

FEMALE INNOVATION

After 30 years making dry cat food from scratch to feed her feline friends, Phyllis Thompson felt it was missing something — a sauce to top it off.

She centered a business idea that centered around making all-natural cat sauces to go in and on cat food.

To make it happen, the retired senior executive and chief financial officer with the federal government turned to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County's Activate program, which trains women technology entrepreneurs.

"This program stretches you and teaches you how to start a business from the ground up," said

Thompson, a 2006 Activate graduate and owner of Purr-fect Gourmet LLC. "I walked in here and the first thing we had to do was write a patent application and I didn't know how."

The program, which began in 2005, is working to fill Maryland's void of women technology entrepreneurs. With the support of a three-year \$600,000 grant from the National Science Foundation, the year-long program is training mid-career women to bring their technology ideas to the marketplace.

Activate's technology focus attracts women along the Baltimore-Washington Corridor looking to create a product or



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER MYERS

Phyllis Thompson at a lab at the University of Maryland, College Park, where ingredients are analyzed and her cat food product is formulated.

business centered in fields such as biotech, science, engineering and consulting.

The program is designed to form a technology-based company by the program's end, said Julie Lenzer Kirk, one of three Activate instructors.

"A lot of people have business ideas and don't know where to go or how to start," she said. "It's about taking something and turning it into a reality."

The goal is to graduate three companies every year, said Kirk. To date, eight women who have completed the program have gone on to start their own business. Thirty women have graduated from the program.

Word has spread since the program's inception and the number of applications are rising. In 2005, 70 women applied to the program. There were more than 100 applicants in 2006 and 2007. The program accepted 28 women this year after an intensive screening process that included

resume reviews and interviews.

"We look for entrepreneur spirit, time commitment and business and technology experience," said Kirk.

The program ranges in age from women in their mid-20s to early 50s stretching from Baltimore City to Northern Virginia.

Market feasibility and analysis, competition, decision making and technology costs are key business lessons taught in the program, said Kirk.

"Activate helps to make the first year in business less painful," said Terry Chase Hazell, a program instructor.

Thompson has received a \$50,000 grant from the University of Maryland, College Park laboratory for product taste testing and secured a confidentiality agreement with Martek Biosciences Corp., a Columbia-based firm that makes products from microalgae. She hopes to market her product in mid-2008.

Thompson said what she learned in the program gave her the knowledge to pursue her product as a real business venture. Learning the costs of licensing, market analysis, technology skills and how to write patents were instrumental in securing funding to create her business, she said.

"This was something I always wanted to do," said Thompson, 61. "I learned there's a real science behind food. The goal is to make dry foods more appealing without changing the nutritional value."

For Kerrie L. Brady, a 2005 Activate graduate, the program enabled her to step into a leadership role.

"I have my MBA and a biotech consulting business background but I didn't have CEO experience and the program provided that," she said. "It's about life experience rather than formal training."

Brady, 44, is a former international business development executive from Australia with over 20 years of experience in

American, Japanese and Australian biotech firms.

Thanks to Activate, she is founder and CEO of Traxion Therapeutics Inc., a biotech company that is focused on the development of drugs to treat neuropathy, a severe pain that affects the nerves of the hands, back and feet.

"There are only five drugs approved to treat neuropathic pain so I would like to develop that further," she said. "We're making extremely good improvement."

Since graduating from the program, Brady has assembled a product portfolio, recruited an advisory team and created a business plan.

Both Brady and Thompson agree that the program has been life changing.

"I should have done this a long time ago," said Brady. "In Maryland, I think we could deal with everyone being more entrepreneurial." <