Students learn what it takes to be entrepreneurs

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Updated: July 12, 2014, 04:58 PM

While most of their peers were spending their Friday afternoon at the movies or the mall, Tafari Akono and Divante Robinson, both 17, were busy pitching an idea for a universal remote finder to a group of judges.

Afterward, the two boys shared big smiles as they discussed the product. They had just won a mock competition in the fashion of ABC's "Shark Tank."

“I came up with the idea,” Tafari, a student at St. Joseph’s Collegiate Institute, said after receiving several high-fives from his friends.

He described how he uses his remote at home and realized there should be a mechanism that is built into the device, a universal remote finder, as opposed to one bought separately.

The competition was the culmination of a three-day “pitching workshop” hosted by Dig Buffalo – a new co-working space at the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, as part of the University at Buffalo’s Liberty Partnerships Summer Program, a training program for high school students in Buffalo who fall below the poverty line.

The workshop, the first of its kind at Dg, was intended to inspire the entrepreneurial spirit in the 37 participating teenagers. Students were split into one of five groups, and each group had to agree on one business idea to present to the judges and their friends.

“This is exactly what would happen at a Google Start-Up weekend,” said Jessica Edwards, Dg’s curator. The ideas were wide-ranging. While Tafari and Divante, who attends Leonardo da Vinci High School, were part of a team that came up with a tangible product, most of the other groups pitched ideas for not-for-profit organizations.

The team that landed in second place presented a plan for “Just Build It,” a business that would improve and rebuild run-down neighborhoods.

Dg opened in March. Part of its mission is to help local entrepreneurs by providing them with a network and resources. It’s an all-inclusive space for people in any sector looking to get their businesses off the ground, according to Edwards.

The workshop was a part of their community-outreach efforts, Edwards said.

To get the students excited about their futures, Dg collaborated with local entrepreneurs from Z80 Labs who spoke to the students in the days prior to the competition about what it takes to build a product and sell it.

Part of Divante’s winning strategy was to implement the lessons taught throughout the workshop.

“We had been talking about innovation all week,” he said.

The speakers had emphasized the need to improve on already established technologies, so that’s what the winning team did.

Tafari learned what goes into following up on an idea: a lot of hard work. This was a sentiment Mayor Byron W. Brown reinforced when he spoke to the room full of teenagers before the pitching began.

“It’s exciting for me to see young people working hard,” Brown, who couldn’t stay for the competition, told the crowd.
“I want you to continue to work hard in school,” he added.

While they might not actually build and sell a universal remote finder, Tafari and Divante both hope to go to college in the next year. Tafari wants to study chemical engineering, and Divante is interested in software engineering.

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