

THE COÖS COUNTY DEMOCRAT

Youth Venture: Helping youngsters become ‘change makers’

September 19, 2007

By Eileen Alexander

GORHAM — Youth Venture may be coming to the North Country next year. The innovative youth-centered international program encourages and supports youngsters ages 12 - 20 to be “change makers” by creating and running projects that benefit their communities.

Representatives from almost a dozen enterprises from around the region who deal with youngsters on a daily basis through schools, churches, and other organizations that target their needs, were enthusiastic and ready to support the program as it was outlined last week at the Family Resource Center in Gorham by Jim Hamel, Director, National Partnerships and New England Region, of Youth Venture.

Youth Venture is a partner of Ashoka, an organization of entrepreneurs who have discovered that change makers develop at a young age. “Without exception,” said Mr. Hamel, “social entrepreneurs had experience as a young person where they were in charge.” As the Ashoka members looked at this pattern, they saw that by putting young people in charge, they were creative and made things happen. “The bottom line mission (of Youth Venture),” said Mr. Hamel, “is creating a group of young people being change makers” with the expectation that this behavior will carry over into their adult lives.

Under the Youth Venture model, any youngster or team of youngsters is encouraged to come up with a plan to address a social issue. Youth Venture supplies the tools, support, guidance, inspiration, and money — up to \$1,000 per venture — to launch their program. Youngsters attend a Dream It, Do It workshop where they are asked what they are passionate about, and brainstorm ways to juxtapose their passion with what they see as a problem in the community.

For example, said Mr. Hamel, in southern New Hampshire, a teen named Alice was into the Goth scene. Even though she looked scary, her passion was punk rock. She noted, though, that punk rockers had very few options to enjoy punk rock without drugs and alcohol. Through Youth Venture, Alice created a venue called Rocktoberfest, and launched a series of drug and alcohol free punk rock performances.

Mr. Hamel shared numerous examples of kids in action: A group in Merrimack developed a project to convert school buses to bio-diesel. Another group has launched a venture called Rubber Ducky Studios where they produce commercials and public service announcements for non-profits in their community. They also produce promotional videos for paying customers that help defray the costs for the non-profits. The girls who started A Birthday Wish deliver a complete birthday party to youngsters/families who otherwise would not be able to afford a cake, candles and all the extras.

“The kids come up with solutions that are meaningful to them,” said Mr. Hamel. “Whatever fires you up brings power to the community.”

Mr. Hamel is particularly interested in finding locals partners, such as the organizations represented at the meeting, who would help kids learn about Youth Venture, and be willing to act as mentors. Youngsters must create a business plan for their venture and once it is refined present it before a panel of community judges, who determine if the kids are ready to launch using the Youth Venture criteria. "It's not a competition," Mr. Hamel stressed. "Anyone who meets the criteria (plan, goals, cost, sustainability) can be funded."

David Gray of Northern Human Services asked what qualified a project as sustainable. "It has to keep going at for one year," said Mr. Hamel. Most have a life of around three-and-a-half-years.

Several of the participants said that they liked the idea that the program was open to all youngsters, not just achievers.

When the Rev. Ellie McLaughlin of St. Barnabas Church noted that it "takes a lot to get kids to work together...(and is) a lot harder to work with non-homogeneous groups of kids," Mr. Hamel said that Youth Venture often conducts small intimate workshops first with one group, and then another to deal with the inherent differences. He noted that, "When an opportunity is meaningful to them, then they come together."

"What I'm excited about," said Gretchen Fink, district social worker in SAU #36, "is that the kids who do a lot can have this experience, too. But there are the different groups, preppies, hicks, farmers, kids in detention (who also have the drive). The key, the magic if for them to come up with the idea and know that they can do it."

"I think kids in this area are willing to accept mediocrity," said Kim Wood of the Youth Alternatives program, who is not long out of her teen years. "It would help them see there are possibilities."

Mr. Hamel said that he was looking for endorsements and letters of support from the community to see if the Youth Venture program would be well received in the North Country. "If people in the group thought it could work, they we would love to get it off the ground next spring and fully implemented in the next school year."

Tami Hartley, the Program Director for Youth Alternatives Program/North Country VISTA, organized the Youth Venture presentation.

Some of the organizations represented at the meeting were Division of Youth Services, SAU #20, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, the Colebrook Recreation Department, SAU #36, The Family Resource Center, and an after school program.

Funding for the Youth Venture program comes from private charitable donations. A lot of successful entrepreneurs support the program, said Mr. Hamel, and funding is also sought from local organizations once the program is up and running in an area.

Anyone who has questions or would like to offer support can contact Youth Venture at (866) 923-9863 or by email at jhamel@youthventure.org.

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