When Jennifer Crayton was considering turning her part-time jewelry design venture into a sustainable full-time business, she had no idea where to begin. Then the corporate recruiter received the email that would start her on the path to small business success — an invitation to apply for the first-ever Entrepreneurship Pioneers Initiative (EPI).

Now in its second year, EPI was conceived by The Center for Urban Entrepreneurship & Economic Development (CUEED) to assist first-generation entrepreneurs with intensive training, counseling, and networking opportunities necessary to add staff, formalize current operations, and maintain a positive growth trajectory. Says Crayton, "I had no idea what resources were available to the small businessperson. EPI opened my eyes to all that and more. The program gave me the knowledge and courage to connect with business owners and organizations that could help me grow my business."

In December 2010, Crayton — a member of the inaugural 2009 EPI class — celebrated the grand opening of Crayton’s Creations, her newly renovated boutique on South Main Street in Phillipsburg. She credits EPI for the tools and knowledge needed to expand her business. "EPI is a great resource, from the original classes to the ongoing alumni events and roundtables. You gain exposure to so much valuable information, all in a safe setting that allows business owners to share their challenges and successes."

Gaining a valuable head start "It’s daunting to know where to begin," explains Julia Muller of Muller Mechanical, a Cranford-based plumbing, heating and cooling contractor who participated in the second EPI program. Muller is now in the process of applying for several certifications that will allow her firm to bid on state plumbing contracts, and has launched a new website thanks to the one-on-one coaching received. "I think the coaching sessions had the largest impact on my business," Muller adds. "We received very specific, step-by-step advice that resulted in a new website and a Facebook business page, and joined several networking groups that have been a great way to market the company."

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Belinda McGuire of LenGuire Institute of Fashion also points to the program’s counseling sessions as an invaluable resource. She says, “The information provided enabled me to complete an application for the New Jersey Institute of Fashion Charter High School. Our application has now been placed on NJ’s Proposed Charters expedited list.”

Smart marketing investments drive results
Julia Muller is among several students who leveraged their EPI knowledge to hone their investments in marketing. Scott Sinclair of The Box Butler, an innovative NYC mini-storage provider, reworked his website and invested in a search engine optimization campaign that paid immediate dividends. His company also secured financing during an economic period in which small business lending had come to a virtual standstill.

What made the difference? “Completing the program provided a high degree of credibility for the lenders associated with EPI,” explains Sinclair. “We were able to gain the financing we needed through the Greater Newark Business Development Consortium.” The company’s growth has resulted in the creation of two full-time positions, as well as a flourishing partnership with fellow EPI student Godwin Dzantah of Charles Moving & Storage.

According to Sinclair, “The Box Butler is primarily residential and mini-storage. When customers had larger items to be stored, we’d miss out on the opportunity because we didn’t have the right crews or equipment. But partnering with other people just wasn’t working out.”

When Sinclair mentioned his difficulties to EPI partner Jill Johnson, COO of the Institute for Entrepreneurial Leadership, she suggested he connect with his classmate to explore opportunities. The Box Butler/Charles Moving & Storage partnership has now generated more than $50,000 in additional revenue for The Box Butler in less than a 12-month period. Says Sinclair, “Charles Moving allowed us to successfully expand our service offerings. They represent The Box Butler and give us better economies of scale.”

Finding valuable partnership possibilities
Indeed, many program participants have begun doing business with one another. Muller Mechanical is exploring subcontracting opportunities with Hamlett Construction Services, a full-service property management and construction management firm.

Carol Blank and Lorrie Sanchez of Utterly Global, which provides anti-bullying programs, have already worked with several of their EPI classmates. According to Blank, “We worked with Jus Pray Production on a video that’s now on our website, and have reached out to Minuteman Press of Newark for printing estimates. We’re also working regularly with Anthony Thompson of WSI Innovations on several projects, including a terrific PowerPoint presentation.”

Since completing their EPI training, Utterly Global has seen its revenues jump by more than 150 percent. After a strategy session taught by Dr. Tendai Ndoro, director of the Rutgers Newark Small Business Development Center, Sanchez and Blank ended up winning a $62,000 contract from New York City Family & Youth Services. They also hope to partner with fellow student Tangela Stewart, owner of Bobbies Babies childcare center, on a joint grant application.
On November 18, The Center for Urban Entrepreneurship & Economic Development (CUEED) brought together the two classes from its Entrepreneurship Pioneers Initiative (EPI) for the first of many alumni networking events.

Says CUEED Managing Director Jasmine Cordero, “Though the second class was not yet quite ‘alumni,’ we wanted to bring everyone together to meet and begin building business relationships/partnerships prior to graduation on December 10 and officially joining the EPI alumni group.”

Robinson connected several EPI entrepreneurs, including Utterly Global, to students in his Urban Entrepreneurship & Economic Development (UEED) class. The students helped Sanchez and Blank with several projects, including the development of a marketing plan to capture additional market share in the New York City tri-state area.

