



Brothers Joe and Josh Tuohy, who opened Salt Hill Pub in Lebanon about three years ago, worked with SCORE counselor Burt Jones, below. Jones was "a sounding board for what we wanted to do," Joe Tuohy said. VALLEY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS — CHANNING JOHNSON

Big Help for Small Businesses

The Upper Valley's SCORE Chapter Guides a Wide Variety of Entrepreneurs

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An Irish pub, a sculptor's studio, a veterinary clinic, a sock knitter's atelier, and an ocular prosthetics lab: What these and hundreds of other enterprises in the Upper Valley have in common is SCORE, a national nonprofit association that counsels small businesses.

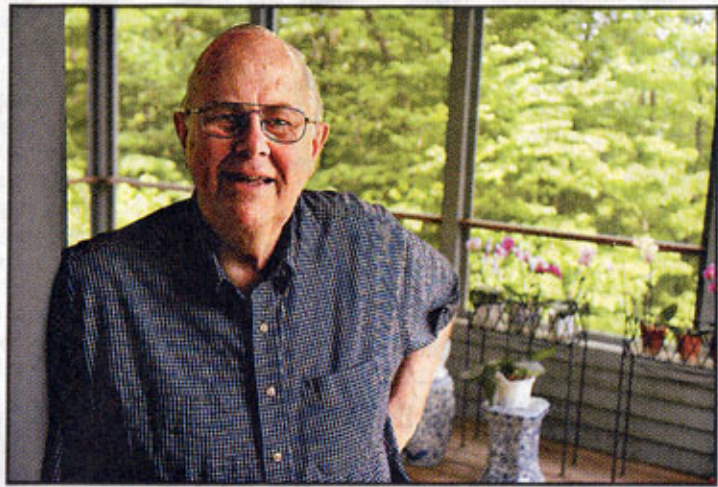
Entrepreneurs seeking business advice can get all they want, for free, from a SCORE counselor. These counselors are successful business people in their own right, typically

retired executives and consultants, who volunteer considerable amounts of their time to clients whose needs match their expertise, which is often formidable.

SCORE Chapter 184, currently housed in downtown Lebanon, has operated in the area since 1967. In that time, the chapter has advised approximately 9,000 clients, according to counselor Fred Thomas of Thetford Center. He says that 30-plus local volunteers handle an average of 350 new cases each year.

Thomas came to the area in the mid-1980s after retiring from Citibank, where he had

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SCORE Chapter in Upper Valley Boosts Local Businesses

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been an international vice president. Prior to that, he worked as a management specialist for the consulting firm McKinsey and Co. An idle retirement didn't suit him. He says he thought about starting his own consultancy, but instead, a friend invited him to join SCORE in 1986. He threw himself into the work.

"It's a fairly full-time avocation," he said.

For about a year Thomas has been advising Brad Burrington on plans to expand his veterinary practice, Veremedy Pet Hospital in White River Junction.

Burrington, who says he considers himself an entrepreneur and veterinarian in equal measure, appreciates having the ear of someone who understands his ambitions.

"When I sit down with Fred, unlike with other veterinarians, we speak business," he said.

Nationwide, more than 7 million people have taken advantage of SCORE counseling since the association's founding in 1964. Not all of them have gone on to start businesses, but according to Thomas, many of the Upper Valley clients have.

SCORE doesn't keep records of how long clients stay in business, Thomas said, but according to national figures from the Small Business Administration, two-thirds of startups last at least two years, and 44 percent keep going for at least four years.

In the two New Hampshire and two Vermont counties of the Upper Valley, 97 percent of all businesses have fewer than 20 employees, mirroring the 96 percent of the nation as a whole, according to 2003 Census figures.

Thomas said he spends time working with new clients and also attends to long-term SCORE clients, such as sculptor Larry Nowlan, whose file has been open since 2001.

