

# Business Day

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Noah Berger for The New York Times

Laura Perez, left, and Patrice Moananu, right, stitch eye pillows with help from their mentor, Jane Segal. The group, the Turning Heads Project in San Francisco, teaches sewing, fashion and entrepreneurship skills.

## 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

The National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship provides more than 300 schools around the country with training seminars and a school-accredited start-up package for teaching young people basic business principles.

"Low-income youth have special skills in entrepreneurship, and learning to run their own business helps them stay engaged with their school," said Steve Mariotti, the foundation's founder.

Financed in part by Pequot Capital, a hedge fund, and philanthropic groups including the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Goldman Sachs Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies, the organization has graduated more than 120,000 students from its entrepreneurship program over the last 19 years.

Adopt-a-Class uses its curriculum and connects inner-city students with successful entrepreneurs for person-

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 pays dividends in 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."

Soon, their eye-catching products became must-have items at Suitland High School in Suitland, Md. With some of their earnings, they gave their mother, Angela Stoudimire, \$5,000 toward a down payment on their first home, in a better neighborhood, Hickory Place, in Suitland.

al mentoring. Patricia Alper, its founder, and Philip McNeill, a men-

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

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tor, taught the Williams brothers how to spot marketing opportunities, manage cash flow and inventory, and exploit marketing and sales. The brothers call their mentors twice a week for marketing strategies or financial advice.

To date, Adopt-a-Class has 22 entrepreneurs mentoring students. Each must donate \$10,000 a semester and spend at least two hours a month for five months either in an entrepreneurship classroom or working one-on-one with the fledgling business owners.

Mr. McNeill, one of the first mentors to sign on, draws from his own experience. His father died when he was 6 years old, and at 21, he was co-manager of the family grain elevator business and farm operations in Thomas, Okla. Currently, a managing partner in SPP Mezzanine Funding, Mr. McNeill works with students from Suitland High School. The best part of being a mentor, he said, is watching the students gain the self-confidence and poise to run their own business.

Across the nation, there has been increasing interest among young people in running their own businesses. "The nation's youth are looking at entrepreneurship as a major alternative career as they are being shut out of a shrinking job market in inner cities," said Carl J. Schramm, president and chief executive of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Marie Harrison, 15, lives in a violence-ridden section of the Mission District of San Francisco where she struggles to get by as she cares for her 71-year-old grandmother, Maria, who recently suffered a stroke. Marie monitors her grandmother's blood pressure and helps prepares her food. She also helps raise her 12-

together fabrics donated by the Turning Heads Project. Marie fashioned her own prom dress. "One of my high school friends bought one of my creations for \$40," Marie said in a telephone interview. "I'm saving the money for college. One day I would like to become a designer and own my own business."

One of her Turning Heads classmates, Patrice Moananu, 15, also lives with her grandmother, as well as five sisters in public housing in the Potrero Hill area of San Francisco. "I work as a youth intern at my school almost every day to help with the family finances," Patrice said. "I've attended the Turning Heads fashion and sewing program for about a year, where I learned about starting my own business. At first I wasn't good at sewing, but the class has given me a new skill and new self-confidence."

With her father in jail and her mother absent, Patrice attends school at the International Studies Academy. "Turning Heads gives me a safe place to be on the weekends to stay out of trouble while making money," said Patrice, who is in the 10th grade. "I would like to own my own travel business, or perhaps work in the fashion industry."

Sophie Aissen, 32, teaches Marie, Patrice and other Turning Heads students. Two years ago, she started SadieAndMitzi.com, a small online fashion business manufacturing pillows and clothing. She also works as a part-time bookkeeper. "I want my students to understand that it's not easy running your own business on a day-to-day basis. Their high hopes must also be coupled with hard work."

The Williams brothers are branching out to other school locations in Upper Marlborough, Md., and the Washington metropolitan area. "We are interviewing students to join our business team and market our products at different school sites," Anthony said.

What is more, Jabious now mentors 20 other students in the program once a week at Roosevelt High School in the area. "It is important," he said, "to give back to our community for the financial blessings we've received."