

## Her light shines

### SCI-TECH SCENE | U. of C. entrepreneurship director goes beyond the call of duty

May 30, 2009

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**Linda Darragh won this year's CityLIGHTS award from the Illinois Technology Association.**

*(Brian Jackson/Sun-Times)*

Anndriene Bell, 17, decided to improve on a dilemma she saw while working as a seasonal cashier at Kmart: Her female co-workers hid money in their bras but it seemed like an inconvenience.

So Bell, a junior at Chicago Vocational High School, designed a pocket that fits into any bra cup. Her company, Pursonals, has sold 10 of the pockets since the end of March, mostly to fellow female students going to the prom.

Bell credits one of her mentors -- Linda Darragh, director of entrepreneurship programs at the University of Chicago's Polsky Center for Entrepreneurship -- with giving her direction.

"Linda and I would brainstorm ways to enhance my idea [at that time, a coupon kiosk] and to do more research," Bell said. "She was very motivational. She encouraged me to keep moving forward."

Darragh, a Toronto native, came to Chicago 29 years ago because her husband decided to get his Ph.D. here. She quickly got involved in the business and technology industries after she was hired as staff assistant for Mayor Jane Byrne's Chicago high-tech task force.

"The whole career path was nothing that I had planned," Darragh said. "But each piece has been the next step toward the next rung."

Darragh takes a somewhat contrarian view of Chicago's and Illinois' place in technology. She believes the Chicago region should forget trying to be the corn-fed version of Silicon Valley or Research Triangle Park and build on its strengths of food, commodity trading, business services and transportation and logistics.

"Innovation is more often evolutionary and built on the shoulders of what innovators have done in the past," said Darragh, who has led two conferences focusing on how the food and futures trading industries can become more innovative and startup-like.

In late April, Darragh won this year's CityLIGHTS award from the Illinois Technology Association. The award recognizes a leader whose work and dedication have made a significant impact on the Illinois technology community.

Darragh's resume is so crammed with activities and accomplishments, the award would seem a no-brainer.

At the Booth School, Darragh mentors students directly and indirectly. She volunteers at South Side high schools to mentor kids interested in starting their own businesses. She also works with the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development to get Booth business students involved in helping nonprofits provide services and earned-income programs for ex-convicts.

"A key goal for me is to have the students and the university connect with the community," she said.

At the Polsky Center, Darragh oversees teaching activities, including conferences, faculty research, hands-on learning, and community and global outreach programs that encourage the students to become entrepreneurs.

Many small businesses haven't had the opportunity to research whether their services create value, at what price and to what extent, Darragh said. "Students can provide market research and analysis to see whether it's a valid business model," she said.

Darragh also works with the Collegiate Scholars Initiative, in which Polsky Center faculty teach entrepreneurship to Chicago Public School students at a two-week summer program. The students create ideas, develop business plans and pitch prospective investors. All of the 55 students who've participated in the three-year-old program are now in college; 72 percent are Latino or African-American.

Darragh also sits on the board of the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center, where she works with the Future Founders program, which gives high school students in Chicago's needy neighborhoods the chance to work with entrepreneurs and with Booth students.

As the former vice president of the Women's Business Development Center in Chicago, Darragh worked with hundreds of entrepreneurs, and developed programs to increase access to capital for women-led businesses.

She brought similar value to the University of Chicago's entrepreneurship curriculum with a New Venture Challenge Plan competition among the business students, as well as the Hyde Park Angels, a group of alumni that funds early-stage business deals locally.

That's why Darragh fit the CityLIGHTS Award criteria: contributing to the community, being visible and evangelical, showing commitment and enthusiasm for Illinois' potential as a technology economy, going above and beyond the day job, and boasting real success stories.