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Mentors ease path to profits

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Tech firm founder acknowledges helping hand and aids others

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By Ann Meyer | Special to the Tribune
June 23, 2008

Entrepreneurship was a survival instinct for George Burciaga, but a mentor helped him make it happen.

Burciaga, chief executive of Chicago technology firm SmarTECHS .net, grew up poor in Pilsen, where two of his uncles were shot on the street and his older cousins protected him like bodyguards. His grandparents raised him with a solid work ethic. And at 7, Burciaga was selling gum in the neighborhood to raise money.

"The only way in my mind to move myself out of poverty and violence was to become my own boss. It was by necessity," said Burciaga, who lives in Bolingbrook.

Burciaga's original goal was to find a safer environment for his relatives, but he has accomplished much more by building an information technology firm with \$9 million under contract this year and 24 workers, many from the East Pilsen neighborhood where SmarTECHS is located.



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SmarTECHS' Follow-Me program takes high school students to visit area colleges and meet admissions counselors, while "SmarTECHS on Campus," planned for a fall launch, will provide hands-on training to students in a 3,000-square-foot facility at Robert Morris College.

Burciaga, honored as Illinois Small Business Person of the Year on Thursday and named second runner-up nationally, is the first to acknowledge he didn't do it alone. He credits his relatives and mentor Richard Wallace, an experienced businessman who befriended him and steered him on the road to success.

"Finding a person like Richard Wallace was a godsend for me," Burciaga said. "He gave me a lot of business structure that I never had. He made it clear he believed in me. I couldn't let him down."

More programs

Mentorship, whether formal or informal, is on the rise, experts said.

"The concept of mentoring is growing," said Jasmine Moore, program director at the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center, who oversees the Athena PowerLink mentoring program for female entrepreneurs, which had more than 100 participants last year. "More organizations are identifying mentoring as a need among their membership and are crafting programs," Moore said.

A mentoring relationship can be useful for women or minority entrepreneurs who might not have role models in their lives to draw on, experts said.

Besides chambers of commerce and other business associations, peer-to-peer advisory groups also can spawn mentoring relationships, while small-business centers sometimes offer programs.

Work colleagues and acquaintances from social groups also can become mentors.

The easiest way to find a mentor is to ask someone you respect for feedback, Moore said. "That invites a dialogue and can open the door to a new relationship," she said.

Mentoring relationships can turn into a long-term friendship. Wallace, for example, was best man in Burciaga's wedding. But Wallace downplays the role he played in Burciaga's success.

"I gave him the opportunity, but once he got the confidence, there was no stopping him," said Wallace, president of Beverage Consultants International in Chicago. "You'd never believe this young man came from where he came from."

A strong mentoring relationship is a two-way street, Moore said. "Both people grow as a

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result," she said.

Veteran entrepreneurs often become mentors because someone in their own life helped them.

Ripple effect

"There are very few things that provide greater satisfaction than helping someone else," said Steven Rogers, professor of entrepreneurship at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, who also helped launch the Urban League's Entrepreneurial Center, a partnership between the league and Kellogg.

For many entrepreneurs, finding the right mentor can have a ripple effect, as the organization and surrounding community benefit, experts said. "Entrepreneurship is the means by which people can change their lives," Rogers said.

He speaks from the heart because, he said, "I have walked in that young man's shoes." Rogers was raised in Englewood by a single-parent mother who emphasized education and entrepreneurship.

"I'm a testament to what can happen when other people care and when you decide you want something better for your life," he said.

For Rogers, help came from an organization called A Better Chance, which provided him the opportunity to attend highly regarded Radnor High School in a suburb of Philadelphia.

His success there led to Williams College and later Harvard Business School.

Rogers, who also owned a lampshade manufacturing company in Chicago, believes entrepreneurship is the ticket to a better life and that successful business owners can make a bigger difference in their community by sharing their expertise.

Think of the alternative, Rogers said. "If you look at this young man's early life, what is his future? Is he going to end up becoming angry because he has no options, or is he going to be the one who provides hope and opportunity to others?"

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