

Bob Prouty and his wife, Theresa, own Northeast Gems in Fryeburg. Bob Prouty says finding space was the biggest hurdle in starting the business. (JAMIE GEMMOTT PHOTO)

Artisans, entrepreneurs paint a picture of challenges facing the 'creative economy'

By LAURA M. RUSSO
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BROWNFIELD — Appropriate space, marketing expenses, health insurance costs and government regulations are some of the many snags entrepreneurs in rural Western Maine hit while trying to earn a living through the arts.

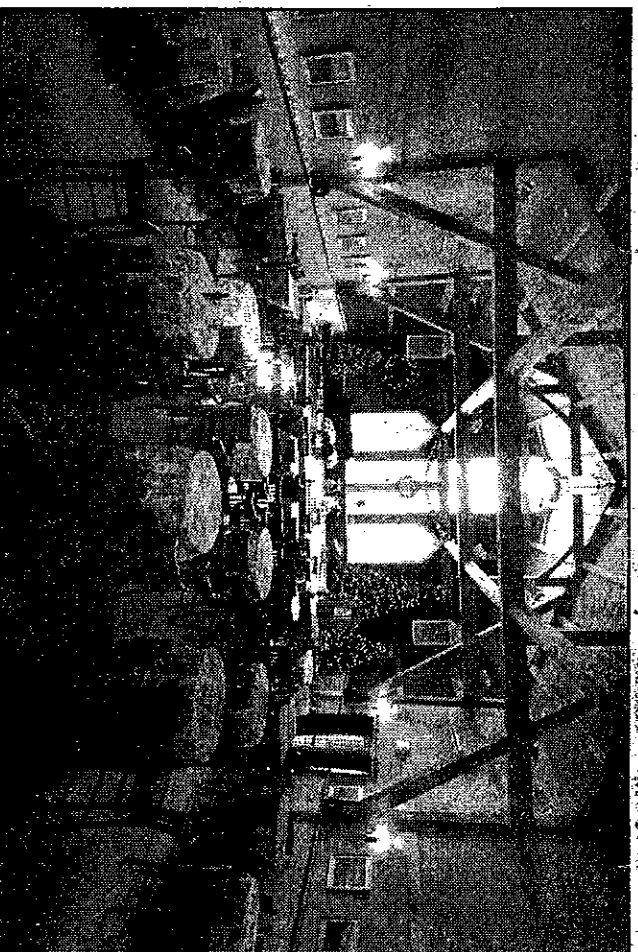
From Carol Noonan's Stone Mountain Arts Center in Brownfield, a Route 113 Corridor Committee Forum discussed issues facing the "creative economy" in the Saco River Valley.

A panel of artisans, craftsmen, and entrepreneurs included singer-songwriter Noonan, jewelers Bob and Theresa Prouty, restorative carpenter John Chwaszczencki, and hooked rug artist Janet Connor. During introductions, Fryeburg Selectman David Knapp called Brownfield "center of the universe for the creative arts economy."

The Proutys, owners of Northeast Gems in Fryeburg, said the "hardest thing was to find a space," adding they wanted a Fryeburg location and did not want to set up shop in North Conway.

"We want people to design their own piece of jewelry," Theresa said, while Bob explained he will go out and specifically mine a gem himself, then polish and shape it to accommodate that design.

"We try to promote Maine gem-



Stone Mountain Arts Center, started by Carol Noonan, is a jewel in Brownfield. (JAMIE GEMMOTT PHOTO)

stones," he said. "New England in general is underrated as to its resources."

Chwaszczencki, who restored the 1734 Inn, is now working on the Hubbard-Cotton Store in Hiram. The village store, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, is Chwaszczencki's 18th building restoration and his second historic undertaking. He is in the process of renovating the original general store and adding a luncheonette, full dining room and eight guest rooms with full bathrooms, among other features. A shuttle to

and from various area attractions is planned upon completion.

"I was brought up to never believe I'd be talented enough to make a living, provide for a family, afford health insurance, etc., by creating art alone," said Connor, of J. Conner Hooked Rugs in Hiram and a retired art teacher. "The saving grace was teaching and creating licensed designs."

Noonan explained the inspiration for her venue was partly because she

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was tired of being on the road, away from home and her husband, for performances. The venues she visited, themselves, added to her desire.

"I wanted to present music in a very special way," she said, "and many of the venues weren't as good as either the audiences, or performers, were."

Just one year later, Noonan is attracting artists — who won't consider performing in Portland — to Brownfield. Her 2007 performance schedule boasts acts such as country performer Mary Chapin Carpenter and comedian Paula Poundstone.

"It's not just about my folk genre," Noonan stressed, adding that the center's variety shows lets her target various audiences and her blue-collar upbringing helps in not catering to an "artsy-only" crowd. "I want to bring people from everywhere here, not just from the area. That's important. Our theme is elegant but casual; I want the guy who works at NAPA, the lady who works at Remy's, to feel comfortable coming here."

