

# Growing effort gives local youths the confidence, ability to succeed

By RICHIE DAVIS  
Recorder Staff

Greg the Wunderllama is one busy DJ. The 17-year-old Turners Falls High School junior otherwise known as Greg Stewart was busy entertaining the crowd at a Turners Falls dance one night last weekend and another at Mahar Regional School the next, while preparing to DJ for an upcoming gig at the University of Massachusetts.

At \$40 an hour, and a job or two every weekend, it didn't take him long to pay for the \$6,000 in equipment that he already had and to buy more.

"People always complained they didn't like the music at dances," said Wunderllama, who began in January playing his 10,000 MP3 computer song files — requested in advance by students. "They said it was awesome!"

Stewart is one of more than 50 youths — mostly in the Orange-Athol area, who have taken part in a Young Entrepreneurs Society training, where they learn to test their dreams on the open market. The course helped them put together business plans, learn how to keep records, how to negotiate and other steps needed to turn their pet interests into money-making businesses.

"It gave me a lot of confidence," said Stewart. "It showed me that average people can do it. You don't have to be super-rich or super-smart."

Now, 3½ years after its start in Orange, Young Entrepreneurs Society is getting more enterprising and spreading out, with plans for at least one "biz-camp" in the area this summer and courses at high schools and after-school programs around the county.

With a renewable \$30,000 grant from the Community See YOUTHS Page 7



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Greg Stewart, aka Greg the Wunderllama, shows his DJ equipment in his room at home in Lake Pleasant.

## Youths

From Page 3

Foundation of Western Massachusetts, YES Director Tim Cohen-Mitchell said, the program hopes to train 200 young entrepreneurs this year and 2,000 over the next five years.

YES, which uses an adapted curriculum from the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship, helps teens who often aren't challenged in a traditional school setting, and who may even use the skills they gain in the 100-hour course to help them go to find a job rather than invent their own.

"It's more about empowerment than anything else," said Cohen-Mitchell, who was thrown out of public school but is now a doctoral education student at the University of Massachusetts. He sees YES as a mini-MBA for students who have dropped out of school or are at risk of doing so, and can gain tremendously from polishing up basic skills in pursuit of a dream they care about turning into a business.

"It's more about empowerment than anything else," he said. "It's something that gets them excited and uses their passion."

By working with mentors from the business community, and honing skills like negotiations through games and group activities, YES helps bring down to earth the mythic possibilities of someone like Bill Gates, he said.

The YES program, which has been offered at Hot Spot Teen Center in Turners Falls and its own space on South Main Street in Orange, will be introduced into Turners Falls High School and its Community School, at Sheffield Middle School's after-school program and Mahar Regional School this fall, said Cohen-Mitchell. He is also looking into having it offered in the Greenfield schools, as well as at Mohawk Trail, Frontier and Pioneer Valley regional schools and is seeking sponsors for two-week "biz camps" in Greenfield and the North Quabbin area like one that is already planned for western Franklin County as part of a collaboration with Hilltown Community Development Corp.

Each 9-to-5 camp is intended to attract 20 to 30 teens, he said. By working with 20 organizations around the county, YES has helped expand its horizons, reaching more youth for a program that bridges human services and economic development.

"There will be more kids each year as we roll out more programs," said Cohen-Mitchell, who is more than halfway toward raising \$1,000 from community businesses and agencies, and is appealing to businesses to provide mentors and site visits to established businesses. "We want to create an infrastructure so we can continue churning out basement-level business incubators for the economy."

To help fledgling businesses get started, Cohen-Mitchell hopes to

establish a revolving regional capital fund similar to the \$500 pool that helps young start-up businesses at what's in essence a young person's version of Greenfield's Venture Center business incubator. Another plan for raising money for the program is to turn that center — where teen businesses can use computers, fax machines, copiers and other support services — into a resource for other businesses in the community.

The youth businesses that YES has helped spin off, like Greg the DJ Wunderllama, have run the gamut: a janitorial service, a vending machine operation, a clothing design company and even an online service that reminds people of anniversaries, birthdays and other dates.

In fact, Cohen-Mitchell said, e-business start-ups may offer Franklin County youth a much broader market with much less investment than trying to launch a brick-and-mortar business — and at the same time be subject to less age discrimination than if they were interacting with customers in person.

But even for young people who don't start up a business, he said, the training can help them navigate the difficult straits of growing up.

"You can transfer all of this to other parts of your life," he said.

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