

BCIT helps acupuncturist get her point across

Money and training help people in the Downtown Eastside get their businesses started

BY BRIAN MORTON, VANCOUVER SUN
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Laurel Irons performs acupuncture on a client Tuesday. The winner of a competition organized by BCIT business students, Irons is setting up a mobile acupuncture clinic in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Photograph by: Nick Procajlo, PNG, Vancouver Sun

A program that helps budding entrepreneurs who live or work in the Downtown Eastside means Laurel Irons can finally get her mobile acupuncture clinic underway.

"This enables me to launch my business," said Irons, who recently won a \$2,000 prize offered through a program organized by the B.C. Institute of Technology's School of Business. "Without [the \$2,000], I'd either have to wait or defer some of my startup costs."

Irons, whose new company is named 5 Shen Acupuncture & Herbal Therapy, was one of five finalists in the Lions Lair competition, organized by the Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE) BCIT team.

The business students, who partnered with the Eastside Movement for Business and Economic Renewal Society in delivering the program, provided one-on-one entrepreneurship training and mentorship to up to 15 disadvantaged individuals either living or working in the Downtown Eastside.

The initiative was under the national TD SIFE Entrepreneurship Challenge, sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group and operated by Advancing Canadian Entrepreneurship, a national charitable organization that among other things organizes the SIFE program.

Irons, a traditional Chinese-medicine practitioner who will soon upgrade to become a registered acupuncturist, said it was a great honour winning the competition, adding that the BCIT business students were extremely helpful.

"It provided a lot of practical knowledge about putting together a business. Instead of jumping into my own clinic, it'll enable me to start my business on a much stronger footing. The coaches were fantastic."

The 35-year-old Irons, a single mother at a young age who herself overcame hardship, plans to focus on people living in the Downtown Eastside who normally might not have access to her services. They include "the homeless, people experiencing the effects of poverty, single mothers like I was, new refugees, people dealing with addictions."

She plans to work with clients of Downtown Eastside service providers who are covered by the province's medical plan.

Another man who benefited from the program was Jeff Martin, who owns a furniture design company in east Vancouver called Jeff Martin Joinery (jeffmartinjoinery.com) that specializes in furniture made from responsibly harvested timber.

"It was incredible," noted Martin, who won a \$500 prize at the Lions Lair competition. "All the students involved really took a risk with their time and resources in helping us out. They helped us develop business plans."

Marlene Romero, project manager for SIFE BCIT, said in an interview that students organized five workshops on presentation skills, sales skills, marketing skills, financial planning and utilizing social media for advertising purposes.

She said each participant was paired with a business student.

"We walked them through each workshop applying it to their business.

"They [participants] said it was invaluable. I feel it was very successful for both the students and the entrepreneurs."

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