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Clinton women partner to form local business

By Ruth Ingram

r Ingram@clintonnews.com



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The Affinity Resource Group LLC team includes (from left) Teri Smith of Pearl, office administrator and conference manager; and Clinton residents Bertinna Dubra, member and program specialist; Mary Lea Nations, managing member; and Jean Weiss, member and director of communications. |

- Affinity Resource Group LLC's Web site is www.affinityresourcegroup.net
- Send e-mail to managing member Mary Lea Nations at mnations@affinityresourcegroup.net.

many aspects of an association or nonprofit that a group wants, including executive director duties, membership services, financial management, training and certification, and clerical duties.

That also includes planning and executing events nonprofits and associations host nationwide and even internationally during the year, such as conferences and workshops.

"It was a leap of faith, but it was also a sure thing. The chemistry was here," Nations said of the women and their new business.

Nations, Weiss and Dubra are members; Smith is office administrator and conference manager.

Said Weiss: "We have such combined and diverse skills, but our skills compliment each other. We're a team."

Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series on the spirit of entrepreneurship.

When it comes to marketing and public relations expertise and management of nonprofits and other associations, a group of women have decades of combined experience.

They've taken a leap of faith, making the decision to be their own bosses and form their own business.

Affinity Resource Group LLC is the creation of Clintonians Mary Lea Nations, Jean Weiss and Bertinna Dubra and Pearl resident Teri Smith. They have formed a company that manages national, state and local associations and nonprofits.

And when the new business says "manage," they mean just that: Management of as

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Clintonian Jean Weiss, director of communications for the new Affinity Resource Group, reviews a 550-plus page curriculum guide she edited, produced and is marketing for an AR

Their new venture came together in August - just as the new school year was beginning for the four women who have a combined 10 children, eight of them school-aged.

client association, the American Society of Diagnostic and Interventional Nephrology. |

Nations and Weiss, both Leadership Clinton graduates, always wanted to own their own business. They were employed by a 1,500-member professional association - Nations served as its executive director - but wanted to strike out on their own.

"One of the medical associations we were managing wanted to continue with us. They are our first client," Nations said.

From their Clinton office on Fairmont Street, they are managing the American Society of Diagnostic and Interventional Nephrology. A second client, the Mississippi Association for Home Care, quickly followed.

Curtis Bray of Columbus, president of the Mississippi Association for Home Care, said the women's "diversity of skills" was why his organization hired them.

"We would not be able to get that skill level or find someone who could provide all the benefits to us that they do," Bray said. "We are an association of volunteers. We don't have a paid staff."

Because Affinity manages his association, he said, "we don't have to enter into the employment mode. They provide us everything that an employee could do, plus more."

Although they do travel - Nations and Weiss just returned from a professional meeting in Alabama - much of their work is done virtually and by phone.

"If a nonprofit or association has no full-time staff, we can be that staff," Nations explained. "We can serve as executive director. We perform their financial and membership services work. We provide clerical services.

"We answer their phones. We are their address. We can do all their communications, including brochures and newsletters."

As director of communications, Weiss uses her broad marketing, public relations and editing skills to produce publications and to build and manage Web sites. She is editing and producing a 500-plus page curriculum for the nephrology association.

She knows from her volunteer work, including serving as president of the Central Mississippi Down Syndrome Society, that many nonprofits can't afford a staff and office. At the same time, a growing nonprofit's membership, clerical and planning duties can snowball into a full-time job for its volunteers.

"We can take that on for them," Weiss said. "If their phone number rings here during the day instead of at the home of a volunteer who's not there, then we answer it and conduct their business immediately."

Instead of paying rent, salaries or the cost of equipment, "they would just pay us a flat fee to do it all," Weiss said. "We help grow their organization, and we offer this as an affordable solution."

And, she said, nonprofits that are volunteer-run but that raise money often need financial expertise in handling fundraising proceeds. "We can manage that for their boards so that there is continuity in finances as the board rotates its members on and off," Weiss said.

The women all bring impressive resumes to the table.

Nations is former director of continuing education at Mississippi College and former executive director of the Mississippi Association for Home Care. Weiss' experience includes working for a PR firm in Philadelphia, Pa., with up to 15 nonprofit clients, serving in membership and development for the Mississippi Museum of Art, and director of communications for Jackson-based BIPEC, Business and Industry Political Committee.

With a background in business startups, Dubra worked in financial services for Deposit Guaranty National Bank for six years, and another six years at BankPlus. She is Affinity's manager of professional certification programs.

Smith spent almost 10 years with BIPEC as manager of administrative resources and has more than a decade of experience

on experience in finance, accounting, bookkeeping, membership services and event planning.

That's not lost on Bray.

"We think they will bring things to the table that we can't do ourselves. They'll help us grow our membership."

What makes that possible, Nations said, is the group's team approach.

"We want to be a boutique-type management company that offers a personal touch," she said.

"We are," Weiss said, "a small group that can do big things."

Know a Clintonian who took a "leap of faith" to start a business or become an entrepreneur? E-mail reporter Ruth Ingram at ringram@clintonnews.com.

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