Business Resource Center (BRC) making big impact on area’s small business landscape

There’s a small room at the Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce producing big-time results for the area’s small business community. It’s called the Business Resource Center (BRC), and it’s already provided serious assistance to several local entrepreneurs and business-savvy minds since opening 11 short months ago.

Now, just how serious of assistance are we talking? When it comes to the BRC, a service for both new and existing businesses alike, the numbers speak for themselves.

All since January:
* More than 60 businesses have utilized the BRC
* Sixty-six jobs have been created through the BRC, and another 96 have been retained
* Nearly $10 million of small business funding has been closed on in the BRC, with $103 million still in the pipeline to end the fiscal year

The emergence of the BRC coincides with the Chamber’s launching of a five-year strategic plan focused on four key initiatives — Community Development, Existing Business Growth & Professional Sector Recruiting, Entrepreneurship & Education, and Business & Community Advocacy. Thanks to a strong partnership with the Alabama SBDC (Small Business Development Center) Network, the Chamber and BRC have already been able to create opportunities for success in each area.

That far-reaching impact can largely be tied to the seemingly endless list of services offered through the BRC. Said list includes, but certainly isn’t limited to:
* Pre-counseling
* Business plan creation
* Professional business counseling
* Financial borrowing and lending assistance
* Location services
* Market research plan development
* Healthcare benefit guidance
* Disaster recovery awareness programs
* Importing and exporting support
* Localized business connections
* Continued follow-up for new businesses for two years

Though the BRC is housed at the Chamber, its services aren’t just for Chamber members. And better yet, almost all resources and training are completely free.

Kenneth and Sabrina Nail are all smiles following last month’s ribbon cutting for Hanceville Primary Healthcare, the very first business to come through the Chamber’s Business Resource Center.
BUSINESS RESOURCE: BRC making a big impact on small business landscape

Bringing a one-stop small business shop like the BRC to Cullman has been a long time coming for Chamber President & CEO Leah Bolin.

“The BRC concept came from my days as a small business consultant,” she said. “People had great ideas for a new business, but they didn’t have a resource to help them put it all together. The Chamber and the SBDC have put together a program that will give these entrepreneurs the tools they need — at no cost. We could not have gotten this far, though, without the assistance of Heather Wright and the SBDC.”

Heather Wright has indeed been instrumental in the BRC’s early success. Every Tuesday, the passionate and tenacious Small Business Advisor for the UAH SBDC makes herself available at the Chamber to provide customized, one-on-one assistance to local entrepreneurs and businesses that request it.

“I think a lot of Chambers and a lot of areas are finding that this is one to mimic,” Wright said of the BRC. “Businesses have to have that local community and that local backing and someone who can be there all the time. That’s what the BRC is for.”

One success story so far has been Hanceville Primary Healthcare, the very first business to come through the BRC. Owner Sabrina Nail and her husband, Hanceville Mayor Kenneth Nail, have been ecstatic to see the independent Nurse Practitioner clinic overflowing with patients since welcoming the Chamber, the SBDC, and numerous state and area representatives for their grand opening in late October.

“We’ve had anywhere from eight to 14 patients every day, which is just unbelievable,” said Mayor Nail. “As a matter of fact, we’re already expanding. We definitely think the Chamber’s assistance is what has made this a successful story so far.”

The mayor’s counterpart has been equally pleased with the BRC’s role in the clinic’s start. If she had to recommend the BRC on a scale of 1-10, Sabrina said her answer would be more like an 11.

“Inadvertent or not, Sabrina’s continued review of the BRC included the most appropriate of references to Hanceville High School’s beloved mascot.

“They’re your bulldog in your corner fighting for you to get your dream up,” she said. “If anybody wants to get a business going, they are the best resource to ever go to, absolutely.”

The BRC isn’t just for startups, though. It’s for existing businesses, too. When Rumors Deli found itself in need of a new location earlier this year, owner Annette Harris facilitated her entire search through the BRC and was able to announce and toast Rumors’ eventual home just last month.

For more information on the BRC or to utilize its services, contact the Chamber at 256-734-0454 or info@cullmanchamber.org.

In order to provide the best service possible, we must understand your needs. Please take a moment to complete our service questionnaire. This information will help us better serve you.

Rumors Deli staff and special guests have a little fun showing off the longtime Cullman eatery’s new location last month. Owner Annette Harris facilitated her entire search for Rumors’ new home through the BRC.