Nowlan's studio occupies an old Unitarian Church on Main Street in Windsor. In the bright, echoing space beneath the high Gothic Revival ceiling and stained-glass windows, Nowlan's latest work is taking shape. In nine-foot-tall clay relief, men in antique football gear clash on the gridiron, one staring ahead with fierce determination as he dodges a headlong tackle. This part of the sculpture, along with the other two segments, will be cast in bronze to adorn the University of Iowa's Kinnick Stadium.

When Nowlan negotiated a contract for the commission, Thomas helped him lay out his terms. A payment schedule was a key part of it. For a project like this, spanning three years, money must be available at the right times to cover major expenses, like paying a foundry to cast the massive molds.

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An artist's studio is not what immediately comes to mind when one thinks of a small business, but it is one all the same. Nowlan realized that his business affairs were scattered and unkempt, and that lacking a sophisticated grasp of management principles, he needed help. A friend's referral led him to Thomas.

"He organized me," Nowlan said.

In addition to enforcing discipline on his balance sheets, Thomas helped Nowlan figure out the best uses for his time and resources. As a result, he now has a business strategy. "It allows me not to spend a lot of energy going down dead-end streets. It allows me to foresee things instead of just reacting to things," he said.

Jeffrey and Margaret Cyphers of Grantham don't have much distance from which to reflect upon their experience.

Only two months ago, the couple became business owners for the first time. They bought an ocular prosthetics practice — which makes artificial eyes — from an established ophthalmologist in Norwich. Jeffrey Cyphers makes the prostheses, and Margaret Cyphers manages the business.

He has been working on prosthetic devices for more than a decade, while she is new to management.

"This is not something that's anywhere near to my comfort zone," Margaret Cyphers said.

Until recently, she said, she didn't know how to read spreadsheets in Excel. But she has had a competent teacher in SCORE counselor Bob Hargraves, a retired corporate IT consultant who has worked as chief information officer and director of telecommunications at Boston Scientific, and assistant professor of mathematics at Dartmouth. Hargraves retired to Hanover in 2000 and joined SCORE a year later.

Before the couple agreed to a purchase price, Hargraves looked over the seller's books. He deemed the price fair, but there could have been hidden liabilities.

"Who knows what we might have walked into," Jeffrey Cyphers said.

Marianne Wakerlin of South Strafford used to be

a financial planner. Today she is known as "The Sock Lady."

Six years ago, Wakerlin left the financial world to knit and sell non-matching pairs of socks in wool or cotton, which she calls Sol Mates. When she started the enterprise, she had no idea how to deal with inventory, retail sales or marketing.

Her SCORE counselor, Stuart Pompian, an active venture capitalist and a former software developer, marketing consultant, and defense engineer who lives in Hanover, pushed her to use databases to research potential markets.

At first she resisted. "I design mismatched socks, so the thought of having to look at a computer to figure out what it's going to tell me to do was pretty unappealing," she said.

Nevertheless, she followed his advice, which actually worked too well. She couldn't knit enough socks to satisfy the demand she had generated. She says she has finally worked out her supply problem, and expects to begin knitting her 2007 inventory this summer.

Counseling is available to veteran business people as well as novices.

Joe and Josh Tuohy, the brothers behind Salt Hill Pub in Lebanon, worked extensively with a SCORE counselor before they opened their doors three years ago. Yet the brothers aren't newcomers to the restaurant business. They grew up working at their parents' restaurant in Newbury, N.H.

Joe Tuohy says he discovered SCORE when he went looking for financing from the U.S. Small Business Administration, which has a partnership with SCORE.

He didn't find a government loan, but he found Burt Jones. Early on, Jones helped by being "a sounding board for what we wanted to do," Joe Tuohy said.

Their concept for Salt Hill Pub impressed the counselor.

"They really had it," said Jones, who is retired from a long career in industrial design and business administration and lives in Hanover.

"A lot of people thought nothing could work on this corner," Joe Tuohy said. Jones wasn't one of them. He gave the Tuohys confidence that they were on the right track.

He didn't merely cheer them on, however.

"If he saw red flags in our business plan he'd say it," said Josh Tuohy.

He also impressed upon the brothers the importance of minding every cost.

"He still comes in and gets a cup of coffee and says, 'How are your energy costs?'"