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Black entrepreneurs growing in number

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MAX SCHULTE staff photographer

BUSINESS OWNERSHIP census

Ben Rand

Staff writer

Valerie Weissert knew she wasn't ready for a senior center when she decided to retire as a Monroe County sheriff's deputy.

Yet, after 25 years in law enforcement, Weissert also couldn't see herself switching to a 9-to-5 lifestyle. So she made a choice that's increasingly popular among many African Americans: She started her own business.

Weissert, now 52, founded V.Weis Construction Solutions of Rochester, an up-and-coming corporate construction company, in 2002. In doing so, she put herself into a sweeping national trend, according to a U.S. Census Bureau study released Tuesday.

From 1997 to 2002, black-owned businesses grew by more than 54 percent in Monroe and five surrounding counties, driven largely by dramatic increases in Rochester, according to the study. Both numbers top the state and nation, which grew by 49 percent and 45 percent, respectively.

Observers attributed the strong local trend, in part, to changes in the economy namely, years of downsizing at major corporations such as Eastman Kodak Co. and Xerox Corp. Starting a business becomes a lifeline for many hit with layoff notices, the experts say.

"I see it all the time. ... There is a shift from big corporations to smaller businesses," said Michael Streeter, founder of Mike Streeter and Associates, which consults with employers on diversity.

Weissert felt she needed to stay active and support her community. She started planning for her business as much as two years before her retirement.

Construction work runs in her family, she says. Her husband works for LeChase Construction Services and previously owned his own company. And her father was a plaster mason.

Rather than add to an already competitive field, Weissert took a nontraditional approach. She formed a partnership with LeChase, one of the region's largest and fastest-growing construction companies. LeChase owns 49 percent of V.Weis, and the two firms occasionally share resources. LeChase also served as Weissert's mentor, exposing her to functions such as accounts payable and scheduling.

The relationship with LeChase has put V.Weis at the heart of one of Rochester's largest capital projects ever the \$200 million redevelopment of Kodak Park, which involves demolishing obsolete buildings and relocating workers.

Weissert says she's driven to help other small, local businesses to pay back the support she's gotten from both LeChase and Kodak.

She said that V.Weis has a basic philosophy, which is to provide top-notch quality at an affordable price in an honest way. "I want to treat people the way we want to be treated," she said.

V.Weis is also an example of a company benefiting from another trend: Companies like Kodak are trying to do a better job at diversifying their supplier base.

Kodak, for instance, pledged in 2001 to increase the amount it spends with minority companies to 10 percent of its total annual bill for goods and services in the United States by the end of 2006. Kodak met the goal two years early and is now targeting 11 percent by the end of this year.

Kodak says it was successful through a combination of internal training, prominent support from executives and external networking. It hasn't been easy, says Joyce Wichie, director of supplier diversity. The program is not an entitlement. That is, minority suppliers must meet Kodak's tough requirements for cost, quality and delivery. But "everybody needs a chance," she said.

Doing business with bigger corporations also made a difference for Environmental Services LLC of Henrietta and its owner, Leta Brayboy. Her company, now almost 12 years old, provides commercial and construction cleaning services and employs 25 to 40 people, depending on the season.

She said the key for small, minority-owned companies is to look for partnerships. The world is too competitive, she says, for any one company to grow large all by itself. "We need to be more creative," she says.

Brayboy has also witnessed the growth in minority-owned businesses as the president of Progressive Neighborhood Federal Credit Union, which specializes in small loans to underserved communities. Progressive is in talks with the city of Rochester on ways to provide capital to potential business owners, she said. The trend toward business ownership is definitely continuing, Brayboy said.

The census report shows that roughly two-thirds of black-owned businesses in the seven-county region are in Rochester.

"It's definitely a function of population," said Sarah Boyce, a social policy official at the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester. She pointed out that three-fourths of greater Rochester's black population reside in the city.

Among them is Bill Smith, who's preparing to launch an upholstery business known as Second Treasures in a Parsells Avenue storefront. Smith is starting the business in conjunction with the Community Place of Greater Rochester, which advocates entrepreneurship as a weapon against poverty.

Though the process has proven long, Smith said the prospect of being his own boss is what attracted him. "It's a feeling of saying 'this is mine,' of being able to create my own hours, my own revenue," said Smith, who currently works as a juvenile correction officer.

Community Place has other wealth-building projects under way. The agency is working with more than 30 Monroe County high school students on Uniquely U, a student-run handmade jewelry business.

The program has inspired students to get excited about entrepreneurship. "If they could, they would have business cards and everything," said Denique Conner, a staff accountant and volunteer adviser. "But we can't afford it yet."

The growth in black-owned businesses, however, does not necessarily suggest that the battle for economic equality is over, said Randy Henderson, owner of the Henderson Automotive Family of auto dealerships and president of the Rochester Black Business Association.

"I think we're moving toward that, but the gap is still great," he said, pointing out that many minority-owned businesses are first generation.

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Broad-based trend

African Americans are not the only minorities increasing their ownership of businesses: Hispanics and women are, too. The Census Bureau earlier this year said that:

*Businesses owned by Hispanics increased 57 percent in New York, by 55 percent in the Rochester area and 25 percent in Monroe County.

*Businesses owned by women increased 28 percent in New York, by 11 percent in the Rochester area and 5 percent in Monroe County.

About the data

Every five years (years ending in 7 and 2), the Census Bureau profiles U.S. businesses from the national to the local level, through the Economic Census.

One of the major products of the Economic Census is the Survey of Business Owners, which looks at the racial backgrounds of business owners in the United States. The black-owned business report is the third in a series. The Census earlier this year reported on Hispanic- and women-owned business; next month it looks at Asian-owned business.

CHART BY KEVIN M. SMITH STAFF ARTIST IS NOT AVAILABLE

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