On the subject of start-up financing, most of the panelists claimed they began very small, financing what they could, a little at a time. "I didn't take funding from anybody, except my own grocery money," Conner said.

Those who attempted to secure grants, such as Chwaszczenski, however, had no luck. "I contacted almost every resource I could find," he said. "I got no answers. If you're for-profit, funding just isn't available to you."

The Proutys attempted to get some small-business start-up suggestions from the state, and said while they were sent a stack of literature, it was somewhat overwhelming and didn't offer much help.

"If you don't know what to do with it, you look at it and think, 'oh, that's nice,' and put it aside," Bob said.

Janice Crawford, executive director of the Mount Washington Valley Chamber of Commerce, advised that

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becoming a chamber member and utilizing its services may be of some help. For example, some grants not available to a business owner may be available for the chamber — and the funding could be used in ways to assist the entrepreneur.

Noonan related the biggest challenge in erecting her center were Maine codes and startup regulations — calling the experience "a nightmare."

"Most of the time, we didn't know what we were doing was wrong until we screwed it up," she said. "While Brownfield was wonderful, they had never done this before and were learning as they went along, too. The state was almost hostile; no one wanted to take responsibility. Many hours were spent getting through red tape."

While Noonan believes a system should be implemented "where you send in 'this is what we want to do' and they send back 'then you have to do (a list of items) and you'll be all set,'" she advises that, currently, anyone attempting such a venture should "dig deep."

"We were told to do things one way and then found out they were wrong," she said.

Chwaszczenski related a problem with town zoning ordinances, saying a reproduction of the "Hiram Hussey" painting, originally planned to hang outside the store, exceeded the 12-square-foot maximum size.

"It was cut down to 3-by-4," he said, "but will hang over the fireplace inside."

Insurance and marketing expenses perhaps added the most frustration to several panel members. Theresa Prouty works 20 hours per week at Shaw's supermarket merely for the sake of insurance. Conner said too much of her Maine teacher's retirement was being eaten up by insurance costs, so she "leaves it to my husband." And Noonan said she's never had health insurance in her entire life.

"It comes right out of your business, and I think that's what deters people from doing their own thing," Bob Prouty said.

An audience member deemed health care and worker's comp insurance "the most devastating thing in Maine business," saying, "the minute you have to hire someone, it could cost you your business."

The panelists approached advertising and marketing in different ways, with Noonan being the most aggressive. Boston Magazine recently listed the Stone Mountain Arts Center in its list of "10 Best New England Attractions."

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Prouty encourages people to design their own pieces of jewelry and he'll polish and shape each piece to that design.

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"I send press releases, CDs, anything out, to anyone," she said. "I've been profiled in Yankee Magazine, Horse and Farm, and even reviewed in Playboy. It's because I send them things every month. In our own backyard, it seems not that interesting, but send it to Boston and they think we're so cool up here. Don't expect to be sustained as a local business. Go above and beyond the area."

The Proutys, meanwhile, say they've relied mostly on word of mouth, that advertising costs are outrageous, and that they struggled trying to track what patronage they received with which advertisement.

"We've been in town (at 299 Main St.) in our retail store for four years, and people still say 'I didn't know you were here,'" Bob said. "It's hard."

"Only half of my career is actually making art," said Conner. "One and a half days out of my work week is spent networking and advertising. I do a little at a time, as I can afford it. I just spent \$200 to ensure an ad in Rug Hooking magazine."

Conner mentioned that Maine Fiber Artisans is "a fantastic association," providing maps directing tourists to artists' studios. Similar concepts are used for events such as the valley's Inn to Inn Holiday Cookie Tour, and the Bridgton Art Guild's Open Studio Tour. Although the studio tour is useful, transportation is an issue in Western Maine, where distances between such locations can be great.

While the panel felt Web advertising very

useful, they said it does take some time for search engines to "bump up" a business to the first page of a search. Positioning is generated by the number of hits on a site, and while it may cost a small amount at first, with enough hits it will be free.

Trade shows, public access TV and collaborative galleries were also identified as affordable means of promotion. The concept of combining several artisans' work into one space and "finding tie-ins" were recommended.

For example, Bridgton's Art in the Park event may be interested in some accompanying music, or a small festival could seek catering from another organization. Noonan works collaboratively with several businesses, including artist Becca Van-Pleet, who created all the signage at the arts center and Noonan's promotional mugs, and the Inn at Crystal Lake in Eaton, where guests can stay, eat, and be shuttled to events at the center.

"We're full for every show, and (the inn's) economy benefits too," Noonan said.

Chambers of commerce can help with these ideas, as well. The Mount Washington Valley Chamber of Commerce is planning a 2007 Arts Businesses Tour, and Crawford said venues for trade shows or festivals, which would add cost for the average person, can be free through a chamber.

"It's necessary to bring the creative economy into the tourism economy," Crawford said, explaining the chamber set up an arts page to attract artisans/creative economists to membership. "For a minimal dues amount, it's a very powerful Web site. We now have 45 artisan members, and with more critical mass, the more we can do for them."