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Cullman Area Career Awareness Fair introduces local 8th-graders to future job opportunities

This year’s Cullman Area Career Awareness Fair went off without a hitch, bringing nearly 1,000 eighth-graders from the city and county to Wallace State Community College on November 7th! The annual fall event is organized by the Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center in partnership with the Cullman Economic Development Agency and host and sponsor Wallace State.

Students spent almost the entire school day on the spacious Hanceville campus, receiving hands-on experience and exposure to more than 60 different career options.

“So many opportunities are out there,” Cullman County Schools Superintendent Shane Barnette told Cullman Today. “This is great because it gets (the students) early enough so they can start thinking about the things they would like to do.”

Exploring career options ranging from Welder to Engineer to Healthcare Professional, students were led by volunteer tour guides through 11 different “career clusters” scattered throughout Wallace State’s Tom Drake Coliseum, Wellness Center and outdoor areas.

The career clusters represented were:
* Agriculture
* Construction, Trades & Architecture
* Business, Finance & Marketing
* Safety & Law Enforcement
* Transportation & Logistics
* Engineering & Design
* Arts, Audio/Video Technology, Communications, Tourism & Hospitality
* Manufacturing
* Health
* Government & Human Services
* Safety & Life Logistics

“Thinking about possible careers is a new idea for many eighth-graders, but they are at the age where they need to start figuring out what they want to do,” Fairview eighth-grade teacher Aaron Prater told The Cullman Times.

Fairview eighth-grader Ben Tankersley, for one, appreciated having the opportunity to learn about so many different career options all in one place.

“It’s pretty neat,” he told The Cullman Times. “There’s such a variety of things you can do.”

Career Awareness Fair organizers would like to extend a huge thanks to all tour guides, volunteers and area agencies that committed their time to making the event such a success. Thank you as well to Presenting Sponsor, Wallace State; partner, Cullman Economic Development Agency; Hospitality Sponsor, American Proteins, Inc.; and Lunch Sponsors, Cullman Electric Cooperative and Topre America Corporation.
December Small Business of the Month

Cullman Veterinary Hospital named November Small Business of the Month

The Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center would like to congratulate Cullman Veterinary Hospital, P.C. as November’s Small Business of the Month, sponsored by Hopper’s Family Market & Pharmacy.

At Cullman Veterinary Hospital, every pet is special when they walk through the front door. Each has their own personality and is treated as such. The staff of 23 has known most of the pets since they were little pups or kittens and seek to form a bond that grows in strength with each visit. Cullman Veterinary Hospital views pets as family and strives to treat them with the love and respect they deserve. Time is taken every day to ensure all clients and pets receive the best information and top level of care possible.

Open since 1985, Cullman Veterinary Hospital is very involved in the Chamber and the community. The clinic is an investor in the Chamber’s “Converging for Success” five-year strategic plan and recently participated in this year’s Cullman Area Career Awareness Fair. Locally, Cullman Veterinary Hospital provides client education on pet care and sponsors events involving pets, such as Kiwanis’ K-9s 4 A Kause. Team members are very service-minded and participate in a variety of area organizations, including the Lions Club, Hope Horses, Cullman Caring for Kids, Cullman Regional Foundation, Cullman County Fair Association and Peinhardt Living History Farm Day. The practice also fosters animals for the Cullman Area Animal Wellness Association and participate in the community’s annual rabies clinic. On a state level, all four doctors are proud members of the Alabama Veterinary Medical Association, which helps impact policies and legislation for Alabama veterinarians. During the recent crises resulting from Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, Cullman Veterinary Hospital served as a collection point for pet foods, supplies and monetary donations that were then delivered to locations in need.

Each month, a sponsoring business helps celebrate and acknowledge the Small Business of the Month winner. If you have a local business you would like to nominate for their outstanding service, please contact Brian Poole at bpoole@cullmanchamber.org.

Monthly winners will be automatically nominated for the annual Small Business of the Year Award, which is presented at the Chamber’s Annual Meeting & Gala.

For more information, contact the Chamber at 256-734-0454 or info@cullmanchamber.org.
The Alabama Retail Association could only pick one place to kick off its “Shop Alabama for the Holidays” initiative, and it chose right here in Cullman County on November 10 in the Cullman Warehouse District! In partnership with the Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce and the Warehouse District, Alabama Retail announced its statewide holiday shopping initiative and #BabyItsSoldInside hashtag campaign as part of the Warehouse District’s Christmas in Cullman Open House opening festivities.

‘When you give a gift that you purchased locally, you’re giving that gift twice. You’re giving it to the person who receives it, and you’re giving the gift to your retailer and your community.’

