

Primer Paso's new grads already see improvement

By Natalie Myers, Staff Writer

Latinos are the fastest-growing segment of Rhode Island entrepreneurs. To get a sense of the issues they face, Providence Business News followed 12 people through a 12-week business planning course for Latino entrepreneurs at the R.I. Small Business Development Center. This is the last of 12 articles in the series.



PBN PHOTO BY STEPHANIE EWENS

ALL DONE: A dozen Latino entrepreneurs celebrated their graduation this month from the 12-week Primer Paso course.

For the entrepreneurs who participated in the R.I. Small Business Development Center's first Primer Paso FastTrac program, the graduation ceremony was more than just a celebration.

It was a validation of their desires to grow their existing small businesses or start new ones.

"We are 12 people with 12 different ideas for business," Oscar Mejias told his classmates at the event. "We are different in our thinking, but with the same dream."

Each entrepreneur walked away from the experience with a changed perspective on how to start, operate and grow a business, he said. And many already have applied what they learned in their businesses.

Andres Almonte said participating in the free, 12-week business planning workshop – taught in Spanish – has changed his ideas on how to best differentiate his business, ABC Insurance, from its competitors.

Since taking the first class on Sept. 13, Almonte said, he has begun to hold weekly meetings with his three-employee staff to discuss ways to improve customer service. One offshoot of those meetings has been the adoption of customer-service follow-up calls.

His firm also has started marketing to existing clients who have let their car, homeowner's or life insurance policies expire.

In addition, Almonte has begun seeking a microloan from the R.I. Economic Development Corporation, so

he can hire more employees to manage his growing client base.

Miriam Garcia, another participant, said she believes she was able to qualify for a \$50,000 loan from Credit Union Central Falls as a direct result of her participation in Primer Paso.

"They liked my business plan," Garcia said, adding that she had used the SBDC's services to help her compile the business plan while taking the class.

Learning how to manage cash flow also helped her, she said, especially when communicating with her accountant. Garcia is midway through opening a meat market, called Fiesta Meats, in Central Falls.

Wilfredo Chirinos said he has noticed an increase in customers since he began taking the workshop.

Its marketing lessons changed the way Chirinos markets his computer repair and maintenance business, PC Repair & Network, he said. Now he offers coupons and discounts on services in order to generate business.

Tomas Avila, an SBDC business counselor and the class facilitator, said he estimates 52 percent of the business-owning participants enhance their existing businesses while taking Primer Paso. He estimates 30 percent of those who wanted to start a new business actually will.

Those statistics are based on past Primer Paso participants, whom Avila taught when the program was part of Progreso Latino's services, before the SBDC picked it up.

Asked how he measures the growth of his students' abilities from when they start taking the class to graduation, Avila said, "I've come to accept the fact that the most measurable aspect of the participants is in their change of mind, as to how they view their business and how they implement change in their business ideas or their existing business."

Avila cited Veronica Martinez as an example. When she started Primer Paso, he said, she had been thinking of starting a life-coaching or spa business with a friend. The class helped her to refocus her attention on a more viable business model.

Now, Martinez is taking serious steps to open a translating business, because it is something she already has the knowledge and capacity to do, he said. It will be a professional extension of the translating services she already provides for her community. "At the beginning of the class, I was lost," Martinez said. "Now, I know I'm going to have to sit down and do the business plan. I'm going to need several people to help me. ... It's not something I'm going to jump into without planning."

Avila said he will follow up with each participant through scheduled appointments. He also will invite them to participate in Primer Paso alumni group meetings, so they will continue networking with each other and will meet new graduates of the class.

John Cronin, executive director of the SBDC, said he hopes the Primer Paso participants will return for a series of business-to-business forums as well. The forums would give them an opportunity to network with a wider array of entrepreneurs, not just with fellow Latinos.

“By building a strong network of Latino entrepreneurs, we can connect the mainstream entrepreneurs with them to make [all of the state’s] businesses stronger,” Cronin said.

“The state needs to take advantage of its creative entrepreneurs. ... It’s our job to connect them.”

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