

Business Booms in Small-town Mississippi

By: Emma Moffett

Amid the humidity of Mississippi in July, hundreds of shoppers and tourists gather in French Camp. Located next to the Natchez Trace is Barlow Blue, a boutique that despite its quaint appearance draws hundreds of shoppers to its annual, “Christmas in July,” sale.

Owner Tonya Barlow never imagined her business would evolve from being housed out of her back-bedroom to the 1,400 square foot building she currently works out of. However, after 17 years of hard work, Barlow has made a name for herself not only in Mississippi but also all over the world.

Barlow is one of many business owners who proves it is not only possible but also profitable to build a business in small-town Mississippi.

Lara Bowman, director for The Enterprise of Mississippi, works closely with local and industrial scale businesses who are interested in working out of Choctaw or Webster County.

Bowman frequently encounters people who are skeptical about starting a business in a rural community and finds that people believe their business will not be able to create enough traction or build a client base that will not only keep their business open but also turn a profit.

Now, due to the internet, Bowman said it is financially realistic to house a business in a small town because a person’s prospective market is more than their physical community.

“We have seen the decline of small businesses in the past 20 years, but those businesses that have remained successful did so by adapting to new technology,” Bowman said. “Being able to evolve is what allows local businesses to stay open and be successful.”

Despite being in a rural area, Bowman said since a business’ market is not only based on those who are physically in the surrounding area, the lower population does not negatively affect

the small-business market in Mississippi. While some businesses are service orientated and cannot provide or sell their product online, most rural businesses thrive by building their online presence and using that market to their advantage.

“Their market is the world,” Bowman said.

Barlow is evidence of that truth, dedicating the extent of her success to her ability to develop a strong online presence and create a community that was not just locally based.

Barlow not only works with customers from all over Mississippi but ships orders internationally. One of her most memorable orders was to create uniforms for an entire cheerleading squad in Sweden. Unique jewelry, reasonably priced embroidery and exceptional customer service are only part of what keep Barlow’s clients coming back for more.

Barlow’s easily accessible and aesthetically pleasing website leaves a lasting, positive impression on her clients.

“One reason why we are so successful is because we do online sales. It’s 2018. There are still businesses that don’t take credit cards,” Barlow said. “Unless you are willing to get into the technology age, you are not going to be successful.”

Barlow hopes to expand her business in the future and said she believes that her small town made it possible for her to have big success.

Bowman said another primary advantage for people opening businesses in Mississippi is that the startup cost is substantially less. Retail space-per-foot is substantially cheaper, and it gives business owners a feasible platform to grow their market.

Gun Dogs Supply, a new business in Mathiston, was able to renovate a building at a more affordable rate than was possible in Starkville. Another boutique that originally opened in Starkville also relocated to Mathiston due to the lower costs of retail space.

In the current platform of a digitally based world, companies can conveniently service people from all over.

Nestled between two drab, taupe buildings in downtown Eupora, Belinda Stewart Architects' mauve office building stands out. People across the South know who Belinda Stewart is and are familiar with her company.

Belinda Stewart Architects, based in Eupora, Mississippi, is an example of how a company can conveniently service people from all over, serving local governments and clients across the Southeast. Stewart, founder and owner of Belinda Stewart Architects, creates most of her architectural designs for projects outside of Eupora, but she has found that having her business in a small-town has not hindered her success.

Stewart said she loves that she can run her business in an affordable location revolved around community and fellowship.

"There is something unique about Eupora, as well as other smaller towns in Mississippi," Stewart said. "Everyone is like family. There is a sense of unity and community that cannot be found anywhere else."

In the past, the limited means of communication would have required Stewart's business to relocate to a highly populated metropolis in order to garner the same level of success she has earned today. However, due to the expansion of the internet, Stewart's architectural dream has become her reality.

"In the digital economy we live in, you do not have to be face-to-face with your customer to be successful and make a profit," Bowman said.

These combined factors, Bowman said, make rural areas in Mississippi an ideal location to grow a business. If someone is a new entrepreneur and is wanting to start a business, Bowman

said small-towns provide a wealth of information on market building and growing one's online presence that is much harder to do in larger communities.

As customers from across the South rush into Barlow Blue searching for monogrammed shirts and faux-pearl earrings, Barlow stands behind the register and smiles. Barlow cannot help but remember where she started 17 years ago.

Barlow recalls her shaking hands when signing her first large contract and the hopelessness she felt when orders would start to slow. Years ago, she was nervous and feared that she had made the wrong choice.

Barlow, looking over a sea of people rushing into her store, now knows that starting her business in small-town Mississippi was the best decision that she could have made.