

# Entrepreneur Cafes Help Feed Local Startups

[Ellen Hoffman](#) December 14, 2012

Melissa Kowalski, a 43-year-old former corporate manager, descended the steps to the front of a college lecture room filled with her neighbors, gingerly dangling a bird cage in her right hand and an animal cage in her left. As she made a [pitch](#) to the audience to invest in her business, [Critters and Conservation](#), she lured Togi, a Congo African gray parrot with a stunning red tail, out of his cage to perform a head-bobbing dance on her hand and then moved Señor Lagarto, a three-foot-plus-long Colombian Tegu lizard, onto her shoulder.

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Melissa Kowalski and her parrot Togi give the entrepreneur cafe audience a taste of the animal education programs her business, Critters and Conservation, offers to children.

*Photo courtesy of David Rosen*

She brought along the lizard and bird to inspire the audience to support her business, which consists of school and birthday party activities and a "rent-a-reptile" program. Food and supplies, such as cages and perches, she explained, account for most of her year-to-date \$1,700 in expenses. But she also needs money to produce a marketing banner and T-shirts for the children who attend her events.

The November Entrepreneur Café in Shepherdstown, W.V., was the town's third fundraiser so far this year. At each event, audience members vote for one of five entrepreneurs to receive their donations, which have run as high

as \$900. On this occasion, Kowalski lost out to a speech therapist and physical therapist, who created a box of laminated cards that describe educational activities parents can use with their young children.

Lacy Morise and Nicole Sergent explain how parents can use information from the box of laminated cards they have created, to play educational games with their children. They won the November Entrepreneur Cafe competition.

*Photo courtesy of David Rosen*

Other towns in West Virginia have staged similar fundraising events for local entrepreneurs in recent months. The first entrepreneur cafés were held in April in Huntington, where one group specifically focuses on funding artists and creative projects, and [Unlimited Future Inc.](#), a local business [incubator](#), supported businesses such as a bakery and a bowling supply company through its lunchtime events. Gail Patterson, director of Unlimited Future, says that since the cafés started, six business sponsors have contributed \$500 each to defray marketing costs and to help ensure an award of at least \$300 to the winning entrepreneur.

In September, the [Vision Shared Foundation](#), a public-private group based in Huntington that promotes entrepreneurship statewide, brought the café concept to Shepherdstown, where 30 to 40 people typically show up and pay a \$10 entrance fee for a simple supper of pizza or sandwiches that are usually subsidized by a local restaurant. The winning entrepreneur takes home the rest of the money. At the last two Shepherdstown cafés, local businesspeople sweetened the pot with personal donations, including \$500 from a real-estate developer and \$250 from a lawyer. The winner's only obligation to the group: report back in six months about how the money was spent and how the business is doing.

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Lucy Morise and Nicole Sergent won \$900 for Milestones and Miracles, a project designed to help families bond by guiding them through play activities. Lawyer Chris Stroeck, in the middle, sweetened the pot donated by the audience by an extra \$250.00.

*Photo courtesy of David Rosen*

David Rosen, an IT expert who is a member of the Shepherdstown Town Council and a branch chief at the National Institutes of Health, contacted the Vision Shared Foundation when he was "researching ways to help build up business and jobs" in the area.

"I understand the barriers to entrepreneurship because of my experience starting up [Plum](#), [a local shop that sells jewelry and other accessories] with my wife Cari," he says. "The immediate effect [of the cafes] is changing the culture. We want our neighbors to understand that it is OK to step out of the box and start your own business, because we will support them."

The Vision Shared Foundation, which has also launched entrepreneurship cafés in Williamson, Clarksburg, Buckhannon and Beckley, sees them as the beginning of a bigger movement in West Virginia.

"West Virginia has the lowest entrepreneurship participation rating in the U.S., according to the [Kauffman Foundation](#)," says Jeff James, co-chair of the foundation's entrepreneurship committee. "The impact of these events is really to spark cultural change in West Virginia as it relates to risk taking and entrepreneurship. The forums provide an opportunity for local citizens to share ideas as well as to receive seed funding, and provide a showcase for truly talented, creative people so that their ideas can bubble up to angel investors."

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