



Elizabeth Warren out to 'break up big tech'

NEWS, 3A

The Journal News

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Opt-out moms revive their local downtowns



Tracy Jaffe, left, chief operating officer for the Acceleration Project, Laurie Medvinsky, a consultant for the project, Claudia Uribe, director of Service Delivery, Jane Veron, chief executive officer, and Wendy Gendel, a consultant, gather in downtown Scarsdale. PHOTOS BY SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Women are using their latent skills to support small businesses

Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy
Rockland/Westchester Journal News
USA TODAY NETWORK

When Jane Veron moved from Manhattan to Scarsdale in 1997 with her investment banker husband and two children, then 1 and 3 years old, she was on a leave of absence from her job as a senior director at American Express.

Throughout her early days of motherhood, the company offered the Yale graduate and Harvard MBA a myriad of options, including working part time and consulting.

"But in the end, juggling family and professional responsibilities and the long commute became untenable," said Veron, of what eventually led to her decision to quit her job.

Her life as a suburban mom in one of the most expensive ZIP codes in the country landed her in familiar company: stay-at-home moms who held degrees from prestigious universities and had experience in the corporate world including at white-shoe law firms, exclusive management consultancies and Fortune 500 companies.

"I felt like there was this latent talent that I wanted to harness," said Veron, of the so-called "opt-out" moms.

See OPT-OUT, Page 5A



Leticia Villagran, owner of Aura Salon in Chappaqua, colors the hair of client Lisa Shaiken. Villagran has utilized the services of the Acceleration Project to help improve her business.



Chris Berlow, owner of United Martial Arts Center, teaches a taekwondo class at the school's Briarcliff Manor location. Berlow has also worked with the Acceleration Project.

Amazing catch: 14-foot sturgeon lurking in the Hudson



A state worker holds up an Atlantic sturgeon captured in 2008. THE JOURNAL NEWS FILE PHOTO

Joseph Spector Albany Bureau
USA TODAY NETWORK

ALBANY — What a find! Researchers last June using sonar equipment on the Hudson River near Hyde Park in Dutchess County made a remarkable discovery: a 14-foot sturgeon, probably weighing 800 pounds and 80 to 90 years old, was lurking deep below the surface.

John Madsen, the University of Delaware geologist running the sonar, said he almost couldn't believe when the reading showed up on his equipment.

See STURGEON, Page 6A

Hacking concerns delay vote machines

Mark Lungariello Rockland/Westchester Journal News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Hackers may be able to manipulate the new voting machines Westchester County plans to buy, allowing extra votes to ballots after they're cast.

The county plans to spend \$6.1 million for 420 new ImageCast Evolution machines, but lawmakers may delay a vote expected Monday due to unanswered questions.



Elections Commissioners Doug Colety, left, and Reggie Lafayette are defending their process for new voting machines.

DAVID MCKAY WILSON/
THE JOURNAL NEWS

Andrew Appel, Eugene Higgins professor of computer science at Princeton University, has written extensively about voting machine security. He said the ICE machines, manufactured by Dominion Voting Systems, have a basic design flaw.

"The voting machine manufacturers are doing their best to make their machines hard to hack and improve their security," Appel told The Journal News/lohud. "But we still have to recognize that in the end any computer can be hacked ... and we still have to be able to run elections that we can

See VOTING, Page 3A

Mount Vernon schools still owed \$31 million

Jonathan Bandler Rockland/Westchester Journal News
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Mount Vernon school district has received \$31 million less in taxes collected by the city Comptroller's Office than it was owed, school officials said Friday.

The shortfall is more than three times larger than in each of the previous two years and has contributed to the district's freezing all non-essential spending.

"We're hopeful the city will recognize its obligation to release those tax payments as they are required," schools Superintendent Kenneth Hamilton said Friday. "Our budget

See SCHOOLS, Page 6A

Spring forward
Daylight saving time begins at 2 a.m. Sunday. Remember to set your clocks forward one hour.



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Opt-out

Continued from Page 1A

There was also a need. Veron noticed businesses in her neighborhood were closing, many feeling the after effects of the economic recession and increased threats from the internet and a shift in buyer behavior.

"Those who had been in business for long didn't know how to pivot and I knew that there were people who we could have helped," said Veron, referring to the extensive functional and industry expertise her fellow opt-out moms possessed.

That led Veron and a fellow Scarsdale mom, Lisa Tretler, a Wharton MBA, in 2012 to establish The Acceleration Project, or TAP, a nonprofit consulting firm with a two-fold mission: to support small businesses and to channel talent into the economy.

"I didn't leave [my job] because I wanted to stop working but because the logistics of life became overly complex," said Veron. "I knew there were many others like me. Once you take time off, it's so hard to find your way back in, to find the flexibility, the control that you need."

About 10 percent of highly-educated mothers (with a master's degree or more) are staying home to care for the family, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center analysis.

