

NORTHWEST BUSINESS

Cooperative wins prize for business plan

By **MEGHAN KENEALLY**
Current Correspondent

Affinity Lab, an Adams Morgan-based business cooperative, won the top, \$100,000 prize last week for best business plan from the Washington D.C. Economic Partnership.

Affinity Lab is a partnership for start-up companies, providing infrastructure services for small businesses and nonprofits that do not have enough resources on their own. The organization was created with the intention of providing shared conference rooms and office space for member companies so they could focus better on their missions.

"It becomes a support system of the intangible," said Berit Oskey, president of Affinity Lab.

After providing a written business plan, Affinity Lab was one of four proposals that moved to the finalist round in the "PremierPlan Business Plan Competition." The company then provided an oral presentation to 20 panelists, including government employees, educators and businesspeople.

"Each one of [the finalists] is interesting in their own way," said Steve Moore, president of the Washington D.C. Economic Partnership, who watched the presentations but was not a panelist. "Affinity was just a little further down the road. What Affinity is doing is the business of businesses. They figured out how to create an environment where collaborative

work occurs."

The three other finalists included a wine bar, a fashion line for chefs and restaurant workers, and a plan to expand CPR training throughout the District.

Oskey said the prize money will go toward growing Affinity so more companies can become members. Currently, Affinity hosts 35 businesses, but renting additional office space could expand the capacity to include 60 to 70 businesses, Oskey said.

"We're very happy because we feel that this is an opportunity for the District as well," he said.

The \$100,000 prize comes in the form of an investment from co-sponsors Enhanced Capital Partners, Advantage Capital Partners and D.C. Coalition for Capital, meaning the money may come as equity, debt relief, or a combination of the two depending on the winner's needs.

"Small businesses are going to revitalize our neighborhoods," said at-large D.C. Council member Kwame Brown in a news release.

This was the first PremierPlan Business Plan Competition, and while quite possibly not the last.

"All of the feedback we have received has been positive and in favor of it happening again next year," said Ben Dupuy, president of D.C. Coalition for Capital.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg for creative people in the District," said Moore. "Everything just exceeded our expectations."

Petals for the People serves up a CSA for flowers

In the floral design classes she teaches, Columbia Heights resident Sarah von Pollaro fields a frequent question: What's the best source for fresh flowers?

In the past, she didn't have an answer.

"The public is not supposed to go to wholesalers," which are set up for professionals and often require large purchases, said von Pollaro. And with grocery store bouquets, the selection is often lacking, and "you don't know how long they're going to last."

This week, she's launching her solution: Petals for the People, a flower subscription service in which customers sign up for weekly or biweekly bouquets, which they pick up at one of three locations. Delivery is available in most parts of the city.

The operation resolves the sourcing situation in several ways.

First, von Pollaro delivers the flowers on the day she gets them — ensuring freshness. Second, she picks different types each week and uses her buying power to get good deals — providing variety and affordability. And finally, her bouquets are ready to display but also perfect for play — offering a chance for customers to learn on their own.

"I want people to have a big assortment of flowers," so they can either display them in one big vase or break them up into several smaller containers, she said. Customers can decide, "Maybe I keep some for myself and when I

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go to a dinner party this weekend, give some away."

Those who haven't attended her classes can turn to her online videos, at petalsforthepeople.com, for tips on arranging. Each week she'll demonstrate options using the flowers in that week's bouquet.

"You don't have to have anything fancy," she said, explaining that she teaches people how to work without any special tools. And she said they tend to pick it up quickly. "A little bit of knowledge and they're on a roll."

Her own flower history began with an early affection. As a child in St. Louis, she arranged bouquets with her grandmother, sometimes driving "around with a bucket in her car and [getting] wildflowers from the side of the road."

An apprenticeship in New York during a college summer had her up at 4 a.m. sweeping floors, but it taught her the basics. And after spending some time on traditional work — she moved to D.C. after graduating to focus on affordable-housing development — she was inspired to return to her calling.

"Friends started to get married ... I always volunteered. I still loved it. It was still there." She went to see a master flower designer, and it hit her: "He's not doing anything I don't know how to do."

Five years ago, she started a floral design business, Urban Petals,

which provides arrangements for restaurants, offices and big events. She also offers flower parties — the source of the sourcing question.

Recently, her husband, Sam, lost his job when his boss, Jeffrey Zients, was appointed to be President Obama's chief performance officer. With some free time before lining up his next gig in the financial world, Sam helped Sarah think through and develop the spin-off, Petals for the People.

The business launched this week, with first orders due by last weekend. (Customers must sign up at least five days before pickup.)

The Web site explains how to order and allows subscribers to manage their accounts, skipping a week or canceling at any time. If a last-minute trip takes a customer out of town on pickup day, he or she can designate a friend to pick up instead, or donate the bouquet to a charity.

Bouquets are \$25 apiece, and there is a \$10 fee for those who choose delivery, which is available only downtown. Other customers pick up for no extra charge between 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. at 17th and O streets in Dupont (Thursdays, starting tomorrow); in Arlington (Tuesdays, starting July 28); or Bethesda (Thursdays, starting July 30).

Sam said Petals has been receiving a "fantastic" response so far.

Sarah noted that flowers are an affordable luxury. "Maybe they can't go on vacation, but they can have flowers in their house."

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