

Program urges students to remain in area after graduation

BY DAVID S. RODOCK
THE VALDOSTA DAILY TIMES

VALDOSTA — The Valdosta-Lowndes Chamber of Commerce is working to position Metro Valdosta as an “Opportunity Central” by instituting a new program to encourage Valdosta State University and Wiregrass Georgia Technical College students to stay in the area after graduation.



Ballard

The chamber plans to work with local business owners to stimulate knowledge-based job growth by focusing on three main areas: facilitating the growth of new jobs, connecting the business community with the local colleges and creating a nurturing environment where the highly-educated want to live.

Chamber leaders are aware that there is a large population of graduates that are leaving the area because there are not enough professional jobs available.

“In the 1950s and 1960s, our economic development strategy was to promote South Georgia as a great place to do business because we had cheap land and cheap labor, but that is not the concept that we want or have now,” said Myrna Ballard, chamber president.

“Until we start thinking about it differently, our community can’t become anything different.”

Opportunity Central is a collective movement of chamber programs to inform and stimulate this high-end job growth.

“We started our effort to increase the availability of knowledge-based jobs in 2004,” said Ballard.

“Even though it was already in an upward trend, it has continued to get better.”

Programs include the Opportunity Central Book Club, which is a forum for leaders in the community to gather and discuss economic and cultural topics that could have an impact on the area.

Books selected are specific to the region or to the goals of Opportunity Central.

The first book that the group discussed was titled “Atlanta Rising” by Frederick Allen, and it focused on how Atlanta was able to become an economic and cultural point for the entire southeast region.

“Creative City” by Charles Landry will be the next book discussed by members and is described as a toolkit for urban innovation.

Former VSU President Dr. Ronald Zaccari will facilitate the next meeting on April 18.

ON THE WEB

Opportunity Central
www.opportunitycentral.net/talent

Another facet of the program invites industry experts in economic development, urban planning, authors and other celebrated professionals who have the ability to inspire leaders and citizens in the area.

Past speakers have been Charles Landry, Peter Kaygeyama, Chris Miller, Christian Sottile and Howard Morrison.

“Other communities have transformed their communities and this is what we’re trying to do,” said ReKasa Deen, business development director. “We’ve invited guests to speak with our community leaders to give ideas about what these other communities are doing and some of the things we can implement into our own community.”

The chamber has also instituted a program called the Opportunity Central Talent Connection, which creates a partnership between VSU and Wiregrass Tech to encourage businesses to offer internship opportunities for students.

“The businesses don’t have to figure who to contact, they just fill out this form,” said Deen. “Our hope is that the internship will turn into full-time employment for these students after they graduate, and even if that particular business doesn’t have an opening, it’s a great way for students to make professional connections in the community so that we can retain them.”

By visiting www.opportunitycentral.net/talent, businesses can sign up to offer internship opportunities to local colleges with minimal work.

Students can use the website to find what internships are available in the area and how to apply for them.

The IT Professionals Network is a quarterly event that allows any IT professional who is a member of the chamber to attend lunch and speak with other like-minded professionals in the area to exchange new technology ideas or methods that they are working with.

“You have to admit, when you have a challenge in front of you to address, things don’t get better until you admit there is a challenge,” said Ballard. “You can’t get different results from going about the problem in the same way.”

According to the chamber, even though the sagging economy has had a substantial impact on overall job growth, with approximately 2,231 jobs lost

in all sectors last year, knowledge-based job growth has continued to grow over the last three years, up 186 jobs in 2009

alone. “We need all types of jobs. We just think that growing these knowledge-based jobs is important for

us to attract our graduates to remain in the area,” said Ballard. “In order for us to begin this change, we need to begin to think of

Valdosta as a center of opportunity for South Georgia. We need people talking about it and getting excited about it.”



Cancer Survivors - It's All About You!

Whether it's 1 day, 1 year or 40 years...
YOU are winning the fight against cancer.
We want to celebrate your victory!

We need your information for our upcoming
Survivor Celebration on April 21 and Relay For Life on April 29!
Go to www.relayforlife.org/lowndescounty or
call Derenda at 560-7493 to register as a Survivor or Caregiver.
2011 Relay For Life presented by **Coleman | Talley**

658106amv

BEST BUDDIES CLUB, INC.

proudly supports

THE HAVEN



PUT ON YOUR
**FAVORITE
PARTY ATTIRE**
AND JOIN US ON
MAY 7, 2011
FOR
**GREAT MUSIC,
DINNER AND
DANCING!**

where **VSU Ballroom** when **May 7, 2011**
Dinner 7:00 p.m. / Dancing from 8:00 p.m. to midnight
Tickets \$75 per person *Please Make Checks Payable To* **THE HAVEN**

Ticket Locations:

Bennett Law Firm, Steel's Jewelry, Mockingbird and Classic Art and Frame

652738dvw