Laurie Medvinsky of Scarsdale, has an MBA in Finance from Columbia Business School and worked for Lehman Brothers, Bank of America and Merrill Lynch in fixed income research and sales. Before she joined TAP, Medvinsky said she had been out of the full-time work force for more than a decade.

"Now that my kids are in high school, I am figuring out if I want to go back to work or maybe start a business. I feel like I can use my experience at TAP as a resume builder," said Medvinsky. "In addition to helping the small businesses grow and improve and giving back to the community, the caliber of women I have met at TAP is outstanding."

In 2012, Veron and Tretler started by recruiting three consultants, growing to 23 by 2015.

Some of their earliest clients came through the Women's Economic Development Center, a White Plains-based nonprofit which helps women entrepreneurs. That included working with a client to develop, manufacture and refine a product she had in a prototype for undergarments for people who are disabled or have limited mobility;

another was looking to scale her sweet potato pie business.

Both New Rochelle-based Undercare and Peekskill-based G&K Sweet Foods, LLC are thriving businesses today.

"What is great about the consultants is that they know how to translate their Wall Street expertise into understandable concepts for small businesses," said Veron. Today TAP has helped more than 100 clients and expanded to six states, including Texas and Pennsylvania, and 32 cities and towns, with a roster of 72 volunteer consultants.

How does it work?

To work with TAP, a business must demonstrate a financial need and be at a critical juncture of development.

"It is so accessible in pricing because we get underwritten by grants and donations and we charge on a sliding scale," said Veron.

When Leticia Villagran, an immigrant from Guatemala, was offered a chance to take over a hair salon business in Chappaqua after working there for a few years, it was a dream come true.

The owner, Robin Michelle, had decided to retire and wanted to sell the business to Villagran, a hair stylist who had worked with Michelle for four years.

It was an intimidating process. Villagran said her first instinct was to say no but with the encouragement and financial support of her husband she decided to take the plunge.

One insight from the TAP coaches which helped the business a great deal was the advice to attend specialty food shows and conferences.

"We have many clients in the Fortune 500 beverage industry, but we wouldn't have thought of checking out the up-and-comers," said Francois.

"The beverage industry is exploding with all kinds of specialty drinks, and going to those shows was valuable in understanding the market and securing new clients."

"I was good at hair styling, but running a business was hard. Even though the business was growing, I was struggling with bookkeeping and managing my staff. They helped me with both,"



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Adolfo Vasquez and Tamara Francois launched XP Agency, an experiential marketing agency, in New City. CONTRIBUTED

said Villagran of her TAP advisors. "They looked at my system and taught me how to be more efficient. They gave me ideas on growing my business by doing promotions."

TAP also helped Tamara Francois and Adolfo Vasquez to launch their business, XP Agency, an experiential marketing agency, in New City in 2016.

With 30 years of combined marketing experience between them, the duo went to Community Capital, a not-for-profit alternative lender, which specializes in loans to women and minorities. The bank connected the pair to TAP to ensure support for the new start-up business.

"We wanted coaches who had worked in brand marketing with Fortune 500 companies, and we wanted coaches who understood agency operations. Their [the consultants'] education and background and experience was top notch," said Francois, whose clients now include Coca Cola, P&G and Netflix. "We worked together for six months."

One insight from the TAP coaches which helped the business a great deal was the advice to attend specialty food shows and conferences.

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Chase as part of its \$150 million Small Business Forward program to help women, minority and veteran entrepreneurs.

The nonprofit has also partnered with 10,000 Small Businesses, a philanthropic initiative launched by Goldman Sachs, to support the alumni of their program and to provide teaser classes to prospective businesses.

Municipalities, including New Rochelle and Yonkers have also awarded grants to TAP in 2018 to help local businesses. Chris Berlow, the owner of the United Martial Arts Center in Briarcliff Manor, a Tae Kwon Do school, said the TAP team helped him better utilize the studio's excess capacity in terms of space and hours. They also suggested a new pricing structure and improvements to the website.

"We get so bogged down with the day to day working of the business, that an outside perspective on the business as a whole really helps," said Berlow. "The suggestions they have because of their experience have a lot of merit."

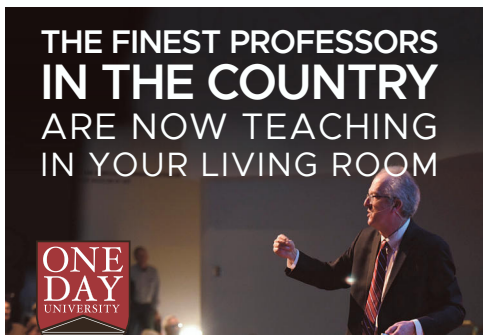
What's in it for the opt-out moms?

For the consultants, who receive professional development and training at TAP, it's a bridge to future work.

Vanessa Siderow, a former director of marketing at TAP, used the experience to bridge back to paid work after almost a decade out of the workforce.

Siderow, who had previously worked in corporate communications and media relations at Citigroup, said the experience at TAP was instrumental in her transition back to paid employ-

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