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Local woman wins extreme business makeover

By AMANDA McGREGOR

Staff Writer

PEABODY - Grace Martins is a changed woman.

Six months ago, she was out of shape, overtired and struggling to keep her home business, Martins Senior Homecare, afloat.

"Really, I was depleted," she said.

Today, she has a new office in downtown Peabody, a business plan, a revamped look and a healthy lifestyle - thanks to her Extreme Business Makeover, a first-ever program sponsored by the North Shore Women in Business organization.

"I didn't realize so much was going to change," said Martins, who applied for the makeover last spring. She had to keep her nomination a secret until last night, when it was revealed at the Women in Business annual meeting in Danvers.

The makeover partnered Martins with 15 North Shore businesswomen - "The Extreme Team" - who volunteered their services for six months to help Martins get her life on track, from personal nutrition and fitness to finding office space, developing employee contracts and launching a Web page.

"These things wouldn't have happened without the support of these women," said Martins, beaming as she sat in her storefront office on Main Street in Peabody yesterday morning. "I just started seeing myself through their eyes."

Carol Sanger, owner of The Web Division at the Cummings Center in Beverly, was one of the businesswomen who helped Martins. She was also one of the women who brainstormed the makeover, inspired by all the reality TV programs.

It actually started with the idea of a personal makeover, Sanger said, "but we said, no, we're a women's business networking organization, and we're not into the frilly stuff. All the shows out there today are about the cosmetic. This focused on a holistic approach to a business turnaround, with the idea that sometimes you need to do work personally to progress professionally."

North Shore Women in Business announced the contest last spring and received 12 applications for the makeover from their membership of 250.

"We are about learning, networking and helping our members to succeed in their businesses," Sanger said. "This was a way to showcase the talents of the members of the organization, too."

Marketing and coaching

During the last six months, Martins worked with each of the Extreme Team members, including a business consultant, a marketing director and a personal coach.

Her business, which she founded eight years ago, had grown to 25 employees, but was struggling. "In order to get to the next level, I knew I needed help - I needed a lot more services and business consulting," said Martins, 43.

"I got to a point where I couldn't be a 'mom and pop' (business) anymore. You either keep it small or you take it to the next level to compete."

Through consultations, Martins, a registered nurse, learned to market her business and to charge for all the skills she is certified to teach, including home health care, food safety, Alzheimer's training and more, and she now runs seminars out of her office. The office is new, too - she used to run the business out of her home.

The makeover has helped her lose 20 pounds so far, and she exercises three times a week. Her diabetes is getting under control, and her energy level is better than ever, she said.

"It's been awesome, just awesome," said Martins, who wore a sleek black skirt and blazer with white piping and matching jewelry. "It was all because of the great support of these women - these things that I accomplished wouldn't have happened without them."

Martins took relaxation therapy as part of the makeover and worked closely with local nutritionist Kristin Ford.

"Grace is just an amazing human being," said Ford, who owns Nourishing Lifeworks in Beverly. "She is so motivated and driven to create a lasting change in her life."

Doing it all

Martins grew up in Portugal and moved to Peabody with her family when she was 15. She didn't speak any English and took night classes to earn her GED, going on to become a registered nurse and, finally, to found Martins Senior Homecare.

Her life is hectic, between her business, volunteer commitments and raising two children - stress that is all too common among women, Ford said.

"Women are often in the role of caregiver for everyone else, and our own needs get left behind," Ford said. "To really be able to make herself the priority was the key to being able to manage everything else."

"That's why I really loved the concept of this (makeover), because it wasn't just about business, or just about fitness. It was about all of those things."

For more information, and a list of all the members of the Extreme Makeover team, visit the North Shore Women in Business Web site at www.nswib.org.

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