

Canal students make pitches for their businesses

By Rob Rogers, The Marin Independent Journal



Dec. 20--Carla Martinez adjusted the microphone, smiled at her audience, and began to describe the clothing store of her dreams.

"The mission of 'Classy & Fine' is to sell teenage girls clothes of good quality at a price that's affordable," said Martinez, a participant in Saturday's "Canal Business Idol" competition at the Pickleweed Community Center in San Rafael. "We'd be constantly updating our line, with everything in the store changing every three weeks."

Martinez's store -- a boutique drawing from the best of Forever 21, American Eagle and Urban Outfitters -- doesn't exist, of course. But it could, if the business leaders assembled for Saturday's competition chose to put their expertise and financial incentives behind her idea.

"This is their chance to bring their plan before the business leaders who could help launch them," said Janice Vela, director of development for the Canal Alliance.

Each of the 60 competitors in "Canal Business Idol" -- all middle- and high-school participants in the Canal Alliance after school program -- drafted a plan for their dream business, creating a mission statement, identifying their target market and explaining what their business would require in terms of retail space and personnel. They also created Web sites, business cards and online commercials to market their companies.

On Saturday, the 20 finalists in the program provided PowerPoint presentations describing their businesses to the competition's judges, who included Tamalpais

Bank Vice President Dick Fletcher, Heffernan Insurance consultant Dan Mahoney and Mandy Gamarra and Allison Shrier of Dominican University's Green MBA program. Twelve winners -- six middle and six high school students -- received additional consulting sessions, a session with Credit Suisse mentors to discuss the financial viability of their projects, and the opportunity to make their ideas a reality with a grant of up to \$1,000.

The competition, part of a nine-month Canal Alliance Young Entrepreneurs Project, wasn't just an opportunity for the participants to develop writing, technology and public speaking skills, said youth education coordinator James Wiley. It was also a necessity.

"We've had a lot of kids who were considering dropping out of our academic program because of financial pressures at home," Wiley said. "We wanted to create a program that would give them the opportunity to make money while continuing to grow academically."

Many of Saturday's presentations -- delivered in both English and Spanish by their would-be entrepreneurs -- reflected the kinds of businesses students would like to see in their neighborhoods: soccer clinics, shoe stores and clothing shops with longer hours, lower prices and a better selection than anything available at the local mall. But many offered particular innovations: Irving "Panchito" Magdelan's store featured soccer clothing made from recycled materials, while customers at Martinez's boutique could listen to a podcast describing the latest styles.

"We asked the kids to include something 'green' in their business, to give them a sense of what may be happening in the future," said Omar Carrera, business development specialist for the Canal Alliance. "They came up with some big ideas."

While a complete list of winning finalists was not available Saturday, winners included Angel Aguilar, Yami Ayala, Debbie Hunil, Samuel Landaverde, Irving Magdelan, Oscar Nunez and Jared Ramirez.

Read more San Rafael stories at the IJ's San Rafael section.

Contact Rob Rogers via e-mail at rrogers@marinij.com

To see more of The Marin Independent Journal or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.marinij.com/>.

Copyright (c) 2009, The Marin Independent Journal, Novato, Calif.