

# Eastern Michigan University's B-Side of Youth program offers business training to Washtenaw County teens

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Posted: Jan 16, 2011 at 10:15 AM [Jan 16, 2011]



Jack Bidlack is the director of the Business Side of Youth, which gives provides entrepreneurial training to teens in Washtenaw County. The B-Side meets at the Eastern Michigan University's College of Business.

Angela J. Cesere

"What problem will your business solve?" **Jack Bidlack** asked the class.

There wasn't more than a mutter from the eight or so young faces looking back at him.

It was a Saturday, and it just a few minutes into the first meeting of [The Business Side of Youth](#), and Bidlack was already all-business. There was no time for the teacher to waste, not when he'd be asking so much of his students over the next 10 weeks.

"Every business, from Microsoft to UPS, was created to solve a problem," the teacher explained.

Some students sat straighter in their chairs, energized to know that the journey they'd soon begin in room 219 of the Eastern Michigan University College of Business was the same path Bill Gates had walked down decades earlier, even if the expectations weren't quite as high.

"Your question is, what problem do you want to solve and how will you go about it?"

Since Bidlack founded the B-Side in fall 2007, he has helped almost 500 Washtenaw County teens, ages 13-20, answer those questions. Some have even gone on to open businesses and answer those questions in the marketplace.

The idea for the Business Side of Youth came about when Bidlack was thinking about putting together a youth jobs program a few years ago. But soon he realized that there weren't many opportunities for meaningful work available to young people, especially on the eastern side of the county.

So rather than try to help teens "get jobs," Bidlack decided to offer entrepreneurial training. Rather than hand a kid a mop and the chance to earn minimum wage doing work that probably won't ever make their resumes, he would rather train them to think as entrepreneurs.

The money might not materialize right away, but the lessons, if taken to heart and put into practice, could be the start of lifelong independence from the ups and downs of the job market.

Bidlack is part business coach, part mentor, part friend and the bearer of high standards. He is ably assisted by Kory Schreiber, who has served every role from volunteer to mentor to staffer and back again to volunteer since joining B-Side two years ago.

Schreiber can alternate between keeping the class loose with his humor and pushing the class just slightly harder than Bidlack with his questions.

When one student presented a concept so novel that it would effectively create a new market, Schreiber hammered him that there is no way to escape competition in business.

"Absence of competition is your competition," he said. "If people don't see what you offer anywhere in the marketplace, they might not want or need it. Maybe someone spent millions of dollars trying and failed."

When another expressed dismay at just how much planning the business plan entailed, Schreiber turned on the tough love. "If you're just going to wing it, I'll see you in the same place you are 5 years from now," he said. "Think your plans through to the end. There really isn't a shortcut."

Last fall's cycle saw students from Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and Saline take part. There was some attrition over time -- more half of the students who came in for the first session weren't there for the last one.

Part of the challenge is the inherent difficulty in getting teens to show up anywhere, for 10 weeks, on a Saturday, when they're not getting paid.

"Some youth start the course and really don't fully understand the level of commitment and what the course is about," Bidlack explained in a follow-up interview, "and therefore quit after a few classes."

Another part of the challenge is the class's new format, which stretched the class from 8 weeks to 10.

Bidlack's pitch is something like Bo Schembechler's when he arrived as the Michigan football coach before the 1969 season: Those who stay will be champions. And if not champions, exactly, then at least teenagers with a well-thought out business plan --and \$250 in seed money for the teen with the very best plan.

The most recent B-Side of Youth cycle started on Oct. 2 and ended on Dec. 11. The class ran from noon to 4 p.m. for each of the 10 weeks, offering some 40 hours of mostly free and largely homework-free entrepreneurship training.

There is a \$20 cost for the course, which covers the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship textbook and workbook, which the students get to keep. Low-income students could participate for as little as \$5, Bidlack said.

Bidlack stresses that communication is essential for any entrepreneur and encourages vocal participation in the class. The goal is for each student who finishes the class to walk out with a thoughtfully-completed business plan, and also the ability to present it orally before his or her peers, and judges who will determine which pitch should win the \$250 in seed money.

"You're going to be talking with potential partners, bankers, investors, asking them for help making your business come to life," Bidlack said. "You have to get comfortable with that now, at a young age."

By the end of the 10-week class, three students were able to present their business ideas in a competition for the seed money.

