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Extreme makeover in Peabody: Home-care biz gets revamp

By JENNIFER HELDT POWELL

Small Business Matters

The country is going through a makeover craze - wardrobes, rooms, even whole houses. So why not a business?

Grace Martins had a big vision. She ran a successful senior home-care agency, providing essential services for homebound elderly, but she had a feeling that it could be even better.

"I have really cared for others, but I have not looked at it as a business," said the owner of Martins Senior Home Care in Peabody. "It's been more of a nonprofit than a business."

She wanted to take it to the next level. She just needed a push, some mentoring and some support.

She got that and more as the winner of a six-month Extreme Business Makeover sponsored by the North Shore Women in Business.

The makeover put a team of 17 experts, including a life coach, a business consultant and an attorney, at her disposal for six months.

There was even a fitness instructor and a nutritionist to help her improve her own health.

Martins, a registered nurse, has been taking care of the elderly since she was a teenager. She launched her own home-care agency nearly eight years ago after growing frustrated with the treatment of and lack of training for workers at places where she worked.

Until six months ago, she ran the business out of her home.

She was doing OK, but the business wasn't living up to its full potential, said Ruth Sheets, chief of Ducks in a Row Consulting. Martins had hired Sheets before the contest started, to develop better systems while cutting costs and looking for new opportunities.

Martins said the work she had done with Sheets gave her the confidence to enter the makeover contest. With the extra resources, she was able to evaluate the direction of the company more broadly.

"The key in this situation was to help (Martins) ground herself in her life purpose," said Martins' new personal coach, Donna Johnson, owner of Pathworks Coaching. "She has a deep understanding that she's here to serve and she has a larger purpose. Once she got a sense of that, she got out of her own way."

Martins started her business so she could improve the lives of her workers while taking care of the elderly.

She provided training not only in matters related to her home health care but also such things as English as a second language.

The key was to take that training she'd been offering for free and turn it into a profitable business.

Through the makeover, she developed a new training division that offers more formal education not only to her own workers but also to others.

While working on her business, Martins started exercising and eating better to help control her diabetes. Making those changes was harder than fixing up the business, she said.

But she has more energy now to devote to the company.

It was difficult to make time to meet with so many different people, but Martins said it was worth it.

"It was life changing," Martins said. "I would not have been able to accomplish what I did unless I had this team of women supporting me and encouraging me."

Ruth A. Sheets is the principal of **Ducks in a Row Consulting**, a small business consulting firm working with start ups, fix ups, and build ups. Ducks in a Row Consulting brings the secrets and know-how of corporate consulting to small business, where it can only make a faster, bigger, and more profitable difference. Call 978-463-2264 or email info@ducksinarowconsulting.com to learn more.

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