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## LEADERSHIP

By Jessica Thacher

## Cultivating Biz Whizzes

**More teens are starting their own businesses, and groups like the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship are helping them do it**

Many people who decide to become entrepreneurs do so because they aren't satisfied with the options offered in the corporate world. Natasha Spedalle was no different. At age 14, she wanted to land an after-school job, but most potential employers told her she was too young. So she decided to start her own business.

Her New York-based outfit, BlInG-BliNg Discount Fashion Jewelry, sells affordable, trendy accessories at street fairs and on college campuses. "It gives me a sense of fulfillment knowing that I can do it at such a young age," she says.

**CHANNELING DREAMS.** Spedalle, now 15, is among a growing number of teens and young adults who are taking the entrepreneurial path, particularly within lower-income communities. "Entrepreneurship is the ultimate social-justice program," says Michael Caslin, head of the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), a New York-based organization that partners with schools and community groups to teach young people in economically deprived areas how to run a business.

Founded in 1987 by Steve Mariotti, a former businessman and New York City schoolteacher, NFTE now works with nearly 20,000 kids each year in 45 states and 16 countries. By teaching young people basic business concepts, such as business-plan writing, marketing, negotiation, and pricing, Caslin says the foundation helps them "channel dreams into reality." NFTE recently honored Spedalle and 28 other young entrepreneurs at its 12th annual awards banquet in April.

For Andrea Dashiell, starting her own business led her back to her kitchen in Forestville, Md. The 17-year-old got involved with NFTE last year when she enrolled in an affiliated class at her high school. Soon after, Dashiell launched Honeecakes Bakery, which sells "homemade cakes the way mom used to make" to members of her local community.

**OPENING DOORS.** She has catered small events, but most of her sales comes from phone orders placed by people who sampled her cakes at school and church functions, as well as various entrepreneurship competitions. Her product list includes everything from German chocolate cake to sweet potato pie. She has even started a marketing campaign of sorts -- a free Honeecakes refrigerator magnet with every purchase.

But for Dashiell, an aspiring college student, creating and operating a business wasn't just about making sweets or raking in money. She says the experience taught her how to think on her feet and make wise decisions quickly. She points out that even struggling students at her high school generally do well in their NFTE classes. "Everything you want to do depends on you," she says. "It's your project."

Anthony Schwager, who was born with a disability, says he wanted to pursue entrepreneurship because he believed it would allow him to open doors that might otherwise be closed for him in the general workforce. With the support of his family, Schwager, 18, transformed his passion for bees into a promising business, Anthony's Kansas Honey. He bought his first hive in third grade as a hobby. Schwager has since amassed 60 hives.

**RESPECTED OPTION.** He nets about \$7,500 annually selling honey and various honey-based products in his Lawrence (Kan.) community. The NFTE award recipient hopes to have 100 hives by yearend and plans to hire workers with disabilities as his outfit expands.

Stigmatized a generation ago as the career choice for people who couldn't find a "conventional" job, entrepreneurship now commands respect and even admiration, with the rise of tech pioneers Bill Gates, Michael Dell, and other high-profile success stories. The growing ranks of organizations like NFTE, observers say, is evidence of continually growing interest.

Stephen Spinelli, the vice-provost for entrepreneurship at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., and a former NFTE board

member, says students used to consider high school business programs as a vocational track that was easier than college prep. But the explosion of entrepreneurship in technology and other areas, along with the proliferation of related organizations and college programs, has inevitably trickled down to younger kids.

**HARNESSING PASSION.** "This is a career you prepare yourself in a rigorous way for," Spinelli says. As much as learning actual business skills, he says the real value of organizations like NFTE is helping students "see the world as a set of opportunities, rather than a series of obstacles."

Barnabas Shakur, founder of New York-based Project Re-Generation -- and another NFTE award winner -- says such organizations don't make entrepreneurs, but they bring out the zeal for business in people and work with them to harness an existing passion. Shakur, whose group provides education, internships, and volunteer opportunities for young people in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, says the entrepreneurial spirit is innate, so his job is to provide the necessary skills and experience.

"You have to want to be there, and you have to work hard to be there," he says of the kids in his program. The Bed-Stuy native, just 24 himself, attributes his own success and ability to avoid negative pressure to his self-reliance.

And that's a common theme among many of these teens-turned-proprietors. "Anybody can be an entrepreneur," says Dashiell of Honeecakes Bakery. "As long as you have a passion for it, you can do anything." A passion, it seems, that certainly transcends age.

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