

“OUR BUSINESS MIGHT NOT GO FAR, BUT WE WANT SOMETHING LIKE THIS TO COME INTO PLAY AND THE PLATFORMS TO UTILIZE IT.”

Andrea Becerril, Gompers Junior High School student

Students showcase business savvy

‘Some of their ideas are amazing,’ USF business school official says

By SARWAT S. AHMAD
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JOLIET – From selling homemade gummy vitamins to developing software to make social media consumption safer, dozens of middle school students from local schools pitched ideas to area business leaders at an entrepreneurship expo Tuesday night at the University of St. Francis.

The expo was an opportunity for 86 students from Gompers, Washington, Hufford, Dirksen, Troy, Rockdale, St. Raymond and Channahon schools to showcase the 43 businesses they had developed as part of the Joliet Chamber of Commerce Young Entrepreneurship Club.

The club – in its seventh year – is a noncredit program that seeks to foster and develop an interest in business in students at an early age.

Since January, students were taught a “Real Life Entrepreneur” curriculum by teachers who worked with local business advisers to help students develop their business and marketing plans.

The students pitched their businesses and product ideas to those who stopped at their stations and handed out business cards. Many also had developed websites for their businesses.

“Some of their ideas are amazing and have incredible potential to do well,” said Orlando Griego, dean at the University of St. Francis College of Business.

Betsy Kennedy, Julie Conroy and Emy Diaz of Channahon Junior High school said they were hoping to find investors for their business, The Purple Bear, which uses essential oils as the base for gummy vitamins they made at home.

“We’re hoping to catch people’s attention,” Diaz said.

Kennedy and Conroy said the product is geared toward children who don’t like regular vitamins, as well as “yoga moms.”

Many of the student entrepreneurs developed product ideas based on their own real-world needs.

Dirksen students Lovely Tua-Link, Laniya White and Gyrus Sims developed an idea for a portable speaker with a charger, which would allow users to listen to music and charge their phones at the same time. A solar panel would keep the speaker charged.

All three are athletes who often travel for games.

“We like to listen to music with our teammates when traveling, but the phone would die,” Tua-Link said.

Shradha Verma and Bella Cyrkiel of William B. Orenic Intermediate School also are athletes. They felt the market lacked products that could help them practice tennis and softball on their own.

SB Sports’ products, Bounce Back and Bullseye, are uniquely designed to help athletes practice these sports on their own, Cyrkiel said.

“We were talking about problems we have in our day-to-day lives – and that’s what people tend to buy,” Verma said.

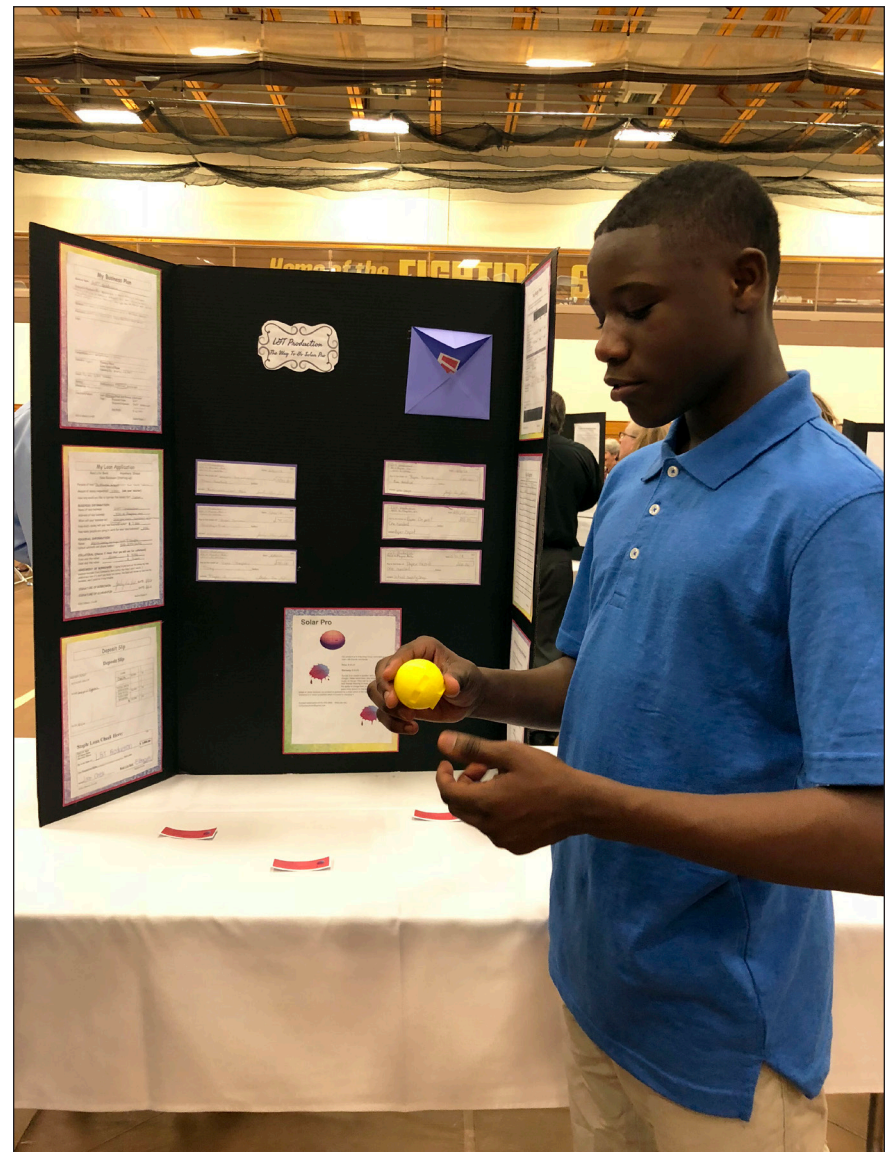
Some entrepreneurs wanted their products to have a social effect. Shelby Fraser, also from Orenic, developed the #YouMatter Organization, which sells T-shirts with the motto #YouMatter. She plans to use social media to market her idea.

“[The T-shirts] will remind people and empower people that they matter; someone on this earth loves them,” Fraser said.

#YouMatter also would donate 25 percent of its proceeds to suicide prevention organizations, she said.

Gompers students Andrea Fuentes and Andrea Becerril pitched the idea for a software program – Protective Assurance Systems – that social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat could use. It would prevent users from uploading inappropriate content.

Fuentes said they got the idea



Sarwat S. Ahmad for Shaw Media

Dirksen Junior High School student Gyrus Sims explains the benefits of the speaker and charger combination concept he developed with Lovely Tua-Link and Laniya White.

from the widely criticized video of a dead body popular vlogger Logan Paul posted on YouTube at the end of last year.

That type of imagery is traumatic for young internet users, Becerril said.

“Our business might not go far, but we want something like this to come into play and the platforms to utilize it,” she said.

The evening ended with a keynote speech from Dana Dominiak, a Lewis University professor and co-founder of video game developer Webfoot

Technologies.

“I started a video game software company in the 1990s, when I was a kid, and I was a girl,” Dominiak said. “If I could do it, anyone can do it.”

Dominiak also told the young entrepreneurs that she “never gave up.”

St. Francis; Lewis University; Rasmussen College; Abri Credit Union; Busey Bank; Martin Whalen, a Xerox company; Will County Executive Larry Walsh; and the Will County Regional Office of Education were the program’s local sponsors.