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# Real-World Education

## New class at JHS offers mentoring

December 5, 2010 - By MIKE ZUMMO, The Leader-Herald

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JOHNSTOWN - In one corner of the room, Johnstown High School student Brittany Wager is working on a nutritional child-lunch business. To her right, Alexis Cannizzo is working on a DVD promotional business for A.G. Cole Funeral Home, which is run by her father, Nick.

Another student is working on a business that creates apps for an iPhone, and the list goes on from there.

It's all part of the new Young Entrepreneurs Academy, which is being offered this year as a for-credit elective class through the school's business department.

"I think it's really fun," Cannizzo said. "We're learning how much work it is to start a company."

Eva Mraz, co-owner of A&E Sportswear in Johnstown with her husband, Aaron, serves as a mentor to two students in the class.

"It's a great program for a lot of reasons," said Mraz, who also is vice president of the Board of Education. "It gets the students to really see what goes behind starting a business. It's a lot of work and it can make you or break you. I think it's such an asset to our district and it's wonderful."

Cannizzo, who is mentored by John Viscosi, owner of Viscosi Photography, said she was surprised at how much work is going into creating her business

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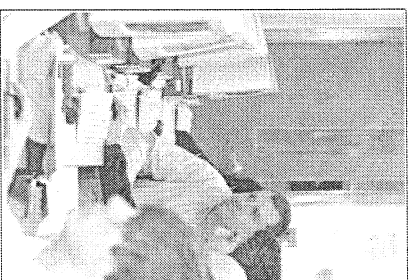
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"She seems enthusiastic," Viscosi said. "She has a good plan and is interested in the input."  
 Mraz, who works with two other students, said it can be overwhelming.

According to Patricia Kilburn, the district's director of Curriculum, Testing and Personnel, who spearheaded the effort to bring the Rochester Institute of Technology-based program to Johnstown High School, the program partners with area businesses to give students a course that takes them through the steps of starting and running a real company.

"I think one of the things in education is that we always try to keep the learning relevant," Kilburn said.

She said there are 18 students in the class, which is taught by business teacher Sarah Jones, made up primarily of high school seniors, but it is open to students in all grades. The Y.E.A. program was started in 2004, and according to the school district's website, students will form and control legally registered enterprises.

Participating students may also become eligible to receive scholarships from the Rochester Institute of Technology. The course teaches students the firsthand approach to creating a business plan, marketing a new business or idea, creating a prototype, making a pitch to potential investors and other parts of the process, the website said.

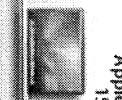
The students also work with owners of local businesses who impart some of what they learned in the process of either opening and running their operations.

"[The mentors] help us out a lot," Cannizzo said. "They provide us with a lot of useful information."

The class meets every day, but only work with the mentors one day per week. Other days, the class has guest speakers, such as Fred Guzilek, president of the Robert J. Hoy insurance agency in Broadalbin, who spoke about insurance for businesses. On Thursday, area attorney Jay Wood spoke to the class about legal issues such as trademarks, copyrights, patents and other topics. The class also recently took a field trip to Townsend Leather.

Another part of the program requires the assistance of 13 businesses to form a panel of investors. For help with that, Kilburn reached out to the Fulton County Regional Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

"We still need to find businesses willing to be partners and work with students and fund the program, to have them establish businesses,"

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chamber President/Chief Executive Officer Wally Hart said. "I definitely still have some work to do and have not completed my task."

Kilburn said businesses that make a donation as investors will join the Investor Panel presentation at year's end, and students will have six minutes to pitch their idea to the judges and seek funding for their businesses.

"They'll learn how to present and make pitches to investors," Kilburn said.

Investors also will send a winning pitch ahead to compete at a regional competition in Rochester, where students will have an opportunity for a scholarship to R.I.T.

But that's a bonus.

Mraz said one of the course's best qualities is that students are working on a project - their businesses - and getting the benefit of the experience of those who have done it before them.

"You're not having someone tell you what to do and have someone share with you their experience," she said. "They grasp you sharing more than you telling them what to do."

As a mentor, she's stressing one thing above all else: marketing.

"Market your product and make sure there is a need for it and make sure the market isn't already saturated with it," she said. "If you can meet those two criteria and have good customer service, you can really run a decent business."

Mike Zummo is the business editor. He can be reached at [business@leaderherald.com](mailto:business@leaderherald.com).

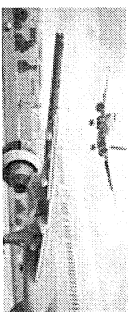
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