the fellow that they just voted down might be the one that they need to fix a tire or put out a fire next week,” Baril said.

For rural residents of Jefferson County and surrounding areas, she said, “The Center provides a safe place for people to talk about things and sense they can make a difference.”

### **Civic Entrepreneurship Drives Director**

Katherine Baril has set the bar high for making a difference in rural Washington.

An attorney who has specialized in collaborative community-based watershed planning and natural resource management, she directed one of the first watershed planning efforts in Washington. Baril was one of three mediators who developed Washington’s Timber Fish Wildlife agreement, re-inventing the State’s forest practices system.

In 1990 she joined Washington State University as a water quality-natural resource agent and worked with diverse communities in conflict over timber, fisheries and spotted owl management. She has served on the state’s habitat conservation plan advisory committee, the salmon recovery board science team, and the science council of British Columbia and was appointed to the national President’s council for sustainable development.

“I love being an Extension agent, and I love the history of Extension,” Baril said. “With its historic respect and trust in being enterprise facilitators for communities, it matches my need for civic entrepreneurship.”

One way Baril defines civic entrepreneurship is “developing new ways to engage citizens in recognizing their unique talents and then encouraging them to gift them to the community through citizenship and community service to make this a better place to live.”

Baril’s belief in innovation and creativity fuels her program’s success rate. But her convictions arise from a community perspective rather than strictly economics.

“I remember my dad would say that I wasn’t business-oriented, and that I would have to work in government, as if that were negative,” she said. “But I was lucky I was inspired early by the Kennedy era to be a public servant.”

Baril laments that creative and energetic young people today are not encouraged to get involved in the public sector but rather dive headfirst into the business world.

“I’m sorry to see the de-valuing of public service that we have now,” she said. “If you really want to solve problems, think outside the box and create something new, then I think public service is a wonderful profession.”

*-By Lisa Bauer, 09/03*