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Event focuses on empowering women

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Inside Bay Area

OAKLAND — Empowering women, supporting entrepreneurs and building community connections were the focus of 300 business women gathered at the **Women's Initiative** Conference and Graduate Reunion on Friday.

"The number one way for an economy to grow is through small businesses," said **Julie Abrams**, **Women's Initiative's** executive director. "Seventy-seven percent of all new employment in California between 1999 and 2003 came from microbusinesses that had fewer than six employees."

The nonprofit Women's Initiative, which has offices in Oakland and San Francisco, does its part by training women entrepreneurs. Friday's conference at the Oakland Marriott City Center had several workshops about money management, investment and marketing (offered in English and Spanish). It also focused on minority and immigrant women and their special needs.

"To compete in California at this point and time, one must be able to handle money wisely and understand the use of technology, and be a fast learner," said business trainer Sandra Murillo.

That is what Anasa Tatum has done. Her business, Herbal Grace, which sells an herbal beauty line, operates through her Web site herbalgracebathandbody.com. With a degree in chemistry and a gift for blending herbs, Tatum needed a business plan and a loan. She got them after a three-month class at **Women's Initiative**.

At Friday's event, Melina Markarian was named Volunteer of the Year for training dozens of women in the use of software and the Internet, among other things. She was once homeless and a victim of domestic violence. "This organization helped me when I most needed," she said. "I could not do anything else but help them the most I could."

Also, Oakland entrepreneur Sandra Floyd of Outsource Consulting Services was honored for her community involvement. Floyd has promoted opportunities to African-American women and African women.

She went to Africa to provide business workshops to low-income people. "We women must support each other and help our local community," she said.