

**An 'Entrepreneur's Forum' with Local Business Owners
by Courtney Hunt, The Eureka Reporter
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Humboldt County residents will have the opportunity to interact with the owners of several local businesses this Thursday from 6-7:30 p.m. at Humboldt State University's Kate Buchanan Room.

As part of the Economic Fuel business plan contest, Lost Coast Brewery owner Barbara Groom, Plaza Design owner Julie Fulkerson, Wing Inflatables co-owner Bruce Hamilton and Jitter Bean Coffee Company owners Rick and Kris Roberts will be available to speak with community members about their enterprises.

Before opening the Lost Coast Brewery in 1990, Barbara Groom worked as a pharmacist for many years until realizing she wasn't passionate about her profession. The Stockton native spent many years working in the Bay Area and then in Fortuna as a pharmacist before deciding to completely switch tracks and open a brew house.

"I never really liked being a pharmacist," Groom said. "I tried other things and the money was so good in pharmacy that I kept going back. But when I saw the first brewery open in California...I knew that's what I wanted to be."

Groom opened the Lost Coast Brewery in its current location in July 1990 and hasn't looked back since. The business now brews its signature beer in Humboldt County and ships it to distributors all over the West Coast and to East Coast distributors as well.

Another guest at the forum is Julie Fulkerson, the owner of McKinleyville, Arcata and Downtown Eureka Plaza Design stores.

Just looking at Fulkerson's credentials, one wouldn't know she would go on to create a string of successful furniture and gift shops around the county. With a bachelor's degree in German and a master's in psychology, Fulkerson opened the first Plaza Design in 1983 after working for many years at a nonprofit agency.

With just a booklet from Bank of America, Fulkerson wrote a business plan that would serve as the basis for her successful retail store.

"When I was looking at business opportunities, I was smart enough to realize that I needed to write a business plan," she said. "I think part

of the challenge for those of us with a lot of ideas is it's easy to imagine the end result and to forget the hundred steps it takes to get there. So the business plan is something I would definitely recommend everyone to do starting out."

With locations in McKinleyville, Arcata and now Downtown Eureka, Fulkerson has her hands full but always finds time to revise her business plan when it needs it.

The third guest, Wing Inflatables co-owner Bruce Hamilton, got his start in local business when Yakima recruited him to move to Humboldt County in 1990. The '90s proved to be a successful decade for the two companies, and when Yakima was sold, Hamilton moved over to Wing Inflatables.

With owner Bill Wing, Hamilton has helped transition Wing Inflatables from a white-water rafting equipment supplier to a business specializing in rib tips.

"Bill started a completely different business, so he had to redefine the business," Hamilton said. Wing Inflatables focused on "white-water rafting in the beginning (with) rafts, catamarans — all this stuff that has to do with the river with one little mention of 'Oh yeah, we make rib tips.' Now we don't do anything but rib tips."

Because the business focus changed so much, Hamilton and Wing decided to sit down and write a new business plan. Another goal of writing the new business plan was to use it to raise capital. The plan helped the pair get more loans for the company.

Other advocates for creating an in-depth business plan are Jitter Bean Coffee Company owners Rick and Kris Roberts, also guests at Thursday's forum. The pair, who are originally from central Oregon, spent an entire year revising their business plan before opening their first drive-through coffee stand in the parking lot of Long's Drugs in Eureka in 1997.

At first, North Coast residents seemed wary of the idea of the coffee business because "drive-through coffee was an unproven concept in this area," according to Rick.

"They'd never seen anything like that first store we opened, so as we were putting it up there was a lot of snickering going on," he said.

"We also had to educate customers a little bit because they weren't familiar with what to do," Kris added.

Opening the first Jitter Bean location required the Roberts to borrow "from everybody we could," but the sacrifice has proved worthwhile. Since then, the Roberts' business has grown to include five different Jitter Bean locations.

For more information about the Entrepreneurs Forum or the Economic Fuel competition, visit www.economicfuel.com.

Timeline of Events

February 2006

- Thursday, Feb. 16: An Entrepreneur's Forum with local business owners. Humboldt State University's Kate Buchanan Room, University Center, 6-7:30 p.m. Guests will include Jitter Bean Coffee Company owners Rick and Kris Roberts, Plaza Design owner Julie Fulkerson, Wing Inflatables Inc. CEO Bruce Hamilton and Lost Coast Brewery owner Barbara Groom.
- Thursday, Feb. 23: Entrepreneurial Thursday: "Ideation, Feasibility & Strategic and Competitive Advantage" lecture. Humboldt State University, Founders Hall 118, 6-7:30 p.m.

March 2006

- Thursday, March 2: Community Lecture Series: Fireside Chat with Local Entrepreneurs. Humboldt State University's Kate Buchanan Room, University Center, 6-7:30 p.m.
- Thursday, March 9: Entrepreneurial Thursday: Strategic Marketing with College of the Redwoods professor Christopher Gaines and Humboldt State University Professor Nancy Vizenor. HSU Founder's Hall 118, 6-7:30 p.m.
- Thursday, March 30: Entrepreneurial Thursday: "Business Plan Financials" with Humboldt State University Professor Mike Thomas and College of the Redwoods Professor Helen Edwards. Humboldt State University, Founders Hall 118, 6-7:30 p.m.