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Women's Business Champion Turns Lessons Learned into Practical Advice

DALLAS, W.Va. – Whether it is spearheading a meeting for a local women's group, organizing an annual women's conference, passing along business advice in a networking situation, or setting an example for her two young daughters, Kara Gray loves helping women entrepreneurs succeed.

For that reason, and for her contributions toward supporting entrepreneurship, business ownership and professional development for women in West Virginia, Gray has been named the 2010 Women in Business Champion of the Year by the U.S. Small Business Administration's West Virginia District Office.

Gray is the owner of New Horizon Consulting, a freelance copywriting and public relations consulting practice she operates out of her home in Dallas, W.Va. She describes her chosen profession as a career field she "accidentally" discovered while a student at Bethany College.

"I actually went to college with the intention of becoming a television news reporter," Gray said. "I had no idea public relations existed as a field, but sometime during my freshman year, I talked to a classmate who was studying public relations and I thought, 'That sounds more like me!' and immediately changed fields."

Upon graduation, Gray went to work as the communications administrator for Ormet Corp., then the fourth largest aluminum producer in the United States with 3,500 employees at seven locations. She took this corporate experience to the National Technology Transfer Center at Wheeling Jesuit University, where she promoted the NASA Commercial Technology program and MountainMade, an e-commerce startup selling West Virginia art and crafts. When MountainMade became a separate company, she went to work there full-time, but was let go after just two years due to budget constraints.

"When I left MountainMade, I sent an e-mail to everyone I'd worked with to let them know who they should contact at the company in my absence, and that I would keep in touch," Gray said. "I immediately received about four responses back from people offering me freelance projects to work on while I looked for work."

She'd always thought about starting her own business, but the idea of leaving behind a steady paycheck and benefits to do so was tough to overcome. Gray stayed quite busy with projects from friends and acquaintances for about six months, which got her thinking, "Maybe I can do this for a living."

She joined the Editorial Freelancers Association and began responding to job postings. This led to her first "real" client — someone she didn't know for a change.

Not sure how to start a small business the proper way, Gray contacted her local Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and scheduled an appointment with Donna Schramm, the center manager in the Wheeling office. Once she had all the particulars in place and was an official 'small business owner,' she soon

began working with the SBDC to organize an Orchestrating Your Life women's conference, which is now an annual event in Wheeling.

She serves on the organizing committee for the conference and continues to facilitate the monthly Ohio Valley Women's Group meetings that were born out of the conference. She is a charter member of the Marshall County Women's Leadership Council, which serves to enhance women's leadership opportunities.

"Being a woman entrepreneur, it is very rewarding to help others overcome obstacles," she said. "If I can save someone the time and frustration of learning the same lessons I've learned 'the hard way' then I'm happy to do it. It's such an honor to receive this award and be recognized for something I absolutely love to do."

New Horizon Consulting was founded in 2003 and has clients throughout the United States and around the world. Working mostly in the high-tech and information technology sectors, Gray helps her clients develop and deploy marketing and public relations strategies to help grow awareness of their brands and products. She specializes in crafting effective press releases and ghost writing by-lined articles, blog posts and other promotional content for brochures, websites and newsletters for businesses of all sizes.

"Of all the work I've done so far, I'm most proud of the example I've tried to set for my daughters," Gray said. "I hope what I'm doing shows them a woman can do whatever she sets her mind to professionally and still enjoy her role as a wife, mother and daughter. And, thanks to modern technology, geography is no limitation to the career opportunities available today."

Gray was nominated by Donna Schramm, center manager of the West Virginia Small Business Development Center at the West Virginia Northern Community College.

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