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BOB BROWN/TIMES-DISPATCH

BUTTONS AND MORE. Jennifer Yane of Jennifer Unlimited, winner of the "Survivor of the Year" award from the Business Growth Network, holds one of her latest creations, a comic book.

'Button lady' has survived more than a business year

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Jennifer Yane said her business, Jennifer Unlimited, stands for unlimited potential.

That potential helped her kick her substance abuse problems, start a button-making business and beat two other finalists for the Survivor of the Year award from the Business Growth Network.

Yesterday, the network, part of the Metropolitan Richmond Chamber of Commerce, gave Yane top honors as the network member who overcame the most obstacles. She won a plaque and a Murphy's Law poster.

Yane's presentation began with an introduction: "You may know me as Jennifer, the button lady."

Living up to her title, she passed a basket of buttons with messages like those found in fortune cookies.

"I never intended to be a business person," Yane said. "I had trouble with chemicals and lost my mar-

riage. While in recovery, I came to believe in a higher power."

Yane said the changes in her life led her to make buttons with motivational messages.

Stories of tribulation are common among small businesses, said Sara Means Geigel, spokeswoman for the network. "Despite all of the odds against new businesses, these people have survived."

Mark Perlstein, one of the Survivor of the Year finalists, said he didn't consider the program a contest.

"We all deserve to be winners because we made it through starting a business," said Perlstein, who owns Allsafe Home Inspections Inc. He overcame a motorcycle wreck in July and a broken ankle in October.

Finalist Graham Haddock of Cakes by Graham wore a cake-shaped hat to read his rhyming speech. He said the Business Growth Network helped keep him afloat.

Each finalist received a year's free membership to the network, which holds seminars and meetings for small and new businesses.