

WOMEN

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were single-person operations without any employees.

Annette Watters, a project manager at the University of Alabama's Center for Business and Economic Research, said that as she pored through the census data, she discovered some interesting things.

Like businesses as a whole, businesses owned by women are most plentiful in urban areas, but Watters said she was surprised to find some rural areas like Marengo and Walker counties where these were thriving and making good revenue.

"In those areas, they seemed to have found a niche that needed to be met and they were able to do it," she said.

In Alabama and nationally, businesses that provide a service were the most popular for female business owners with many of those businesses geared toward serving other women. They include beauty salons, nail salons, makeup and skin care businesses — the types of businesses that have employed women for decades and where women with training and skills would find it easier to start their own business.

But Watters said she also found Alabama women owning cleaning and janitorial services. "And we don't want to overlook the thousands of women in Alabama who own and operate a day care center or offer some kind of social assistance service such as home health care.

"Accounting, tax preparation, bookkeeping and payroll services are among the thousands of women-owned professional service businesses that women in Alabama. And retailing also is very popular."

While some women, like Rue, own their own shops, many more female retailers do not have a storefront. Instead they frequently sell their products from a home office, Watters said.

And many female retailers, both those with shops and without, don't just cater to female customers, she said.

More women own auto parts stores than flower shops, she said.

"Hundreds of building materials and garden equipment stores, furniture stores, grocery stores and office supply stores in Alabama are owned by women," she said. "If it is a retail commodity, there is probably a woman somewhere in Alabama who owns a store that sells it."

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Annette Watters, a project manager at the University of Alabama's Center for Business and Economic Research

Even the construction industry, once a male bastion, has seen not only a growing number of women employees but also more female business owners. Alabama female own electrical, plumbing, heating, air conditioning businesses, painting companies, and businesses that do other kinds of exterior building, Watters said.

But she said one industry surprised her.

"Women in Alabama own fewer restaurants than we might have expected," she said. "Women are more likely to own a real estate business than a restaurant. And almost as many Alabama women own an insurance agency or some other finance business as those who own a restaurant."

Female business owners, like their male counterparts, often will use the professional skills and knowledge they acquired working for others to start their own business.

That's what Rue did.

"I was always interested in home decor, furnishings and gifts," she said. "As I got into my late 30s, I had this strong desire to try this."

She had worked as a paralegal in Houston before moving to Alabama, but also had work experience in real estate, inventory management and other areas that she was able to use as an entrepreneur. Her mother, who was a partner when the business started, also had retail experience.

But that did not assure success.

"There were times in the early years when it really was tough, and I asked myself why did I give up a job with better pay, job security, a retirement plan and benefits," she said. "But I always felt I was made for this."

Having encouragement from her husband and family also helped, she said.

Attorney Carol Armstrong started her own law firm in Tuscaloosa two years after leaving a larger law practice. She also has been active in leading the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama's Women in Business Council.

All business owners or man-

agers, whether male or female, face the same challenges, whether it is managing people or finances, she said. But many women have an additional challenge — balancing their careers with family responsibilities.

Until a few decades ago, women were seen as solely responsible for managing the home and family, she said. Today, women often still take on that responsibility while managing business or professional careers.

That can lead to extra stress. The Women in Business Council provide seminars and guest speakers to deal with that and find a healthy balance between careers and family, she said.

That balance is something more and more women face.

The number of women with careers has grown significantly in the past 50 years. Since the late 1970s, women have outnumbered men in colleges and universities, according to the U.S. Department of Education. And since 1984, women have been in the majority in the nation's graduate schools.

More than 57 percent of students in degree-granting institutes of higher education are now females, the department said.

And many professions that 50 years ago were overwhelmingly male bastions are now becoming dominated by women. Reports this fall, for example, indicated about four out of five students in the nation's veterinary schools are now female.

In comparison, Armstrong noted that when she earned her law degree at UA in 1998, her law school class was about evenly split between the sexes.

She said the increase of more women with college degrees and advanced degrees has put major cracks into the "glass ceiling," a term popularized in the 1980s to describe the artificial barriers that kept women from advancing to the top echelons in corporate America. But she said, the glass ceiling has not disappeared.

"To paraphrase the old saying, we have come a long way baby, but we still have a long way to go," she said.