Training Grant Helps Aroostook Knitting and Weaving Company Enhance its Productivity

Caribou, Maine: A collaborative effort by three economic development organizations in Aroostook County has helped a small Fort Kent manufacturer obtain the training she needed to improve her business. Stacy Martin, the owner of Three Bags Full, recognized the productivity and design improvements that her company could achieve with the adoption of a new loom technology. But before the company could embrace that technology, Martin knew that she needed training on the loom.

With the help of the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP) and two other economic development agencies, Martin was able to obtain funds to support the necessary training and has now taken the next step in her company’s strategy for long-term growth.

“Three Bags Full is a great example of the kind of family-owned business we’re here to serve,” said Brian Sutherland, the Caribou-based project manager for the Maine MEP at Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC). “It’s a small Fort Kent manufacturer in a niche market that takes great pride in its hand-crafted products and has a vision for growth. By providing the company with technical assistance and some grant funding for training, we’ve enabled the company to improve its productivity and ability to compete.”

The success of Three Bags Full in obtaining training funds illustrates the way in which Aroostook County’s coordinated network of economic development agencies work together to strengthen local business. The grant that Three Bags Full received came from the Small Manufacturing Industry Effectiveness Program (SMIEP) of the NMDC. The grants are provided to qualifying businesses within the NMDC service area and can provide as much as 50 percent of a proposed project’s cost.

Owner Stacy Martin learned of the availability of the grant funds from the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at NMDC. Working with the SBDC counselor and Maine MEP Project Manager Sutherland, Martin developed her proposal and succeeded in obtaining a training grant. The grant enabled her to travel to Washington, Maine, to train on a new loom under the direction of Nan Kennedy, a well-known Maine entrepreneur in the wool and knitting business and the creator of Seacolors, a line of naturally-dyed yarn.

Taking with her the new designs she wanted to produce, Martin obtained the training and knowledge she needed to develop the new products. With Kennedy’s expertise, the Three Bags Full owner was able to improve the product’s design and changeability.

“I felt as though I received everything out of this training that I was looking for. Maine MEP Project Manager Brian Sutherland and the SBDC Counselor were more than helpful and accommodated me in every way throughout the process,” said Martin.

The Maine MEP project manager expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the project and encouraged other Aroostook County businesses to tap into the variety of services his organization offers.

“Maine MEP provides a wide range of services to help manufacturers streamline their processes, reduce costs, adopt cutting-edge technologies and compete in the global marketplace. But we also collaborate closely with dozens of other state and national agencies and nonprofit organizations to support Maine’s small business community. We know what’s available for resources and how to help companies access them. Maine’s a small state. The only way we can succeed in these tough economic times is by collaborating effectively and helping every Maine business owner find the solution to their challenges,” said Sutherland.