



News

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For more information contact:
Rena Carlson
441-1081

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SBA's Woman Owned Business of the Year Hails from Conrad

HELENA, MT – SBA Montana District Director Michelle Johnston announced today that Big Sky Travel Nurses, Inc. of Conrad, owned by Jennifer Keck, has been named SBA's 2004 Montana Woman Owned Business of the Year. Keck will be honored along with an outstanding cast of entrepreneurs and advocates at SBA's Annual Small Business Week Awards Luncheon at Missoula's Doubletree Inn on May 7th.

Keck began her nursing career at Pondera Medical Center in Conrad in 1998. At the same time she worked with Benefis HealthCare in Great Falls as a Peace Hospice Nurse. In October 1998, Keck was diagnosed with renal failure and underwent a kidney transplant. Determined and strengthened, she returned to her positions in Conrad and Great Falls, but being an overachiever, she had a desire for more. Keck began working as a travel nurse. She worked in various facilities throughout Montana where traveling nurses were getting all the hours, and it was apparent to her that this, combined with the national nursing shortage, was a business opportunity waiting to happen. So, after garnering information from professionals on operating her own business, she launched Big Sky Travel Nurses, Inc. in January 2000.

Big Sky Travel Nurses is a temporary staffing agency providing traveling nurses to hospitals in Montana, Alaska, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Washington, Arizona, Oregon and California. The company finds nurses from all over the United States, mostly over the Internet, to work 13-week stints in the areas of their specialty at hospitals in various locations.

The company started out in the basement of Keck's home as a one "woman" show. She was traveling throughout Montana as an RN, while handling all the managerial duties as well, and running the business by her cell phone. Today the company has grown from the one owner/employee start-up to five office staff and a team of 30 nurses, while revenues for the company have increased an astonishing 78% since the company's inception.

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Woman Owned Business of the Year

Keck's road to success has been filled with challenges however, she has met these challenges head on and Big Sky Travel Nurses, Inc. is here to stay. As the healthcare industry has changed and the economy has weakened, Keck has focused on identifying areas within the industry that are lacking services. She recently started another business, Montana Healthcare Registry to develop a one call clearing house that matches healthcare facilities' specific needs with various travel nurse companies across the country. In addition, Keck is venturing into home health care. With the nation's aging population, there is a continuously growing market and she wants to be a part of it!

Suzie David of the Great Falls Small Business Development Center nominated Jennifer Keck. Other award winners being honored include: William Woody of Nightingale Nursing Services, Inc. of Missoula – Montana Small Business Person of the Year; Jack Morgenstern of Century Companies, Inc. of Lewistown – First Runner-up Small Business Person of the Year; Frederick “Rick” Larson of Employee Benefit management Services, Inc. – Entrepreneurial Success Award; Ryan Deskins of R&R Pressure Washing of East Helena – SBA Young Entrepreneur of the Year; Kim Wild of TowHaul Corporation, dba Smith Equipment USA of Belgrade – National Small Business Exporter of the Year; Mandi Luce-Heinle and Sarah Ann Hamlen of Innovative Marketing Solutions, LLC of Hathaway – Main Street Business of the Year; Jerry Sullivan of Flint Creek Valley Bank in Philipsburg – Financial Services Advocate of the Year; Sheryle Shandy of Billings Food Bank & Montana Harvest Kitchens/Montana Harvest Gift Boutique in Billings – Home-Based Business Advocate of the Year; Flathead Business Journal of Kalispell – Small Business Journalist of the Year; Craig Smith of the Fort Peck Community College in Poplar – Minority Small Business Advocate of the Year; Joe Fletcher of the Great Falls Job Service Workforce Center – Veteran Small Business Advocate of the Year; and Joy Ott of Wells Fargo Bank Montana, N.A. in Billings – Women in Business Advocate of the Year.

For more information on SBA programs and services, contact the Montana SBA District office at (406) 441-1081 or log onto www.sba.gov/mt.

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