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## Quabbin Valley Voices

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# The Young Entrepreneurs Society

By TIM COHEN-MITCHELL

**I**t came as no surprise that a recent study by Northeastern University concluded that job prospects for youth in America are less favorable now than at any time since the 1940's.

I've seen these same findings play out in the lives of many young North Quabbin job seekers with whom I work. Their experiences mirror those of youth across the nation who find themselves competing with adults for entry-level positions that were once the domain of teens.

The Young Entrepreneurs Society (YES) was founded in 1998 to help area youth step up to the challenge by unlocking their potential through entrepreneurship, job readiness and financial education.

The best way to explain how we do this is through stories.

The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel for young job seekers was dim even in the summer of 1997 when I crossed paths with Jerry Whaland.

Then 17, this resourceful high-school dropout from Orange approached me and asked for help starting a silk-screening business with some friends as their home-spun solution to unemployment: if you can't find a job, make your own.

They'd heard that my employer, Orange Revitalization Partnership (ORP), had been helping folks with small business loans and assistance.

We discovered there was no help for entrepreneurs under 18.

Prior to ORP, I'd worked with adult entrepreneurs in Franklin County, with unemployed youth in Ireland, and with young street vendors in East Africa, so I could appreciate both Jerry's ambition and his frustration.

Others at ORP were keen to help.

Thanks to a small town grant, I went to Babson College to be trained and certified by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) to teach entrepreneurship education to youth in the north quabbin.

## Spotlight on Quabbin Community services

We held our first YES class in 1998 in an Orange storefront.

Twelve youth, including Jerry, gathered two evenings each week for four months to learn the nuts and bolts of starting and operating their own businesses.

Attending voluntarily, they ranged in age from 13 to 21 and were from four towns and diverse backgrounds.

Some had struggled in school, or became discouraged and dropped out.

Others were trying for a GED.

A few had held jobs, if short-lived. Some had experienced homelessness, hunger and run-ins with the law.

For most, it was the prospect of unrelenting poverty that motivated them to consider entrepreneurship as a tool for achieving their dreams.

"My dream was not to die in poverty," said one, "but to have poverty die in me." I began with interviews to help students identify their 'attitudes', the things that energized them: hobbies, interests and passions.

We translated these into to business and career ideas and walked through the steps entrepreneurs use to test a business idea: Does it satisfy a consumer need? Will it work in this setting? Can it be executed in the 'window of opportunity' that exists? Does the entrepreneur have skills and resources needed to create and operate the business? As they completed NFTE's 'mini-MBA' curriculum, adult entrepreneurs from the community provided advice and instruction, serving as guest speakers and hosting tours of their businesses.

Hearing their stories inspired students and helped them acquire 'social capital', or the 'who you know' asset that is a key for upward mobility.

We engaged in hands-on activities - a negotiation game, stock contest, invention competition, and sales call role-play - that helped students develop confidence, interpersonal skills and 'outside the box' habits of mind.

Their experience was also broadened by a 2-day business trip to NY, NY to visit NFTE on Wall Street, tour the stock exchange, meet successful young entrepreneurs, purchase items wholesale for resale back home, and mingle with peers staying at the international youth hostel.

The trip kept spirits high and nurtured mutual support among class members.

These activities all contributed to a dropout rate of under 20-percent, low when compared to out-of-school programs.

At graduation, friends and family members heard students present their business plans.

Donn Deane of Orange House of Pizza gave an address on how entrepreneurial aptitudes - adaptability, confidence, drive, honesty, organization, persuasiveness, discipline, perseverance, risk-taking, understanding, and vision - are vital for both business and workplace success and for personal, household and community well-being.

Diplomas and T-shirts were presented, an entrepreneur's pledge taken, and students welcomed as charter 'Society' members.

Where are they today? Eight are employed full-time, three have attended college, and three have been in business, of which two are still business owners.

