

The Scarsdale Inquirer

Founded in 1901

VOLUME 95, NUMBER 49

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2016

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

The Acceleration Project puts business talents to work

By LISA COLEMAN BRADLOW

Susanne Leary Shoemaker is a Bronxville resident who devised an idea to produce undergarments for people who are disabled or have limited mobility.

Wanting to launch a business to produce and market these products — called Undercare — Shoemaker attended an 18-week workshop run by the Women's Enterprise Development Center in White Plains, a nonprofit organization that supports women entrepreneurs.

"One of the lessons I learned was you can't cut corners when you're starting a business, not just in financial terms, but in terms of learning," Shoemaker said. "I am very artistic. But I could not ignore that I had to deal with financial aspects and learn about them."

She needed a way to tap in.

After the workshop, Shoemaker was introduced to Jane Veron and Lisa Tetler in late 2012, when the two women were launching The Acceleration Project, a nonprofit group that was beginning to marshal local professional women to help nearby small businesses in need of advice.

Shoemaker had only a prototype and a patent for Undercare. So TAP went to work with her, helping Shoemaker identify important milestones, construct a capital structure, target customers and perfect her pitch.

"They gave me confidence and a roadmap," Shoemaker said, "and a process to follow in setting and achieving goals and how to reset if I'm not achieving them. There are so many different pieces to a company, and they narrowed down what I most needed help with."

In creating TAP, Veron and Tetler recognized one of Scarsdale's natural resources, its women, who fuel PTAs, the Woman's Club, Junior League, major and minor religious institutions, and a long list of charitable good deeds and fundraising.

Though many are trained as doctors, lawyers, experts on art or media and business people of all kinds, the majority of Scarsdale's mothers opt to stay at home while their children are of school age. Such a decision can put careers on hold for up to 20 years, and possibly for good.

Despite rank or talent in the working world before full-time parenting, women's professional re-entry can be daunting.

"Ultimately, I want to get this talent back into the economy," Veron said. "I've cared about this from the moment I left business school and recognized I was going to juggle parenting with incredibly ambitious career desires. I want to be a role model for my daughters."

Veron has an M.B.A. from Harvard, after which she worked as a strategic consultant at Bain & Co., then as a marketing executive at American Express before committing to raising her three daughters.

Elected last year to Scarsdale's board of trustees, the village's governing body, Veron has also served on the executive committee of Scarsdale § Edgemont Family Counseling Service,



ALAN ZALE PHOTO

TAP executives Kate Conlan, Jane Veron and Tracy Jaffe.

chaired the Scarsdale Planning Board, served as president of Scarsdale's League of Women Voters, led the Fox Meadow Neighborhood Association and was elected chair of the consortium of 16 neighborhood associations.

In 2007, she received the Mayor's Award for exceptional leadership.

TAP ultimately has two compatible end goals: enable small local businesses to grow and empower its pool of professional consulting talent. The mission is a mutual mentoring; its consultants mentor local businesses and simultaneously refresh their own skills and professional experience.

"There's such a need for this right now, with the economy being stagnant for the last eight or nine years," Kate Conlan, TAP's client and partner development director said. Conlan has a master's degree in engineering and an M.B.A. from Harvard. "We are positioned well to go into some of these businesses that are starting to feel hopeless and don't know what to do. And here we are, these highly trained professionals who can come in and look at their business with fresh eyes, and just have conversations with them."

TAP and its roughly 60 clients, in locations from Rockland County to southern Westchester, find each other through word-of-mouth, networking and various micro lenders in Westchester that fund small businesses. Currently, TAP is interviewing a potential client in California, a consultant for start-ups seeking help marketing herself and her practice. She found TAP through an internet search.

To work with TAP, a business must submit an application showing it's at a critical juncture in its lifecycle, have the motivation and skills necessary to make it to the next level, demonstrate a financial need for TAP's service and then sign a contract.

