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## **Stonyfield Institute: a success story**

By [Cindy Kibbe](#)

The Stonyfield Farm Entrepreneurial Institute, presented by School of Community Economic Development at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester, was created to give new business owners the information they need to help their businesses succeed.

But the institute is far more than just a “how-to” seminar – it involves entrepreneurs sharing their stories of success, failure, accomplishments and hurdles.

Often described as a “boot camp,” the program is more of a retreat, allowing entrepreneurs to take the time to discuss with each other what’s working, learn to retool what isn’t, and form lasting relationships with those from all across the business experience spectrum.

One entrepreneur who has benefited from the institute is Melissa Harvey.

In 2003, she started the New Boston Farmers Market, bringing fresh, local products to area residents. One item she wasn’t seeing, however, was a quick snack that was also good for you.

Blending her love of cooking and her interests in whole foods and the organic movement, the Kizos bar was born.

Made of natural, simple ingredients like whole grains and nuts, Kizos bars bear the name of an Abenaki word for “sun,” giving it the connotation of a wholesome treat she was looking for.

She had the idea, the drive and even the product — but then what?

Harvey attended the first Stonyfield Farm Entrepreneurial Institute in 2004 looking to learn from other entrepreneurs and has been attending each one since then.

“Becoming an entrepreneur was something I really just fell into,” said Harvey. “There really weren’t any other entrepreneurs in my family or among my friends. I did know I wanted to do something creative. I love to cook and to bake. I am also interested in alternative medicine, whole foods, and the local and organic food movement.”

At the Stonyfield Institute, Harvey, who makes her Kizos bars under the company name Will n’ Roses LLC, wasn’t so much looking for pearls of wisdom but for contacts.

“I wanted to talk to people that were that much further ahead in their businesses than me,” she said. “I can talk to someone with a commercial kitchen or someone who has a distributor, neither of which I have.”

Last year, Harvey made some 20,000 Kizos bars, which are sold in select stores and farmers’ markets from Keene to the Seacoast. This year, she is adding Kizlix, a granola-type cereal line. She also is looking to take what she’s learned at the previous Stonyfield Institutes by attending a local whole health fair as well as revamp her Web site.

While her company is still reinvesting in itself, Harvey said one of the best things about being an entrepreneur is the freedom to pursue your passion.

"It's about independence. You can take something that motivates you, that inspires you and act on it without roadblocks," she said. **Fulfilling and daunting**

Independence is a factor that Jim Fontaine, owner of Positively Creative Solutions, a Web design firm, also finds appealing as an entrepreneur.

"Knowing that every day you can take some step toward the success of your company" is what drives him, said the Alton resident.

Years spent working at high-tech corporations — and weathering the subsequent layoffs — strengthened his desire to become self-reliant.

In 2002, after the company he was working for was acquired and then downsized, "I resurrected a computer consulting company I had formed in 1989. I had kept the trade name all those years."

Adding his experience in sophisticated back-end Web management and software project management allowed Fontaine to handle larger projects as well as those requiring more in-depth design than perhaps those other solo practitioners could.

Still, a new business is by its very nature one filled with questions.

Fontaine and his wife — also an entrepreneur running her own online art studio — attended the Stonyfield Institute for the first time last year.

"The most striking point for me that came out of last year's event was noticing the persistence of each successful entrepreneur," he said. "Their businesses could all be very different, and they might have had to change their ideas a little bit, but they did not give up."

Fontaine said he is planning to attend this year's event because the institute gives him an opportunity to connect with other entrepreneurs, asking questions and learning from others.

"I talk to as many people as possible. I find I learn about 50 percent from the event presentations and 50 percent from the attendees. They've all been through the same phases of starting a business," he said.

Like many entrepreneurs, Fontaine is blending his business acumen with his passions. A newer spin-off of his firm is Golf Webs USA, a subsidiary that combines his computer experience with his love of golf.

Golf Webs USA provides content management for golf course Web sites. One client in Wolfeboro is already using the software application.

Becoming a business owner, while exciting and fulfilling, can also be daunting.

Harvey said that it can be intimidating when first moving from a regular paycheck to relying on your business for your income.

Fontaine said that, although his business has grown some 20 percent year-over-year, maintaining the enthusiasm after the first blush of new ownership has faded can be difficult sometimes.

"It's very easy to get discouraged if a deal falls through, if cash flow isn't where you want it to be," he said. "It's so easy to hear only the bad news." **Telling stories**

The Stonyfield Institute is a place where new entrepreneurs can discuss these downtimes with those who are further down their path to business success and find advice and even comfort.

"Hearing other people's stories is really helpful," said Harvey.

Telling stories is really the hallmark of the two-day seminar, said Michael Swack, dean of SNHU's School of Community Economic Development. "The institute really revolves around the presentation of three case studies."

Registered participants are encouraged to request that their business plan, and any associated start-up issues, be discussed as a case review in front of a panel of business experts.

Of the cases submitted, Swack and institute founder Gary Hirshberg select three that are the most interesting and will provide the most applicable discussion for the rest of the audience.

Because of the case studies' popularity, three mini-case studies were presented last year, and a similar brief review of two or three others will be considered again this year.

While it might be difficult to hear tough advice in front of 100 or so other business owners, Swack said, the information received is invaluable. "Participants really vie to become one of the case presenters," said Swack.

But hearing presentations from entrepreneurs is something Swack is used to. Years ago, he was chair of a community development lending program that gave seed money to Hirshberg's then-fledgling Stonyfield Farms.

Later in 2004, he and Hirshberg discussed the similarities of some of the areas both the School of Community Economic Development and Stonyfield were interested in — social consciousness and small business — and developed the first Stonyfield Farm Entrepreneurial Institute.

Four years later, hundreds of new business owners are a little further on their road to success.

"The institute evolves and grows every year, as the participants grow and evolve," said Swack.