The UEED students also helped Dorrine Davis, owner of The Davis Center, develop a brand identity and marketing plan for her firm’s proprietary methodology, The Davis Model of Sound Intervention™. According to Davis, “I knew this was an important piece of my business plan, but didn’t have the time to focus on it. The students generated several good ideas we’re in the process of implementing, including developing a logo for the product, a dedicated website, and some social networking.”

Raising the small business profile
Marketing seems to be the common thread when it comes to many EPI success stories. In addition to sharpening their branding, the Utterly Global team hired West Orange-based Fahoury Ink to edit their children’s book, Virgil: The Bully from Cyberspace, and to update their LinkedIn profiles. “Working with the group from EPI feels like working with family — everyone goes the extra mile. We’ve made wonderful connections and friends among people who share our excitement and enthusiasm for entrepreneurship,” says Sanchez.

After working on the Utterly Global projects, copywriter Lisa Fahoury connected with CUEED Managing Director Jasmine Cordero to handle the creation of the department’s upcoming

EPI Alumni Networking: Facilitating Profitable Connections

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CUEED Managing Director Jasmine Cordero (center) presents certificates of recognition to Anthony Thompson, WSI Innovations, and Jinni Rock-Bailey, Rock-Bailey Enterprises, for their efforts in spearheading the EPI Alumni Group.

EPI Alumni organizers Anthony Thompson and Jinni Rock-Bailey were recognized at the close of the event for their ongoing efforts in launching and coordinating the alumni group. Says Jasmine Cordero, “Jinni and Anthony have taken a leadership role in creating a vibrant and valuable extension of the EPI program, one that will hopefully keep all our alumni connected for years to come.”

Thanks to the continued support of the PNC Foundation and the Prudential Foundation, preparations are now underway for the third EPI program. Applications will be available in February at the CUEED website. Deadline for completed applications is March 14, so be sure to pass along this link to any business that might benefit from participation in the EPI program.
The Center for Urban Entrepreneurship & Economic Development 4

Rutgers Business School–Newark and New Brunswick (RBS) is an integral part of one of the nation’s oldest, largest, and most distinguished institutions of higher learning: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, founded in 1766. Rutgers Business School has been accredited since 1941 by AACSB International—the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business—a distinction that represents the hallmark of excellence in management education. Today, with a focus on Business, Science, and Technology, Rutgers Business School is educating more than 4,500 undergraduate and graduate students at two main campuses in New Jersey as well as six satellite locations in New Jersey, China, and Singapore. Steeped in academic excellence, with a distinguished faculty and a corps of over 30,000 successful alumni, Rutgers Business School is highly ranked by the Financial Times, U.S. News & World Report, BusinessWeek, and The Wall Street Journal. It is recognized as one of the top three business schools in the greater New York metropolitan area; is ranked #6 nationwide for “Most Competitive Students” by The Princeton Review; and is part of the campus that is ranked #1 in diversity nationwide by U.S. News & World Report, for 12 straight years.

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Anthony Thompson, WSI Innovations, and Jinni Rock-Bailey, Rock-Bailey Enterprises, worked with CUEED to create an EPI Alumni Group.

newsletters. Once Fahoury Ink was entered into the Rutgers University procurement system as a new supplier, Lisa Fahoury was delighted to be contacted by Supplier Diversity Manager Pam McMellon-Wells.

Says Fahoury, “Pam explained that as a Women’s Business Enterprise (WBE), our company was eligible for inclusion in the Rutgers S/M/WBE Business Directory. Buyers throughout the university review this database when searching for potential vendors, which translates into tremendous ongoing exposure for our firm.”

Fahoury also noted the help her business received from EPI partner Mitchell Greene, managing member of The Growth Group. “One of my goals was to better understand our financials, and how to leverage that knowledge for strategic planning and growth. Mitch gave me some terrific tools for making more informed decisions.”

Positioning businesses for growth
Originally conceived as a finite nine-month program, EPI has now expanded into an ongoing Alumni Group thanks to the efforts of Jinni Rock-Bailey, Rock-Bailey Enterprises, and Anthony Thompson, WSI Innovations. The two, who were part of the inaugural EPI program, approached CUEED with a request to continue the valuable connections participants were making. CUEED agreed to provide monthly meeting space, and in return Rock-Bailey and Thompson have put together educational sessions ranging from business credit and factoring to business law and trademark protection. All future graduates will be included in the ongoing alumni program sponsored by Rutgers and CUEED. For example, both EPI classes recently came together for the program’s first joint networking event (see sidebar on page 3).

“Success is all about networking, networking, networking,” says Jennifer Crayton. “Thanks to EPI, I learned I don’t have to do it all on my own. There are people and resources out there waiting to help me. I’d recommend this program highly to anyone looking to bring their business to the next level. Honestly, I wouldn’t know where I’d be now without EPI.”

Julia Muller echoes Crayton’s comments. “I gained thousands and thousands of dollars in knowledge. EPI is the best thing you could do for your business — it gives you focus and ensures you’re on the right track. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of EPI!”

The EPI program, designed for growing businesses, provides classroom training as well as one-on-one counseling.