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## Small Business Development Center earns award after record year

By DON SERGENT [dsergent@bgdailynews.com](mailto:dsergent@bgdailynews.com) Oct 6, 2017

Miller Slaughter, director of the Western Kentucky University Small Business Development Center, poses for a portrait Thursday at the WKU Center for Research and Development.

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When Debra Dudley came up with ideas for new products at her Bonnieville-based Oscarware Inc. back in 2012, she was at first stymied by lack of financing.

Bankers, it seemed, weren't sold on the idea that new attachments adding versatility to outdoor grills would find a ready market.

Five years later, Dudley is the newly minted Kentucky Small Business Person of the Year and runner-up for the National Business Person of the Year award.

Her secret? Help from the Small Business Development Center in the Western Kentucky University Center for Research and Development on Nashville Road. She credits the center's director, Miller Slaughter, with helping her navigate the financing maze and other obstacles she had to overcome.

"He believed in us when no one else would," Dudley said of Slaughter. "I went from bank to bank, but I wasn't able to find the resources I needed. Financing was the very first thing we needed.

"He (Slaughter) found resources we didn't know about. He helped us prepare business plans and projections, any type of information we needed, and he found the financing for us."

That helped Oscarware launch two new products, leading to a 50 percent increase in sales from 2014 to 2015. The company now has 32 employees and has started exporting to Europe.

"After that launch of the new products, everything just fell into place," Dudley said. "With growth and profitability, we've been able to keep people working year-round."

Such success stories are part of the reason why the Small Business Development Center is itself an award winner. At the annual conference for Kentucky SBDCs held last month, the Bowling Green center took home the State Star Award for the first time.

"It has been a phenomenal year," said Slaughter, who has been with the center for six years after spending 30 years in marketing and management. "We'll see 200 to 250 different businesses, most of them on multiple occasions. Our long-term clients are up 30 percent over last year, and the ability of our small-business clients to get loans is up 72 percent."

The recognition is great, but Slaughter said his greatest satisfaction comes from knowing he has helped some fledgling entrepreneurs. The local SBDC, one of 15 in Kentucky, is funded by WKU, the state and the U.S. Small Business Administration. It provides free

counseling throughout the 10-county Barren River region to small-business owners and those looking to start businesses.

“The SBA’s mission is to help small businesses grow and thrive across the country,” he said.



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“We recognize how important small businesses are. Communities like Bowling Green and Glasgow really depend on small businesses,” Slaughter said.

“We help them navigate the questions and challenges they have. Probably half our clients will discover that their idea isn’t feasible or the risk is too high, but I consider those successes also.”

Chase Smith, whose Kentucky Health and Safety Training has been providing first aid and CPR training through the American Heart Association for more than five years, credits the SBDC with helping him get established.

“Nathan Lee (Slaughter’s associate at the SBDC) has been working with me and has most definitely helped my business get off the ground,” Smith said. “He has helped me with getting licenses, developing a website and networking. If not for his help, I don’t think this business would have been able to grow as much as it has.”

Operating on a fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, Slaughter has just completed a record year for the center. But he doesn't expect that record to last long.

“We have three or four projects that are multi-million-dollar projects,” he said. “We have one business that's ready to gear up and could create 100 jobs. We're expecting to have a banner year.”

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