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Michelle Corson, the CEO and founder of On The Road Garage, received a \$3 million investment for a yearlong apprenticeship program to teach auto repair skills to what Corson describes as vulnerable groups, such as domestic violence victims and the formerly incarcerated. Photo by John B. Sutton, Jr.

On the Road Garage gears up for auto repair

Apprentice program gets \$3M in backing from Perot family.

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To Michelle Corson, cars are fundamental to navigating the long road to economic equality.

So since 2013, she's followed that path—initially launching On the Road Lending to help underserved communities build credit by giving recipients low-interest loans to buy cars. Then came On the Road Motors to sell cars directly to buyers at auction. “I’m just fascinated by how Henry Ford’s mission was really to make the car affordable for the common man, and how it just unleashed this tidal wave of economic prosperity for decades and transformed our culture,” said the 55-year-old impact investor and former real estate executive.

The newest addition to her Dallas-based stable of nonprofits is On the Road Garage, a yearlong apprenticeship program to teach auto repair skills to what Corson describes as vulnerable groups, such as domestic violence victims and the formerly incarcerated.

She got it launched with a \$3 million investment from the Perot Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the late Ross Perot and his family. Corson said the program will cover all facets of the auto body shop trade, from painting and mechanic work to customer service.

“This is fantastic for women and all kinds of vulnerable groups that we’re going to want to train here,” Corson said. “There’s

going to be some tremendous opportunity to learn something that’s very dynamic and high-growth and high-wage work.”

Working with Corson on the garage idea is Cathy Bonner, who came out of retirement to jump-start the effort as its chief strategy officer. Bonner, 70, was previously CEO and chairwoman of Service King Collision Repair Centers before retiring five years ago.

“We’re adding the element of training the workforce of the future to work on the smart cars in the future, which is a whole new ballgame,” she said. “Collision repair is something so different that it really captivated my interest, and that’s what I’m most excited about.”

On the Road Garage expects to train about 150 people over the next few years. Apprentices will be paid and receive benefits while working beside a skilled technician, Corson said.

The first garage opened in Irving a few weeks ago. The second will open in West Dallas by the end of the year. Both 20,000-square-foot buildings will separately employ about 100 people: About one-third will be employees and two-thirds will be apprentices, Corson said.

The garages will handle everything from collision to advanced driver assistance system repairs.

The first apprentice starts next week. Applications for jobs are available on the garage’s website. It’s also offering technology-focused distance learning classes.

“The [auto] body tech, after about four years of really good experience, can be

making six figures,” Bonner said. “After our apprenticeship, the average salary coming in to start work as a body tech is about \$55,000. Plus, they’re highly incentivized on quality and they can add to that.”

On the Road Garage is part of an economic mobility initiative that aims to address employment and transportation challenges among vulnerable populations, Corson said.

“I believe transportation is something that can really transform people’s lives,” she said.

In January, On the Road Lending received a loan of up to \$10 million from Goldman Sachs’ urban investment group to expand the program to other states. Besides Texas, it operates in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi.

Corson said she hopes On the Road Garage expands alongside the lending program.

“There’s such a need in terms of recovering from the economic collapse,” she said. “I can’t wait for the day that this place is completely full with tons of people working here.”

On the Road Lending employs 19 people nationally, with 11 in the Dallas market. On the Road Garage employs 15 people.

Corson calls her network of enterprises On the Road Companies. In 2011, she founded Champion Impact Capital to make investments in social enterprises. She’s also created On the Road Sustainability Funds, a private equity fund.

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MICHELLE CORSON