



HIGH-FLYING HELP: Dow Chemical says it provided a plane to assist former President Bill Clinton's mission to North Korea to free two imprisoned U.S. journalists. Midland-based Dow and its CEO, Andrew Live-riis, left, were among those thanked Wednesday by Laura Ling upon her arrival in California.



ROMAIN BLANQUART/Detroit Free Press

Jaison Raju, right, advises DaShawn Parks on her business ideas at the Wayne State University TechTown conference, FastTrac. Another session is scheduled for Aug. 18.

TechTown guides entrepreneurs to bring business plans to life at FastTrac sessions

By NICQUEL TERRY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

While the economic picture has been dim for many in metro Detroit, TechTown leaders are looking to brighten the outlook for budding entrepreneurs.

This summer, they've hosted conferences aimed at helping those who are looking to start a business. Late last month, TechTown put on the second session of FastTrac to the Future: The First Day of Your Entrepreneurial Adventure at Wayne State University. And a third session is set for Aug. 18.

The first session in June was so popular, Tech-

Town leaders decided to offer more. TechTown said it aims to help Michigan's growing population of underemployed and displaced workers leverage new careers as entrepreneurs and potential employers.

Belinda Smith, who attended the second session, said her mediation firm wasn't doing so well because of difficulty finding clients. She hoped to get advice on networking and marketing the business.

"Quite frankly, I needed a pep talk," Smith said. "Business has not gone as I hoped it would." More than 500 attended the second session.

■ AUTHOR, FINANCIER CHRIS GARDNER IS KEYNOTE SPEAKER. 4B

BUSINESS COVER STORY

TechTown nurtures entrepreneurs

Business owners flock to training sessions

By NICQUEL TERRY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

As southeast Michigan grapples with auto industry cutbacks, layoffs and underemployment, hundreds of striving entrepreneurs are taking steps to get their businesses off the ground.

Those budding business owners have flooded workshops this summer at Wayne State University to develop entrepreneurial skills. Last month, more than 500 people attended the second session of FastTrac to the Future: The First Day of Your Entrepreneurial Adventure at TechTown, a research and technology park at Wayne State. A third session is set for Aug. 18.

The sessions give attendees free in-depth entrepreneurial training. Seminars cover such topics as social media, how to raise money and intellectual property. Additionally, the workshops provide introductions to entrepreneurial programs in the community such as Ann Arbor Spark and Automation Alley.

Chris Gardner, author of

"The Pursuit of Happiness" and owner of the brokerage firm Gardner Rich LLC, was the keynote speaker during the first two sessions and is to be the keynote speaker for the third session.

Randal Charlton, TechTown's executive director, said the group is hosting the conferences to help improve Detroit's economy. The goal is to launch 1,200 new businesses in the metro area, he said.

Demand was so high for the first session, which took place in June, that TechTown decided that others were necessary. "If you can make your programs work in Detroit, you can make them work anywhere," Charlton said. "The future is in our hands."

Russell Steiner of Saginaw said he decided to start his own business after his employer, AmTech, cut his hours.

Steiner, who attended the first and second conferences, said the workshops helped him gain insight on logistics and how to finance a consumer electronics business.



ROMAIN BLANQUART/Detroit Free Press

Jan Gensheimer of Seracon Consulting lectures last month during the FastTrac conference at Wayne State University's TechTown. The event aims to help displaced workers launch new careers as entrepreneurs.

"I think it's wonderful," Steiner said. "I'm looking for a network of people to actually do this business with."

June's FastTrac conference already has helped

Southfield couple Michael and Susan Lewis create a development plan for a medical equipment supply business.

Susan Lewis said they were able to receive one-on-one

guidance from business consultants at the conference. Lewis and her husband have taken business courses through TechTown since the conference.

Third FastTrac session

When: 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Aug. 18

Location: McGregor Memorial Conference Center, Wayne State University

Cost: Free

Featured speaker: Chris Gardner, owner and CEO of Gardner Rich LLC and author of "The Pursuit of Happiness."

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Chris Gardner

"You kind of feel like someone is helping to guide you and keep you on track," Susan Lewis said. "We are hoping that the program... is going to really help us and get us off the ground so we can really do well with the business."

A partnership between the New Economy Initiative for Southeast Michigan and the Kauffman Foundation sponsored the \$9.24-million FastTrac project.