

Chicago Tribune

Camp invests in young entrepreneurs

Second City? All in a week's work

By Ann Meyer

June 19, 2009



Misha Rose and Ralph Johnson raise their hands to ask questions during the pretzel factory tour. ANTHONY ROBERT LA PENNA/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

Getting a group of high school students to sit still for a lesson on presentation skills during the summer might seem like a tall order.

But when you take them out of the classroom and plo p them on center stage at Second City, where they use tips gleaned from improvisation experts to engage the audience and compete for a cash prize, suddenly they're all eager to participate.

"The activities teach you more than you can learn from a textbook," said Zoë Damacela, a 17-year-old from Whitney Young Magnet High School and one of more than 20 students from eight Chicago high schools who participated in the weeklong Future Founders Academy.

The Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center offered the youth entrepreneurship camp, with corporations, such as Motorola Foundation, AT&T, Ford Motor Co. Funds, and Harris Bank, covering program costs and \$47,000 in awards.

“We can’t do activities this interactive during the school year,” said Scott Issen, managing director of the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center, which runs the Future Founders program at select high schools during the school year in conjunction with the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship.

“Presentation skills are some of the most critical skills we can provide and will be useful throughout their lives,” he said.

The low-income students who participated in the academy weren’t a random group. All have completed a class on entrepreneurship at their high schools, many have won awards for business plans and some already have viable small businesses going.

“The program teaches us the sky is the limit,” said Devanté Perry, 17, an entering senior at Global Visions Academy in Chatham.

Perry has created a business plan for In the Club Workout, a company that will offer dance workout classes in person and on DVD. He plans to start teaching younger children this summer.

Damacela, who designs and sells custom apparel, won first prize in the Citywide Business Plan Competition for high school students earlier this month. Still, Damacela knows she has a lot more to learn and said she was enjoying the experiential activities.

Mia Bridges, 18, launched NV Lotion two years ago from her family’s Englewood home after she couldn’t find an organic lotion to help dry skin. With help from her grandmother to perfect the recipe, Bridges has sold more than 450 bottles at \$10 apiece during the last two years and has persuaded a local drugstore to sell the product.

Bridges, who graduated from Gwendolyn Brooks College Preparatory Academy, will use the proceeds as spending money when she attends Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville this fall to study criminal justice.

At Second City, the students participated in a two-hour program on presentation skills, which included interpersonal games and improvisation activities. It was similar to what the improv company presents to business groups, said Sarah Finch, director of learning at Second City Communications.

“These soft skills will help the students throughout life in job interviews, classroom projects, working or whenever,” Finch said.

The students also visited the “Smart Home: Green and Wired” exhibit at the Museum of Science & Industry and had the task of creating a business plan around one of the environmentally friendly technology products on exhibit. They attended the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce’s annual meeting and later met fashion designers at the Chicago Fashion Incubator at Macy’s Loop store.

Between the field trips, the students participated in speed networking bingo, a finance game based loosely on the NBC-TV show “Deal or No Deal,” and other activities.

The week culminated in a business plan contest, with 12 college scholarships awarded totaling \$35,000.

During a tour of Kim & Scott’s Gourmet Pretzels on Wednesday, founders Kimberly Oster-Holstein and Scott Holstein told the students how to turn an idea into a viable business. The Holsteins opened their pretzel factory in 1995 and now sell stuffed pretzels to supermarkets and food service vendors.

“It’s so incredibly valuable to show them how it works and tell them what are the steps you take to get from A to B,” Oster-Holstein said.