

Entrepreneurs Speak at Forum
by Laura Provolt, The Eureka Reporter
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Five local business owners spoke at Economic Fuel's Entrepreneurs Forum on Wednesday evening at the Kate Buchanan Room, Humboldt State University.

Jessica McGuinty of Jessicurl, Renata Maculans of Renata's Creperie, Ted Vivatson of Eel River Brewing Co., Maureen Smithey of Pacific Rim Manufacturing and Mary Keehn of Cypress Grove Chevre spoke about the process of developing their businesses in Humboldt County, describing their challenges, triumphs and advice for new entrepreneurs.

Economic Fuel is a business plan competition sponsored by The Eureka Reporter in which competitors attend a series of forums and lectures, develop a business plan and compete for \$117,000 in start-up money.

Kathy Miller, the coordinator of the Economic Fuel team, said the goal of the evening was to inspire budding entrepreneurs by presenting success stories of businesses that began and/or grew in Humboldt County.

"I don't think you could find a better resource of business experience than this event," Miller said. "It really was a success; I think they really inspired and motivated a lot of people."

McGuinty described the development of her business, which she began by making products for curly hair in her apartment kitchen in Oakland. Due to a lack of capital, space and employees, she moved her business to Humboldt County, where it saw rapid expansion.

She described her creative advertising methods, as she uses her customers as her primary form of advertisement. Recently, McGuinty was featured on Rachel Ray's television show, where she gave hair-care tips with her product.

McGuinty said she does most of her business through her Web site, www.jessicurl.com, but that shipping is a challenge because of Humboldt County's relative isolation.

She said the cost of shipping ingredients into Humboldt County and shipping products out is so great that she must charge her customers

more for her products. Nevertheless, McGuinty said Jessicurl would not have grown as it did if she had stayed in Oakland.

"I would be the poster child for 'move to Humboldt with your business,' if they needed one," McGuinty said. "If you are considering moving your business out of the area, I would encourage you to stay here. There is a lot to offer here."

Vivatson and Keehn agreed that shipping from Humboldt County is a difficulty, but the speakers were unanimous in their approval of Humboldt County as an environment for the expansion of their businesses.

Maculans said she was teaching in Los Angeles when she decided to come to Humboldt County to open a creperie. Due to her restrained capital, she began her creperie by purchasing an old mail truck, refitting it as a kitchen and driving it up from Orange County to Humboldt County, where she opened her restaurant on the Arcata Plaza.

When the area where she operated her truck was to be developed, Maculans began looking for a permanent location. A bookstore on the Plaza was closing at the time and came to her with an offer to move in.

On Nov. 30, Renata's Creperie will celebrate its first year of operation.

"I decided to speak tonight to encourage you to have faith in your passion," Maculans said to the audience. "If the passion is there and you are willing to do the work, have faith in that."

Vivatson described the beginning of Eel River Brewery, in which he and his then-wife Margaret developed their award-winning brewery and restaurant.

Vivatson said he became the nation's first certified-organic brewery when he fulfilled a customer's request for an organic beer. Since then, Eel River Brewery has received countless awards for their organic beer.

"We are dedicated to the art of brewing. We understand the wants and needs of our customers, and we do the best we can to fill them," Vivatson said.

Smithey described the evolution of Pacific Rim Manufacturing from her beginnings making leggings and leotards in the 1980s to her current "cut and sew" manufacturing business. Smithey said she had to find the right size for her business, as outright growth was not her goal.

After cutting back some operations and employees, Smithey said she found her target business size that allowed her to devote her time to the development of product lines, rather than purely manufacturing.

"After scaling back my business, I was able to do more cut and sew, which was what I loved and why I got in the business at the beginning," Smithey said. Due to her success, she will soon be able to form overseas alliances, she said.

Keehn described her evolution from making homemade goat cheese in her home to her business, Cypress Grove Chevre. As a biology major in college, Keehn initially began breeding goats, but found that making cheese was a good use of the milk she got from her goat herd.

"We just focused on doing the very best job we could do. We were always looking for the next step, always looking for innovation," Keehn said. "That is the thing about being an entrepreneur. If you are successful, that is great, and if you are still struggling, then you are struggling doing something you love."