(Sam used his social capital to win an annual contract supplying apparel to hundreds of NFTE CET's nation-wide.)

An unplanned consequence was an alumni parent who credited her son's YES experience with inspiring her to successfully pursue her dream of business ownership.

Each is finding their path and the small part YES played is what keeps us going on ours.

After graduating, Jerry traveled to New York and became a NFTE Certified Entrepreneurship Teacher (CET).

"I argued with Tim so much (on the small points of business) that he figured I'd be a good teacher." Jerry and I taught several classes together, later joined by YES alumni, Dan Richards, a young veteran.

We needed more hands-on class activities, so we negotiated with NFTE to hold a free CET training for UMASS education graduate students in exchange for their developing a series of 20 new lesson plans.

by limitations imposed by government or foundation grantors.

We were heartened to learn that youth entrepreneurship was recognized as an economic development priority in a 2004 report by the Northern Tier Project, an effort facilitated by Congressman John Olver.

We, too, believe there should be no resources spared and no time wasted in the task of cultivating, nurturing, and supporting young people to be prized employees, financially responsible citizens, and ambitious entrepreneurs.

Our young people inherit a tumultuous world; they need all the help we can muster as they prepare to take the reins.

Call (978) 544-1869 or visit the BizCenter or [www.yes-inc.org](http://www.yes-inc.org) for more information about YES and how to get involved.



COHEN-MITCHELL

As YES spread its wings and ORP's major grant came to an end, YES spun off on its own.

Donn Deane offered a storefront for nominal rent and Society members and I incorporated YES as a non-profit organization.

Community members were generous in their advice and financial support and buoyed us through the transition.

Meanwhile, a Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts study found high interest in business education among Franklin County youth.

With their support, we partnered with 20 area agencies and business groups to offer classes in schools, summer camps, and after-school in other towns.

We trained more teachers and expanded the classes - BizVenture! and GirlVenture! - to include job readiness (with Franklin-Hampshire Career Center) and personal finance.

And we helped some students earn high school credit and transferable college credits through an on-line exam.

To date nearly 300 youth have graduated from Venture! YES has also helped alumni and other youth with ventures ranging from marketing a youth-produced CD and launching a cinema to marketing teen reproductive health services and creating an after-school Teen Cyber Café (Tuesdays and Thursdays at the YES).

This spring, we hope work with students at Athol High School to pilot test a student-run cooperative business to supply solar-charged rechargeable batteries to students, staff, and parents.

And we continue to operate our oldest program, the Odd Jobs Exchange, a free advertising service for more than 50 teens selling odd jobs services.

This July we launched a 'graduate school' for YES alumni to hone their skills in a real-world setting.

The YES BizCenter is a retail venture operated by youth and adults that sells copying, document finishing, faxing and office supplies and is a FedEx

## YES

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Authorized ShipCenter and UPS Authorized Shipping Outlet.

It rents PC and high-speed Internet access and a meeting room.

The idea for such a venture was the brainchild of unemployed teens in 1996 and resulted in a business plan by YES alumni that won the 2002 National 4-H Council's business plan competition.

Their plan helped YES obtain a mortgage and line of credit to purchase and renovate adjoining storefronts on South Main Street.

It took 18 months, 4,500 volunteer hours, and the help of over 200 area businesses, residents and organizations went into the effort - including BizCenter start-up - with under \$10,000

in grants.

Such 'stone-soup' support allows us to serve about 100 youth each year with a cash budget under \$60,000.

Much of our income comes from teaching and consulting services, BizCenter sales, and community members who support us as members and donors.

We are fortunate to have young staff members paid through the Orange Jobs for Youth, AmeriCorps, and Summer Youth Employment and Training programs.

Grants are few, as YES does not fit into traditional social service, human service or educational molds or those of donors who fund them.

But every problem is an opportunity, and despite enduring periods of hardship, we've been free to create programs that grow from and cater to the needs of local youth unencumbered