

# Local/Regional

## Grants available for new Orange, Turners teen programs

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**GREENFIELD** — What are teens from Orange and Turners Falls doing on Wall Street?

Learning about business, of course.

A three-day trip to New York's business district is just one facet of a 2-year-old program called the Young Entrepreneurs Society — or YES — which offers youths and young adults in the Orange and Turners Falls areas a hands-on primer on being in business.

The program is for people ages 13 to 35, with the average participant about 17 years old. Roughly 60 percent are high school graduates, drop-outs or people with their GED diplomas, according to program Director Tim Cohen-Mitchell. The 100-hour, three-month course gives participants the basics on "the holistic view on the art and science of entrepreneurship," he said.

They learn money management, business planning and the personal skills necessary to be successful in a business, according to Cohen-Mitchell. But most of all, they meet entrepreneurs within their own communities.

"Entrepreneurship is about doing your own thing, and if they have the drive, the initiative, they can craft their business and do business in their own style," he said. "We introduce them to as many local entrepreneurs as possible. When we go to New York, we introduce them to a lot of young entrepreneurs who may have started out marginally, themselves."

Currently, the program is teaching eight youths in its 1 South Main St., Orange, location and five in the Hot Spot teen center on Avenue A in Turners Falls. Graduates have gone on to start their own janitorial service, a custom line of woven key chains, a toys-and-candy home business, and similar projects. Others who've found odd jobs posted through the organization have gone on to full-time or permanent part-time jobs with those employers.

At graduation, each student presents his or her own business plan to a panel of local entrepreneurs. Many also join "The Society," a youth business association that meets monthly, elects its own officers, and runs community fundraisers and other activities in the area. Some of The Society entrepreneurs go on to become mentors to younger people in the group, says Cohen-Mitchell.

YES is just one of 11 local programs for youth that now receives grant funding from the Franklin Regional Council of Government's Community Coalition for Teens. But the coalition is hoping to hear from more agencies with programs aimed at youth development and teen pregnancy prevention.

Teens will be awarding a total of \$140,000 in \$10,000 to \$25,000 grants to competing agencies providing teen programming within five priority areas:

- ◆ Access to health education and preventative health care
- ◆ Job or educational skills development
- ◆ Art, music or theater
- ◆ Mentoring
- ◆ Sports and recreation.

According to Lisa White, director of community services for the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, the priorities were derived from surveys with 300 teens, feedback from teens at last year's annual youth conference and interviews with the agencies that received grants this year.

The priorities are aimed at giving youth skills and interests that build self-esteem while diminishing the likelihood of at-risk behaviors that can lead to teen pregnancy or dropping out of school, said White.

Although the rate of teen pregnancy in Massachusetts is below the national average, the largest towns in Franklin County and the north Quabbin area are above the state average in teen births, according to

White. In 1997, the teen pregnancy rate in the state was slightly more than 33 births per 1,000 teens. But in Greenfield, that rate was 36 births per 1,000 teens. In Montague and Athol the rate was almost 46 births per 1,000 teens; and in Orange, it was nearly 40 births per 1,000.

When asked why she believes there is more teen pregnancy in the area, White points to the isolation that can result from living in such a rural area. Isolation and lack of transportation can prevent youths from participating in the kinds of activities that would keep them from at-risk behaviors; also, it may prevent them from having access to needed programs and services, she said.

The 11 agencies funded with teen Coalition Challenge Funds serve about 500 youths annually, she said.

Among those programs are: Athol Area YMCA Super Teens; Big Brothers/Big Sisters: Sister to Sister; Dial/Self Art Express; FCAC Youth Programs: Pioneer Youth Staying Empowered; The Literacy Project Reach Out; Millers River CDC Youth Business/Leadership Course for Athol High School students; North Quabbin Community Coalition Voyagers; Orange Elementary Schools OASIS enrichment program; Quabbin Mediation teen workshops; Tapestry Health Systems Teen Outreach and Young Entrepreneurs Society.