By Jenny Gabruch for Saskatoon Business

Diane Ehrhardt recently made the leap.

This fall, the Saskatoon sales executive switched gears from employee to entrepreneur, opening Serenity Apparel on Second Avenue, a retail clothing store catering to the ever-growing yoga and fitness trend.

"It was a really scary decision," she says of leaving The StarPhoenix, her employer of 14 years, to strike out on her own. "I pondered it for a long time because I was happy in the position I was in. But I thought if I didn't try it, I would regret it because I've always wanted to have my own business."

Ehrhardt, 36, is among a growing number of women in Saskatoon and across the province who are making the move to self-employment.

"We've seen a lot more growth in the last few years," says Laura Small, CEO of Women Entrepreneurs of Saskatchewan, a nonprofit group that provides business advising, financing and training for women starting or expanding their business.

"When we first started in the late '90s, women were starting businesses at four times the rate of men. That has slowed down somewhat, but they are still outpacing men."

According to Statistics Canada, the number of self-employed men in Canada doubled from 1976 to 2008, from 873,400 to 1,719,700. The number of self-employed women nearly tripled in that same period, from 311,600 to 909,900.

In Saskatchewan, Small says the number of women entrepreneurs has nearly doubled since 1982, from 16,000 to around 30,000.

She says the types of femaleowned businesses have diversified.

"Our clients are across industries. Probably 70 per cent are in the service sector, but there is such a broad range of the types of businesses. And we're dealing a lot more with growing businesses than with start-ups."

Michelle Zimmer changed

More women entrepreneurs



Engineer-turned-chef Michelle Zimmer, owner of Wild Serendipity Foods, changed her career path three and a half years ago and couldn't be happier with the move

- SB Photo by Jeff Lyons

careers paths three and a half years ago, and she couldn't be happier with the move. The engineer-turned-chef says it was more about following her passion than anything else. Before launching Wild Serendipity Foods, Zimmer spent nearly 10 years as an environmental consultant in Vancouver and Victoria. She made a good living, but says her interest in food and cooking became all-consuming.

"My desire to work with food

sort of turned into a need," she recalls. "I just decided to take the plunge and do it full-time."

Less than one year after opening, Zimmer was named a finalist in the 2007 SABEX (Saskatoon Achievement in Business Excellence) awards.

Zimmer, 42, originally ran a professional catering venture but now focuses on cooking classes and selling fresh-baked scones and gourmet condiments Saturdays at the Saskatoon Farmers' Market. That's where she first started out, and where she's found her niche — 80 per cent of her revenue comes from the weekly market.

She says having a solid business plan and continually re-assessing her products and services to meet customer demand has helped her business change and grow.

If there's one thing Small advises, it's having a business plan. She considers it the strategy for success — a blueprint that will map your direction and provide ways of resolving problems that inevitably crop up.

"We equate it to going on a trip. If you have a road map, you're likely going to get there easier and faster than if you don't."

Small says female entrepreneurs still face stereotypes about the businesses they run and are more likely to be turned down for bank financing. Balancing work with family is another challenge.

But they also have some genderrelated advantages.

"Women tend to do more planning. They tend to start their business smaller, grow them slower or more strategically and with less debt than their male counterparts. That's what makes them more sustainable in the long-term."

Before opening a storefront location, Ehrhardt tested the market through home shopping parties. She went to Women Entrepreneurs of Saskatchewan for help with her business plan and sought advice from established business owners.

"They were fabulous mentors for me."

Both Zimmer and Ehrhardt say juggling the demands of family life with running their own business can be taxing at times. And there's no question entrepreneurs need to be prepared to put in some long hours.

"It's almost like working 24-7. There is always something to do," says Ehrhardt. "But I believe in it. I'm happy."

For Zimmer, making a living at something she loves has been the greatest reward.

"I'm a lot happier now."