Bella Crispino, 14, a freshman at Skyline High School, kicked off the presentations with her plan for "Muy Loco Tex-Mex Restaurant." Crispino is hoping to strike out as the sole entrant in Ann Arbor's "good Mexican food" market and will tailor her menu to be affordable enough for college students and of high enough quality for families to serve it at the dinner table.

But if Ann Arbor needs a restaurant that offers good Mexican, people might be hesitant to buy it from a 14-year old, judges said, pushing the student. The judges raise such questions not to discourage the students, but to give them a glimpse of the interrogations they'll face when approaching investors for money. At this level it's not about having the right answer to every question, it's about answering in a way that shows serious thought.

Crispino responded that she could start now by working at local restaurants, getting a sense of how an operation is run, how quality food is delivered to the masses. For her efforts Crispino won second place honors and an iPod Nano.

Richard Johnson III, 18, and a senior at Pioneer High School, presented on a concept called "RJ's Odd Jobs," a business whose philosophy seems to be, "If I don't know how to do something, I'll learn how."

"I'm great with my hands, and there's a lot of people (in the area) with good jobs and money who don't want to spend their time fixing things up," Johnson told AnnArbor.com. "So they'll be able to call me. I can't do everything around the house but I am always willing to learn."

Johnson's proposal suffered from the time crunch of switching plans at the 11th hour, and so it was light on specifics, even if the concept was sound. Johnson took home 3rd place and two EMU sweatshirts, one green and one grey.

Myron Webster, 15, and a sophomore at Ypsilanti High School, spoke last on his concept, "USB Gaming." Over the last 20 years video games have gone evolved from the eight-bit cartridges to higher grade cartridges into the CD format. But, Webster said, they haven't taken that next step, to the USB level, where games could be inserted into any computer and run.

Rather than needing the gaming console, any gamer could plug the USB game into a computer and play. Add in an Internet connection and teens could be playing their counterparts a world away, an option that some computer and console games already offer.

Webster's big challenge, beyond the technical expertise needed to pull the concept off, will come at the licensing level, where he'll need to convince video game producers to try the new format and have to convince gaming console makers to invest in something that could hurt console sales.

These are uphill battles, to say the least.

After brief deliberation by judges, Webster took home first place and \$250 to invest in making USB Gaming a reality.

Webster will have a chance to stack even more money for USB Gaming when he enters the 2011 Skandalaris Business Plan Competition for high schoolers, which offers a cash prize of \$1200. The 2011 competition will be hosted at EMU on Feb. 11 at the Sesi Midwest Entrepreneurship Conference.

The next cycle of the B-Side of Youth will begin in early February, Bidlack said. Parents and youth who are interested in enrolling should contact himk through the program's website, [www.bsideofyouth.com](http://www.bsideofyouth.com).

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#### **Ross Dunbar**

at 10:51 AM on January 16, 2011

This is a fantastic program that has been very successful helping young entrepreneurs from across Washtenaw County. I hope it continues to be supported by EMU and the local business community in the years ahead. There is a real need for programs like the B-Side that help empower and teach life skills to young adults in our community.

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#### **Mibloom**

at 4:36 PM on January 18, 2011

I enjoyed seeing this article that highlights an excellent youth program. The enterereneural concepts and skills that the B-side teaches is just what Michigan students need to be successful in the economy of the future. Many individuals, businesses and organizations have stepped up and contributed to the success of the B-Side students. I would like to add that this program would not have been possible without the vision and start-up investment over the past three years from the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation, Eastern Michigan University, the James A and Faith Knight Foundation and the RNR Foundation.

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**Decky**

at 7:41 AM on January 19, 2011

We so appreciate the highlighting of Eastern Michigan University's trailblazing community based program The B.Side (Business Side of Youth), housed in its office of Academic Service-Learning. This program has serviced over 500 youth in various capacities over three years. B.Side was developed as a response to a community youth mapping project where youth shared that they what they needed were job opportunities and relevant employment experiences. The B.Side was founded with the support of AAACF, RNR Foundation, James A. & Faith Knight Foundation and launched by Shamyle Nesfield, Program Director and Angelina Hamilton-Broderick, Asst. Program Director. Broderick remains as the program's Assistant Director with Jack Bidlack as the current Program Director. Fostering a culture of youth entrepreneurship is both a challenge and an necessity in these times and we believe that the B.Side is integral to doing just that, encouraging drive, innovation and creativity among area youth.