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Students learn 'right way' to run a small business

BY HILARY LEHMAN
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Yanique Jean-Phillippe says everyone wants bustiers and tutus.

Of course, she's biased: The 17-year-old senior at North Miami Beach High School designs, makes and sells those items for her business, Anarchy Couture.

But she knows what's selling. She made about 14 tutus, each priced at \$80 to \$100, for girls to wear to homecoming.

Jean-Phillippe is one of 10 students in the North Miami Beach High eClub, which educates students about starting and running businesses as part of the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship.

NFTE provides services to students from low-income communities. Twenty-three middle and high schools in South Florida have NFTE programs. Such programs have served more than 7,400 students since the local office opened in January 2006.

This year, about 3,000 students will participate in local NFTE programs, said Alice Horn, executive director for NFTE South Florida.

Horn said the first goal of NFTE is to make students connect with academics in a practical way. When students start a business, they begin to really understand the importance of math or writing. "All of a sudden, academics become relevant," Horn said.

The second goal of the program is to open doors for future businesses and careers. Because Miami is a hotbed of entrepreneurship, Horn said, it makes the NFTE program an easy sell.

Jessica Cervantes, a senior at John A. Ferguson High School, is one of NFTE's success stories. Her company, Popsy Cakes, sells cupcakes on cookie sticks.

Last October, she beat out 34 other young entrepreneurs from across the country to win NFTE's National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge, earning \$10,000 in prize money.

At the North Miami Beach eClub, the students are hoping to get their businesses off the ground, too. Most of the students are interested in either fashion or graphic design, and they're showcasing their talents at an April 16 show, "Street meets Couture."

Ray Parris, the eClub sponsor, teaches art classes, yearbook and graphic design. He said he brought his own entrepreneurial experiences to the table as a teacher and wanted to help his students learn about business themselves. NFTE allowed him to do that.

He said seeing his students have success and gain confidence in themselves is what he enjoys most about the program.

"Seeing kids smile at the end of the day when the whole process is done is a good thing," he said.

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Jean Mendez said the business skills he has learned in the eClub are helping him further the success he was already having in fashion. Mendez, 16, and his 21-year-old brother have been painting designs on T-shirts for about seven years. Mendez says they used to sell the shirts for \$20 or whatever cash their customers had.

He said NFTE has taught him "the right way" to run a business -- with a business plan and hard work.

For custom designs, Mendez and his brother now charge \$15 for every 30 minutes they spend working on a shirt. Shirts usually cost from \$30 to \$60, Mendez said.

They are shopping the shirts to boutiques, and Mendez is working on designing a website by himself to save money.

Other members of the club are already accomplished Web designers. Steve Della Valentina, 17, designs websites for up-and-coming musicians and sells his layouts for between \$150 and \$200. He learned layout from free tutorials on Google, he said, but NFTE has taught him how to create a pricing plan and stick to it.

Many of the eClub members weren't good students before they entered Parris' class, said Brenda Grullon, 18, who is developing a fashion magazine in eClub. Parris helps them develop their skills and makes them feel bad if they don't work toward their goals, she said.

Jean-Phillippe identified herself as one of those students. She was in the "in-crowd" before she joined the eClub and not really thinking much about her future.

"It was nothing good," she said.

Now, she spends most of her time working on her fashion line with Grullon. She said people think she has dropped out of school because she spends so much time at lunch and after school in Parris' classroom. "He's like my little personal Obama," she said ``He makes us feel like we can do anything."

She and Grullon are role models in and out of NFTE, Jean-Phillippe said. In the next few years, they see themselves going to the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and working hard to make it to the top.

"I can't fail. I can't," Jean-Phillippe said. ``It's not in my book at all."

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