The Start-Up as the First Step Up

Groups Aid Young Entrepreneurs From Tough Neighborhoods

By PAUL WISENTHAL

At age 7, Jabious Williams recalls, he walked a mile to a self-serve Exxon station where he offered to pump gas for tips. Working after school and on weekends, he said, he typically earned $30 to $50 a day to help support his single-parent family.

He and his brother, Anthony, grew up in Anacostia, a neighborhood in southeast Washington, plagued by gang violence. Homeless for a time, they lived with their mother in their aunt’s two-bedroom apartment.

Four years ago, the Williams brothers founded SAJA Originals, a hip-hop fashion line specializing in custom-made T-shirts. The brothers said they could not have done it on their own and they credited a program sponsored by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship called Adopt-a-Class. It provided them with a teacher and two year-old sister, Megan, as well as attend Immaculate Conception Academy.

Marie has lived with her grandmother, who is her legal guardian, on the same block since she was just over a year old. “The area where I live isn’t safe. There’s lots of drug and gang violence,” she said. Last July, her cousin David was hit by a stray bullet.

Every Saturday, she said, she looks forward to attending a sewing and fashion program sponsored by the Turning Heads Project, which helps poor young people in San Francisco become more economically self-sufficient. “Marie gained a lot of self-confidence and new skills attending our sewing and fashion programs and learning entrepreneurship,” said Jane Segal, her mentor and director for special projects.

Marie said, “We make pillows, skirts and purses in class.” Piecing
mentors.
The number of people under age 18 living in poverty has reached almost 12 million, according to the Census Bureau, and 700,000 join their ranks every year. "The dropout epidemic disproportionately affects young people who are low-income, minority, urban, single-parent children attending large public high schools in the inner city," according to a recent study financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Williams brothers sought out school-based entrepreneurship programs to help support themselves, buy school supplies and to contribute financially to their family.

Increasing numbers of successful entrepreneurs are mentoring low-income young people, offering financial support and contributing their skills in inner-city schools.

"There is a growing body of research that indicates that youth entrepreneurship can lead to college preparation and self-esteem," said Andrew B. Hahn, professor at Brandeis University and an expert on entrepreneurship for underprivileged youth. "These programs wake up young people to new dreams and new options for their lives."

Jabious, now 19, said fashion was a natural choice for he and his brother. "We were always interested in fashion and wanted to have our own clothing line," he said. "We asked this guy from church to design five shirts. We paid him $100, but soon after realized we could not make a profit."

Anthony, now 18, recalled that he and Jabious began by drawing cartoons on T-shirts and wearing their creations to school. The designs were unique and abstract, with positive messages like "Dream Big!" and "Shoot for Your Goals!"

"Jabious prays before designing every shirt," Anthony said. "His creativity comes straight from his heart."

Social media photos of their eye-catching products have made them must-have items at Sutherland High School in Sutherland, Md. With some of their earnings, they gave their mother, Angela Stoudimore, $5,000 toward a down payment on their first home, in a better neighborhood, Hickory Place, in Sutherland.

Where jobs are few, helping youth become self-employed.

Jabious, 19, bought a used sewing machine for $100. "I called the store and said, 'I can't afford it, but I'm interested in it.' They said, 'You can have it.'"

On her own, Jabious went on to develop a clothing line called "Melt," inspired by the movie "The Hunger Games." She sells her designs online and at local events. "It's been a lot of hard work," she said. "But it's worth it."

Another entrepreneur, Anthony Williams, 18, uses social media to promote his clothing line, "The Sutherland Collection," which features unique designs inspired by his travels. "I want to bring attention to the city of Sutherland," he said. "We have a lot of potential."