

Bethalto's Nelson wins first round of 2017 InnovateHER contest

by Jo Ann Di Maggio May
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EDWARDSVILLE - Metro East resident Lorie Nelson has captured first prize in the local InnovateHER Business Challenge and hopes to vie for a spot in the national competition this fall.

[InnovateHER](#) is a business plan contest organized by the U.S. Small Business Administration ([SBA](#)). The national competition is open to entrepreneurs and small business owners with products and services that help impact and empower the lives of women and families.

In April, the SBA chose the Illinois Metro East Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville to host a local business plan competition in the Challenge's first stage. More than 180 entities across the U.S. were selected as host organizations with a total of four in the St. Louis metro area.

Founder of [Signature Virtual Assistance](#), Nelson submitted her online application in May. The Bethalto native pitched her business concept to a panel of three judges on June 1. On Friday, June 2, a group including sponsors and judges presented Nelson with a \$1,500 prize provided by Scott Credit Union, the [SIUE School of Business](#) and Louer Facility Planning, Inc. In addition, Nelson will receive an array of in-kind legal services from Mathis, Marifian and Richter Ltd. of Belleville.

The winning pitch by Nelson centered on assisting business owners, primarily women, with various tasks from bookkeeping to calendar and email management.

Signature Virtual Assistance, Inc. (SVA) is a solution provider for office problems. The solutions to office problems result in minimized stress, increased business efficiency and increased revenue for the clients. SVA has identified the largest problem small business owners' face – inability to grow their business past a set point. This inability is because of the small business owner's lack of willingness to delegate to an assistant. Usually, the lack of delegation stems from not seeing the problem, but it is sometimes an inability to let go.

The solution to this problem is a virtual personal assistant and bookkeeper. Being virtual eliminates all overhead associated with an employee – overhead that a small business owner usually cannot afford. The personal assistant works hand-in-hand with the small business owner, taking on all tasks to which the owner does not add and, therefore, can be accomplished by someone else. In addition, the bookkeeper manages the books for the business. These two pieces combined are the vital solution to allowing the small business owner the time to focus on growing the business, while the administrative side of the business runs more smoothly than before, resulting in minimized stress, increased efficiency and increased revenue.

Local InnovateHER winners are automatically nominated as semi-finalists and will compete for 10 finalist spots in the national competition in September. InnovateHER's national sponsor, the Sara Blakely Foundation, will award a total of \$70,000 to the top three winners.

Robert Steiner, SBA's Illinois district director, called InnovateHER a tremendous opportunity for Illinois entrepreneurs. "We're thrilled to have SIU Edwardsville as a local host and the opportunity to showcase our state's most talented innovators," said Steiner.

Lorie Nelson officially began offering her services in August 2012. "The Illinois Metro East SBDC has been instrumental in assisting me through various stages of my business growth," she stated. "I have received excellent support and guidance, as well as a sounding board for ideas when I was not sure what step to take next.

"Earlier this year, I learned about the InnovateHER challenge. I am so appreciative of this opportunity. The preparation for involvement in InnovateHER is an excellent exercise in fine tuning basic administrative aspects of a business, such as the business plan and executive summary. Building a presentation of those pieces is important and emphasizes why a business should be invested in it. InnovateHER has a significant impact on the region and economy."

Jo Ann Di Maggio May, interim director of the Illinois Metro East SBDC, considers the InnovateHER Business Challenge a highly effective means to foster women-focused entrepreneurial activities in the region. "Women of today are taking on many additional roles and challenges, and companies can find success catering to their needs."

"Signature Virtual Assistance" is a great example of how the SBDC is able to elevate a hardworking business to a national stage," said Di Maggio May.

The Metro East SBDC assists businesses like Lorie Nelson's operating in the nine-county Metro East region of Calhoun, Jersey, Madison, Bond, Clinton, St. Clair, Washington, Monroe and Randolph. It enhances the region's economic interests by providing one-stop assistance to individuals by means of counseling, training, research and advocacy for new ventures and existing small businesses.

SBDCs in Illinois are funded, in part, through a cooperative agreement between the U.S. Small Business Administration, Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity and [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#) as a service to the community. To learn how these no-cost services may help your business venture, contact the [SBDC for the Metro East](#) at (618) 650-2929 or sbdcjedw@gmail.com.