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Small Business Administration to honor entrepreneurs

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BY FRANCINE KNOWLES Business Reporter

Heather Becker sought a way to combine her passion for art with her love for business.

Cynthia Johnson, a former residential interior designer, was inspired to move in a new direction.

Both women opted for entrepreneurship, and their efforts in building their successful enterprises will be recognized here Tuesday at the US Small Business Administration's annual Illinois Small Business Week Awards Luncheon.

The event, presented by the Illinois district office, honors small-business owners and advocates for their contributions to Illinois' economy and society.

Becker is chief executive of The Chicago Conservation Center, an art conservation company, based in Chicago, that repairs and restores paintings, frames, textiles, photographs, murals and other art objects. Named Small Business Person of the Year, Becker noted her company has grown to become the largest conservation laboratory in the United States.

Becker joined the company 15 years ago as an administrative assistant. At the time, the regionally focused business had roughly 100 clients.

Three years later, she proposed a national business plan for the company's owner at the time.

"In one year, I grew the company 15 percent," she said.

Becker who became a partner in 1995 and sole owner last year, said the business today has more than 500 clients and took in \$2 million in revenues last year.

Its staff of 24 does work for corporations, museums, insurance companies, auction houses, galleries and private clients, and it restored more than 425 murals in the Chicago Public Schools.

"We see ourselves as a unique business model," Becker said. "We do business with big business like the insurance industry. Yet on the flip side of that, we work for private clients to save art collections and family heirlooms in addition to doing the community service of preserving public works of art."

Johnson's Chicago-based contract furniture dealership, Johnson & Associates Business Interiors Inc., is also a unique enterprise.

It is the only minority, female-owned office furniture dealership in the Chicago area.

Johnson, named Entrepreneurial Success of the Year, launched the company in 1978.

The full-service dealership provides office furniture and interior space planning to corporate, institutional and government clients.

Johnson started in the industry working in residential interior design. Before launching her business, she moved into the contract furniture business by landing a job at Steelcase, where she was assigned to major corporate clients, she said. She loved the work and saw opportunity for growth, so she decided to venture out on her own with a staff of one -- herself, she said.

Today she employs 22, and her company generated \$14 million in revenues last year. It counts among its 100 clients Kraft Foods, SBC and Bank of America.

Asked her perspective on what's key to being a successful entrepreneur, she shared, "Perseverance and keeping focused."

"You have to be a business person first; I've been through three recessions," and she learned from the experiences, she said.

"In today's competitive environment, you have to be knowledgeable, prepared and able to deliver quality and sustain growth."

Other entrepreneurs being honored at the SBA luncheon, which takes place, at the Renaissance Chicago Hotel, are:

- Key Sang Lee, president of Cover the World Import and Export Inc., an exporter of meat and agricultural products. He was named Small Business Exporter of the Year.
- Jennifer Breen, president of WorkForce Cleaning Inc., a residential and business cleaning company. Twenty-nine-year-old Breen was named Young Entrepreneur of the Year.
- Ike Hong, president and chief executive officer of Pacific Construction Services Inc., named District Director's Choice Award winner.

Also being recognized are Kathleen Kim Erkman, contracting officer for the Federal Aviation Administration Great Lakes Region, named Veterans Small Business Champion of the Year; Mayor Daley, named Minority Small Business Champion of the Year, and Tamina O'Neill, first vice president of LaSalle Bank's Government Lending/SBA division, named Financial Services Advocate of the Year.

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