

Woman starts own business after getting laid off

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By John O'Connell joconnell@journalnet.com

POCATELLO — Long ago, Teresa Nelson had aspirations of opening her own small business and making the right moves to see it grow.

Toward that end, she earned both a bachelor's degree and a master's in business administration at the University of Wyoming. But somehow, she found herself taking the safe route professionally, working stable jobs for established employers.

Last April, the slow economy gave Nelson the nudge she needed to pursue a goal she'd pushed aside for far too long. Nelson, the former marketing manager with the Idaho Museum of Natural History, was among a host of Idaho State University employees who were laid off due to state budget cuts to higher education.

A few months later, she's now owner of her own franchise business, called Home Helpers of Eastern Idaho, enabling the elderly to continue living in their own homes. She's already got four full-time staff members with benefits beneath her and two employees who will work on call until additional clients are added. She's had no trouble finding qualified applicants for jobs.

"They're fully bonded, insured and background checked," she said.

The client base — she currently serves a handful of elderly residents — is also growing nicely. On Monday, she's planning to hire a few additional employees in the Idaho Falls area and to meet with some perspective clients.

Strange as it may sound, Nelson is convinced that in many ways, her lack of experience in the industry accounts for a great strength of her business model.

Though the employees she's hiring have extensive backgrounds in medicine and geriatrics — she's looking for staff members who are certified nurse assistants — she doesn't have those qualifications herself. Nelson reasons without the temptation to spend too much time in the field, she'll be free to market her business, seek referrals and stay on top of paperwork. After all, her strengths lie in marketing and management.



Teresa Nelson, Pat Wharton. Photo by Joe Kline/Idaho State Journal

Through the Home Helpers franchise, which encompasses 500 small businesses throughout North America, Nelson underwent a week of training to become a certified senior adviser. For now, her role in the field involves tasks such as shuttling seniors to appointments and taking them grocery shopping.

Nelson admits the thought of running a business to help seniors continue living at home never crossed her mind until she consulted the Idaho Small Business Development Center, 1651 Alvin Ricken Drive.

The center, funded by the state and the Small Business Administration, offers free training and consulting services to perspective business owners. Nelson spoke with officials at the center about various options, including franchising, and they had her meet with a franchise consultant. The consultant, whom Nelson likens to a matchmaker, had her fill out some questionnaires and used the data to come up with several ideas that suited her personality.

“I don’t know that I would ever have picked the senior industry on my own. I don’t even think it was within my realm of consciousness if the franchise coordinator hadn’t matched me,” Nelson said.

Aside from senior care, Nelson had matches in event planning, tutoring and consulting. Based on those matches, Nelson began to realize that you don’t necessarily have to be an expert in a given field to start a business in it. It’s good enough to have a keen interest in a subject and hire some experts.

“In previous jobs I’ve been involved with elderly folks and always had a fondness for them,” Nelson said. “The senior population is growing so quickly. This business model allows you to provide the help for them to stay independent in their own home. That was so appealing to me.”

Nelson researched six different senior care franchises before she settled on Home Helpers. Her territory covers all of Eastern Idaho.

In exchange for her franchise fee, Nelson said she received training, software, mentoring services, manuals, job descriptions, applications, marketing materials, policy manuals and a trusted corporate name, among other resources.

“The franchise made it easy because they just told me step by step what I needed to do,” Nelson said.

Statistically, franchises have a much better chance of succeeding than other small businesses, explained Tom Maydew, executive director of the Small Business Development Center.

While just one in four small businesses survives five years, Maydew said business owners who buy franchises have an 85 percent chance of success.

“You’re buying a proven step-by-step program. They have got the system developed, and it’s a proven track record,” Maydew said.

The center plans to host a presentation in the fall featuring an expert on pairing people with franchises. On the second Thursday of every month, the center also offers a free seminar on starting

a business. Sometimes, the service is valuable in that it convinces those who attend not to open a business, Maydew said.

In seven and a half years, Maydew has helped 115 businesses get started.

“I bet I’ve helped three times that number decide not to do it,” Maydew said.

But then there are also businesses that take off.

Nelson, for example, knows there’s a growing need for her business’ service as the baby boomers age. She’s spoken with many other Home Helper franchise owners and has been encouraged by their stories. One owner employs 85 workers and has 100 clients.

For now, Nelson is just getting started and runs the business out of her home. But she’s already dreaming of the day when she’ll not only have an office in Pocatello, but also a satellite office in Idaho Falls run by an office manager.

“It’s absolutely a dream come true,” Nelson said. “I just can’t believe I’m finally getting to do it. Sometimes I just smile thinking I finally did this.”