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Gates Chili student finds marketable solution to purse problem Illuminated bag is a winning idea

Many great inventions have come from a personal pet peeve or struggle — and Gwen Le was tired of digging through her purse looking past the make up, phone and food for minutes just to find her keys.

Then she got a bright idea that she hoped would shed light on the problem.

"Purseonized by Gwen" are custom-made handbags that light up inside, in order to help people keep track of items.

"My purse is organized most of the time, but I do like big purses and I tend to put a lot of snacks and junk food inside," said Le, of Gates. "I actually put items in little baggies inside my purse and it is hard to find anything."

Le, 18, a senior at Gates Chili High School, participated in the Young Entrepreneurs Academy Class of 2009 where more than two dozen students came up with various projects.

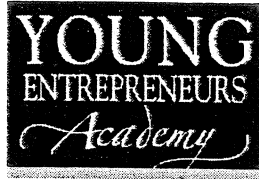
She fashioned a super-bright, waterproof, flexible, light-emitting diode light strip to go inside her purses.

She wanted a professional-looking, and still fashionable, alternative for women needing help to see what they are looking for.

"I remember so many times I was in a dark parking lot or outside an apartment trying to find my keys," Le said.

"It is dangerous to be spending all that time, and I think people will like this alternative."

Le received a \$20,000 scholarship to attend Rochester Institute of Technology after competing in a regional business competition with her new invention. While the offer was tempting, she decided to attend Syracuse University, where she will receive a full scholarship.



"When everything came together, I was so excited," she said. "And I feel like I am a step ahead of other students going to college because I know you often have to come up with a business plan and I already did."

In the Young Entrepreneurs program, students are taught with the help of business mentors from within the community how to brainstorm ideas, write business plans and launch their own real company.

Whether it was with a heated bra, a teen cooking show or Le's customized handbag, students ages 11 through 18 were able to explore their inner mogul.

Lynn Mellas, a transition specialist at Gates Chili High School who helps oversee the program, said students learned to manage every aspect of their business ideas by talking with advertisers, financial planners and business experts.

She saw the confidence level of her students, including Le, skyrocket by participating in the nine-month project.

"Each one of the students started out having a hard time speaking in front of people and talking about their ideas, and by the end you could see they were comfortable," said Mellas.

When she heard of Le's idea, she immediately liked it, calling it one of the more creative projects in the group.

"At first, she didn't know what kind of business she wanted to go into," said Mellas. "But then her mentor asked her what she liked, and she said she liked fashion and talked about how difficult it was finding things in her purse at night."

Valerie Alhart, who works with the Young Entrepreneurs Academy Inc., said it's important for young people to get first-hand experience into the business world before they enter college, especially if they plan to major in business.

"In this economy, whatever a student can do to make themselves more marketable in the future is a plus," she said.

"Learning how to pitch their own business ideas puts them a step ahead of others."