



ENERGIZING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES

A Pathway to Prosperity



Source: Robert Donnan, E Communities Coach, [Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky](#)

Energizing and Equipping the Homegrown Entrepreneur

For many counties in Eastern Kentucky, outmigration is a problem. Owsley County hopes that nurturing local entrepreneurs will not only create more businesses, it will create more employment and people will come back to the county.

That's where grassroots initiatives like Energizing Entrepreneurial Communities (E2C) come in. People want to start businesses but need direction and resources to get started as well as assistance to keep from getting discouraged once they are up and running. As part of the E2C program, the Kentucky Highlands Innovation Center (KHIC Center) participated in an Entrepreneur Speed Dating event in Booneville in August 2017 along with the Owsley County E2C Committee, the Owsley County Action Team and the Kentucky Innovation Network's Richmond Office.

The meeting was organized by Glenn Baker—who until recently was community education director for the Owsley County school system—with full support from the Owsley County Action Team. “The workshop was fantastic,” Baker said. “The visiting technical assistance providers were able to meet individually with each of three local enterprises and share with them specific information they need to succeed as well as offer immediate feedback regarding each business owner's ideas about how best to move their small business forward.”

The Owsley County entrepreneurs ranged from the co-owners of a bed and breakfast, the owner of a monogrammed apparel company who would like to expand online, and two social entrepreneurs from a Booneville community-based organization that has a black-box theater and is interested in purchasing the old theater to show movies and stage productions.

Melissa Conn, director of the KHIC Center, which is the London office of the Kentucky Innovation Network, spoke with the entrepreneurs. She is a certified facilitator of the Ice House entrepreneurial training program and brought copies of the book, *Who Owns the Ice House? Eight Life Lessons from an Unlikely Entrepreneur*, for all of the meeting participants as well as several students. Those students are participating in the Kentucky Lieutenant Governor's Entrepreneurship Challenge, an annual competition for high-schoolers.

Other speakers were Zachary Stanifer, a KHIC loan officer; Kristel Smith, director of the Kentucky Innovation Network's Richmond office; and Robert Donnan, who is the Kentucky Coordinator working on the seven-county Energizing Entrepreneurial Communities. The larger initiative is hosted by the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, working in a special partnership with The Brushy Fork Institute at Berea College.

“Repeatedly throughout the meeting, these entrepreneurs said they wanted to stay in Owsley County because of a love for the community,” Conn said. “I believe that in some of the smallest communities we serve, we find the biggest pockets of hope.”



Following the success of this initial Entrepreneur Speed Dating Event, Glenn Baker and the Owsley County E2C Working Group organized a follow-up session, held in October 2017, that offered yet another cohort of Owsley County small business entrepreneurs the opportunity to discuss opportunities and challenges facing their startup enterprises with two business coaches from KHIC and one from the Kentucky Innovation Network at ECU. One of the entrepreneurs was a high school student who along with three of his classmates had launched an electronic game design business. His conversations at the Speed Dating Event led two of the coaches to invest a small amount of funds that enabled the young entrepreneur to attend an annual computer gaming conference that took place a few weeks later in Lexington, KY.

The popularity of the two Owsley County Speed Dating Events soon led E2C Working Groups in two other Eastern Kentucky Communities to follow suit with arranging their own Speed Dating events for local startup entrepreneurs and small business owners. Leslie County held its event in mid-November 2017 at the Red Light Cafe in Hyden, while Jackson County held its event in early December 2017 at the Old Court House in McKee. Even the business technical assistance providers appeared to be impressed at the turnout and enthusiasm evident at these gatherings. Melissa Conn at KHIC called the Kentucky director for the E2C initiative to say, “Just wanted to let you know that we’re planning to take your idea and run with it in several of the communities that we serve!”

Unfortunately, these early E2C successes in Owsley County ultimately proved not to be sustainable. Union College in Barbourville offered Glenn Baker, coordinator for the county’s E2C Working Group, a teaching position that would require his relocation to Knox County. While the Owsley County Action Team (OCAT), which had hosted the ongoing E2C work, was pleased with the working group’s progress, it was unable to identify a successor for Glenn Baker who could pledge as many volunteer hours each month as the task demanded. Within a short time after Baker’s departure, the Kentucky E2C Initiative and OCAT agreed to suspend the working group’s ongoing activities.

Probably no one felt the loss more than Glenn Baker, whose inspired leadership, built across his many years as a teacher and school administrator, had prepared him well to coordinate the E2C projects. He had developed a wide-ranging network of contacts throughout the community, having taught and/or befriended both his former students as well as many of their parents. He also exhibited a tireless dedication to making sure that even the monthly meetings of the working group were carefully planned and well attended. Finding a replacement for that sort of expertise and commitment is not an easy task in a small rural community. As such it points to a key vulnerability of the E2C work: It depends upon inspired leadership that can go the distance—even though it’s always likely that one’s life may at times lead in other directions. Even so, it’s equally likely that Glenn Baker’s impact upon entrepreneurs in Owsley County continues to be felt, even in his absence.