Margaret Hamm
Monograms Plus owner

City of Cullman and the Warehouse District, Alabama Retail announced its statewide holiday shopping initiative and #BabyItsSoldInside hashtag campaign as part of the Warehouse District’s Christmas in Cullman Open House opening festivities.

After hearing from Alabama Retail’s Melissa Warnke, Cullman Mayor Woody Jacobs, the Cullman Chamber’s Magan Bartlett and Monograms Plus’ Margaret Hamm, Warehouse District retailers and several other area representatives lined up around Mayor Jacobs to officially unwrap the ribbon on Christmas shopping season. As if that weren’t enough to usher in the holiday spirit, the “snow” that soon fell from above Mae’s Food Hall definitely did the trick!

“‘Shop Alabama’ really is a call to action,” said Warnke, a Cullman native. “It’s a challenge for everyone to spend their holiday shopping and dining dollars locally. If you spend money here in Cullman, that money goes to support your friends and neighbors, it goes to support and strengthen your local economy, and you’re investing in the vibrancy of your own city.”

As a former retail employee, Bartlett understands firsthand the importance of keeping local dollars in the area during Christmastime and all year round. Standing in the very Warehouse District she once worked, the Chamber’s Director of Member Services shed light on the multi-layered “Think Local” campaign the Chamber is set to launch.

“We want you to think local for your job or career, your family activities, and, of course, when you shop,” Bartlett said. “When you think local and when you shop local, whether it be in the cities of Cullman, Good Hope, Hanceville or any of our other municipalities, your dollars circulate within our community — so before you buy online this year, think Cullman first.”

Hamm is a longtime staple in the Warehouse District and Alabama Retail’s newest board member. She’s thankful to have customers who realize the power of shopping local and that to continue even having the option, they must keep shopping local.

“Online shopping’s not going away, but that’s just not fun like coming out and shopping with your family and friends,” she said. “When you give a gift that you purchased locally, you’re giving that gift twice. You’re giving it to the person who receives it, and you’re giving the gift to your retailer and your community.”

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Window Display Contest ramps up Christmas spirit in Cullman area

This year’s Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce Christmas Window Display Contest proved to be yet another fierce competition! Votes were cast after an awesome holiday trek around the community one early November night. The judges were thoroughly impressed by the creativity and effort put forth by every participant.

Congratulations to the winners and runners-up in each division! Make sure to window shop (and venture inside, too) at their stores to see their festive Christmas decorations for yourself! You can also check out a photo album including every business that entered on the Chamber’s Facebook page.
Open for business

J&D Auto/Tire Service | 1395 AL Highway 69 S, Hanceville, AL 35077 | 256-887-1410
DaVita Colonel | 1830 Lee Ave. SW, Suite B, Cullman, AL 35055 | 256-736-9276
First Federal Mortgage | 101 1st Ave. NE, Suite 230, Cullman, AL 35055 | 256-727-1502
Gateway Mortgage Group | 412 2nd Ave. SW, Cullman, AL 35055 | 256-690-5617
After a strong finish to 2017, Emerging Professionals Impacting Cullman — better known as EPIC — is looking to be even bigger and better in the coming year. With so much local excitement surrounding Entrepreneurship & Education, one of the four key initiatives laid out in the Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce’s five-year strategic plan, that should be a cinch.

Having a group like EPIC in Cullman has never been more imperative as it is today. Not only is EPIC a great way for young professionals to get to know each other, but it also positively impacts the area's ability to recruit and retain top talent.

“With an aging workforce in Cullman, it is very important that we keep our young professionals in our town or do all we can to bring them back home after college,” said Wesley Smith, Director of Entrepreneurship & Education, at the Chamber’s recent Converging for Success Victory Party.

Wearing a coat and tie isn’t necessarily required to be considered a young professional in Cullman. EPIC welcomes members from all different career backgrounds — so long as you’re between the ages of 21 and 39 and care about your community’s future.

EPIC membership is $100 for individuals, which includes entry to all four quarterly events (Wine & Cheese Night, Putts & Pints, a College Football Tailgate at Goat Island Brewing and the EPIC Christmas Sweater Party were on the docket in 2017) and two other premium EPIC events like socials and seminars. Company rates are also available for businesses seeking membership for at least five or 10 employees. Occasional informal takeovers at various local hotspots, of course, are free for EPIC members to attend.

To fill out an EPIC application or view the group’s membership guidelines, visit www.cullmanchamber.org/epic. For more information on EPIC, contact Wesley Smith at 256-734-0454 or wsmith@cullmanchamber.org. Keep up with EPIC on the group’s Facebook page at facebook.com/CullmanEPIC.