"We need to make sure they have the basic expertise that will help them move to the next level; that they are responsible and responsive to the work we do," Veron said.

TAP's 40-plus consultants are selected because they're good at understanding strategic implications of business decisions and good at giving specific tactical advice. After a two-part training process held twice

each year, two consultants with complementary skills are then paired with a client in need. TAP also hires high school and college interns.

Currently, the organization has a waiting list of about 25 people wanting to join its consulting team, from women with young children to empty nesters and recently retired professionals who want to share their skills and professionals between jobs who want to hone or update their expertise.

"It's tricky," Tracy Jaffe, a corporate marketer with a Columbia University M.B.A. currently TAP's COO said. "If our mission is to help people who took a hiatus from work develop skills that put themselves in a mindset and a place of confidence so if they want to pursue a career they can, then we will naturally get more women than men."

Indeed, most of TAP's consultants are women.

"There's a lot of research about women feeling like they have to do 150 percent of the job before they actually even apply for the job," Veron said. "What we're showing women is they are so exceedingly capable. We're showing them by actually having them do."

Promoting women is where TAP started, but they are inclusive and integrating men as they grow.

"I came into TAP because I wanted to start leveraging my business skills again," Jaffe said. "It wasn't just about getting to redeploy my marketing skills but to have a socially impactful mission."

Elyse Mall Klayman is a communications specialist who left her job at NYU Law School to deal with some family matters.

"TAP offered a way of keeping my skills fresh and myself feeling somewhat normal after years of working full time," Klayman said. "I continued to feel that my professional identity was intact."

Klayman didn't work directly with TAP clients, and instead spent about a year and a half helping the organization scale up its identity through its communications.

"I think we live in an unusually highly credentialed community," Klayman said. "It's terrific to be able to channel all of that knowledge and

experience and professional know-how to people in the local community who can benefit. At the same time, it keeps women flexing their muscles."

After about two years away from the workforce, Klayman is now executive director for communications, marketing and public affairs at Columbia Law School.

"When I went back to work, it was an easier transition," Klayman said. "Volunteer work is certainly relevant and valuable whether you're going back to work or not. It's work without the politics."

Thus far, TAP has been supported by only a few individual sponsors, including both the Pelham and Mount Vernon chambers of commerce, People's United Bank and Community Capital New York. No one takes a salary. Clients pay a program fee based on a sliding scale ranging from several hundred dollars to a few thousand.

"It doesn't sustain our business, but it's important clients have skin in the game and take us seriously," Veron said.

TAP also aims to connect its clients with each other — business community building.

"Not only are we helping them, we are helping their community get stronger by introducing them to one another and inspiring the cross-fertilization of ideas," Veron said. "It kind of builds a stronger, more united group that feels more powerful and reverses the despair that many businesses feel."

Last February, TAP hosted a speed consulting event in Pelham, matching 20 businesses with about 15 consultants. A second event took place Nov. 16.

"It's amazing what you can cover and the value you can add in 15 minutes; what they can walk away with," Veron said. "We have them discuss their business, identify their issues and [are] able to give them fresh views and ideas."

Tetler recently stepped down from TAP to pursue different personal goals, but Veron carries on, aspiring to have a global reach with TAP. The organization recently spoke with two team candidates in Britain interested in spreading the work.

And what of Shoemaker and Undercare?

Earlier this year, they were chosen for a spot in Top Ten Small Business Administration's InnovateHer: Innovating for Women Business Challenge Competition. After first competing at a local level, Undercare made the national shortlist of start-ups by women that included an entrepreneur who developed a way to detect breast cancer in tears and an emergency room pediatrician who built a pacifier used to dose medicine for babies.

Undercare's products are set to be ready for sale in early 2017.

"I like them all so much," Shoemaker said about working with TAP. "I felt a lot of mutual respect. They were especially smart, professional and nice. I wanted to model myself after them professionally and personally."

For more information on The Acceleration Project, visit theaccelerationproject.org