

Women's Opportunities Resource Center celebrates 25 years of helping women build businesses

Ayana Jones Tribune Staff Writer

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Lola Harper, deputy director of commerce at the Philadelphia Office of Economic Opportunity, was honored at the Women's Opportunities Resource Center's 25th anniversary event. — PHILADELPHIA TRIBUNE PHOTOS/KAYLA BROWN



The Women's Opportunities Resource Center honors entrepreneur Judy Wicks, founder of the White Dog Café and the Sustainable Business Network.



John Fleming, acting director of the U.S. Small Business Administration Eastern Pennsylvania District, gives Women's Opportunities Resource Center founder and president Lynne Cutler the Small Business Champion of the Year Award.

When Lalita Paris first went to the Women's Opportunities Resource Center more than 14 years ago to pursue her dream of opening her own child care center, the center gave her entrepreneurial training necessary to manager her own business.

She opened Beautiful Beginnings Childcare Center in 2004 and, with the help of nine loans from WORC throughout the years, she has expanded to open a second site and now employs 15 staff members serving more than 100 children.

"Without the guidance and access to capital I received at WORC, Beautiful Beginnings wouldn't be an essential part of its neighborhood," Paris said.

She and other beneficiaries of the center, along with WORC staff and community leaders, gathered last week to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

Founded in 1993, WORC is the first microenterprise economic development agency in Philadelphia offering a combination of entrepreneurial training, individual business assistance, incentive savings programs, micro business loans and financial resources.

WORC has issued 783 microloans totaling \$3.8 million for businesses or expansion and has trained 3,700 clients. Through its Family Savings Program, 1,598 families have saved \$3.4 million and were matched \$3.4 million.

"It has been extremely gratifying to serve so many individuals over the last 25 years and spur true economic vitality," said WORC's founder and president, Lynne Cutler.

"Our various clients have attained true business success and growth and more importantly reached financial stability and contributed positively to the economic impact in our region. Many of our graduates have become leaders in their respective communities and hired locally."

Among the successful business owners Cutler highlighted were Paris and Augie Wallace.

Wallace went to WORC for help when he needed funding and technical assistance to start his home health care business. While WORC focuses on promoting economic self-sufficiency primarily for economically disadvantaged women and their families, the organization also serves men.

Wallace started Greater Love Home Health Care in 2015, after he participated in WORC's Start Smart Start Green program and received a \$10,000 loan for office equipment.

"I felt like they had my back," Wallace said in reference to the agency.

"WORC was there for me from the moment that I walked in and I felt at home. I feel like I'm going to be one of those people who is going to be part of WORC forever."

His Upper Darby-based agency serves adults who have a long-term disability and are clinically eligible to go into a nursing home. The home care agency has more than 200 employees and provides its clients with cooking, light cleaning, laundry and companionship.

"We are taking care of families," Wallace said. "One of the things that I do love is that we are giving back to the community and we're making a difference in people's households."

During its anniversary event, WORC honored two women who have been at the forefront of economic development — White Dog Café and Sustainable Business Network founder Judy Wicks and Philadelphia's deputy commerce director for the Office of Economic Opportunity, Iola Harper.

Cutler also received the Small Business Champion of the Year Award from the U.S. Small Business Administration Eastern Pennsylvania District.

“Lynne’s work in support of small businesses has made a profound difference for entrepreneurs, their families, our community and the economy,” said John Fleming, acting director of SBA Eastern Pennsylvania District, in a news release.

“It’s an exceptional honor to work with her and recognize her for the many great things that she has accomplished. Over the years, I’ve met with entrepreneurs, business owners and community leaders who sing Lynne’s praises for her work.”

“While this well-deserved award is specifically for Lynne, it also serves as a reflection of the team she has led and all of the many wonderful successes WORC has had, particularly for woman-owned small businesses,” he said.

WORC is working to continue its successes and is branching out to start helping business owners buy their commercial properties.

Cutler said this would help prevent businesses from being displaced due to rising rents.

“If they get in and they have leases and they go up and they don’t have ownership, then they don’t have control,” Cutler said.

“We want them to be able to build wealth and assets,” she continued. “Particularly for African Americans and other people of color, the wealth gap is so high that we want to try to see if we can address that.”

ajones@phillytrib.com (215) 893-5747