



NEWS RELEASE

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Virginia Owners of Pet Products Company Are National Small Business Persons of the Year

Iowa, Georgia Winners are Runners-Up

WASHINGTON – The owners of a pet products business whose Richmond, Virginia-based company started at home with \$5,000 and two used sewing machines were named *National Small Business Persons of the Year*, during ceremonies today at the National Entrepreneurial Conference and Expo.

Sharon E. Bennett and Evan C. Wooten and their company, Premier Pet Products, sell and produce collars, leashes and other specialty pet products that “improve the relationships between people and their pets.” The 40th annual National Small Business of the Year, they were selected from among the state Small Business Persons of the Year representing the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam.

Bennett’s life changed in 1988, when her family adopted a retired greyhound racing dog whose career had come to an end. Saddened by the idea that most retired greyhounds are put to death, she founded the Richmond Chapter of Greyhound Pets of America to promote more adoptions. A year later, with a \$5,000 loan in her pocket, she bought two used sewing machines and a few boxes of raw materials, and started making innovative dog collars and leashes at home.

Bennett’s self-taught business and marketing abilities led to a request from a local dog trainer for a new kind of collar so that dog owners could have better and more humane control over their pets. Her efforts led to a new halter collar called the Easy Walker, and later to another called the Gentle Leader. Both products were in line with Bennett’s passion for creative, fun, fashionable and humane products that improve the interaction between people and their pets.

From that start, Premier Pet Products – with the help of an SBA-backed loan – now distributes its products directly to 10,000 independent pet supply retailers, veterinarians and dog trainers, as well as the big-box pet specialty chains. Bennett brought Wooten in as a partner in 1998 to help her manage the fast-paced growth of the company, and since his then, employment has grown to 114 and sales have leapt from 50 to 70 percent per year, to more than \$10 million last year.

“People often ask what’s ‘hot’ in small business, and Premier Pet Products proves that *innovation* is what’s hot in small business. Small business success happens when entrepreneurs like Ms. Bennett and Mr. Wooten identify a need and fill that need with a product or service.

In this case, Ms. Bennett's invention, and her personal commitment to animals, filled a need that is part of \$30 billion industry – that's what Americans spend on their pets every year," said SBA Administrator Hector V. Barreto. "Small business is the premier source of American innovation, and Premier Pet Products is a great example of that fact."

The first runner-up this year in the national competition is Joanne Stockdale, president and owner of Northern Iowa Die Casting, Inc., \$10 million per year maker of quality alloy castings for manufacturer clients in Lake Park, Iowa. The second runner-up is Paula Hiers Deen, owner of the Lady & Sons Restaurant, caterer and cookbook writer in Savannah, Ga.

Joanne Stockdale bought Northern Iowa Die Casting, Inc. in 1984 when it was on the brink of failure, down to six employees, obsolete equipment and a single customer. With the help of an SBA-backed loan, she turned the company around. Today, Northern Iowa Die Casting, Inc. has 100 employees casting eight different alloys on 11 casting machines. The company manufactures zinc and aluminum castings for original equipment manufacturers in seven states and five countries. Sales have gone from \$225,000 in 1984 to \$10 million in 2002 – an astounding 4,344 percent increase. Between 1996 and 2002 alone, sales doubled from \$5 million to \$10 million.

Paula Hiers Deen has published best selling cookbooks based on the menu at her popular "The Lady & Sons" restaurant in Savannah, but her climb to the top in the culinary world reads more like a bestselling novel – the story of an agoraphobic single mother who started a tiny catering operation in her own kitchen with \$200 in cash and grew it into a \$2 million a year business that has been featured from *USA Today* to the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Her deft hand in the kitchen, combined with a dedicated staff and her flair for the dramatic, have set her restaurant apart. Singing waiters and waitresses, an innate Southern charm to her place, and her signature cheese biscuits have pushed her business to the top of the charts in Savannah, with a staff of 60 and sales topping \$2.6 million per year.

The national small business awards are a highlight of SBA's National Entrepreneurial Conference and Expo this week in Washington, D.C. The National Entrepreneurial Conference and Expo this year marks the SBA's 50th anniversary as a federal agency and honors the contributions of the nation's small business owners. The winners are selected on their record of stability, growth in employment and sales, financial condition, innovation, response to adversity, and community service.

For more information on the these companies and on the rest of the state Small Business Person of the Year award winners, visit the SBA Web site at <http://www.sba.gov/50/winners.html>

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*Additional Information on **National Entrepreneurial Conference & Expo 2003** is available at <http://www.sba.gov/50/>. For more information about all of the SBA's programs for small businesses, call the SBA Answer Desk at 1-800-U-ASK-SBA or TDD 704-344-6640. Also, visit the SBA's extensive Web site at www.sba.gov.*

