

“You’re Fired!”...Local teens take on the role of boss

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By Kathleen Hall

Is the next Bill Gates, Donald Trump, or Oprah Winfrey sitting at your dinner table every night? Don’t be too quick to laugh. Many successful entrepreneurs heard the first callings of capitalism at a young age.

This trend continues today. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, seven million teens between ages 16 and 19 are employed full- or part-time, with 87,000 of them listed as self-employed. This number typically rises in the summer. The BLS reports the most common jobs for self-employed teens are lawn care, babysitting, and newspaper delivery.

The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well among young people in Chesterfield County as well. Below, meet several teens who have already turned their skills and strong work ethic into the American dream of running their own business.

Despite juggling school, activities, and their businesses, these teens also hold down part-time jobs. What is even more impressive, however, is their sense of balance and priorities. Business is important, but they keep it in perspective and don’t allow it to consume their lives.

Got mulch?

For some people, working in the yard is a welcomed escape from the stresses of the workweek. To the rest of us, however, it’s just one more thing on an already too long to-do list. Joe Lewis, 15, and his brother Josh, who is 18, recognized at an early age that there were many people too busy to properly maintain their lawns. Like a weed in their customers’ yards, the idea for a landscaping business took root and sprouted.

Joe chuckled as he described how it almost happened by default. His dad was going to buy a new lawn mower, and was deciding between two different sized mowers. He bought the bigger mower and the Lewis brothers were off and mowing—and cutting and trimming and hauling.

“We provide mostly grass cutting, mulch, and tree removal,” said Lewis. They use their own equipment and get new clients mostly by putting out flyers in the Stonehenge community.

“I like working my own hours,” Lewis said. “I don’t have to worry about my boss, although all my clients are bosses. I can have freedom.”

Lewis said the duo’s biggest challenge is finding clients, but he admits sometimes they get so busy they don’t always make time to market their business.

Joe is a rising sophomore at Monacan High School and his brother will start college in the fall. It seems the entrepreneurial spirit runs in the Lewis family. Their father also runs his own business. In between school and taking care of lawns, Joe and Josh help him as well.

Lewis tells other budding teen entrepreneurs, "You have to work hard. You really have to want to have the business. It takes perseverance to get it done."

Sweet Endings

Recipe: Two eggs, one cup of sugar, a dash of passion, and a pinch of determination; mix together thoroughly.

Yields: one beautiful cake and a successful entrepreneur.

Wendy Noble, 18, is a senior at Thomas Dale High School and takes a baking and pastry class through the culinary arts program at the Chesterfield Technical Center. The CTC provides catering services, which give students a first-hand opportunity to practice what they learn in class. Noble took this experience one step further and turned her culinary skills into a moneymaking venture.

"I started by making a friend's father's wedding cake," Noble explained. "I thought, 'How hard can it be?' It was really hard. It took a week!" With some practice, however, Noble pared the process down to just a few hours. Today, she generally leaves the baking to her instructor or her partner. Her expertise is the decorating.

Noble's most challenging project to date has been a three-tiered wedding cake. "It had pink and peach roses cascading down the sides. It was hard making the icing roses stick into the cake," Noble explained. She also bakes cakes for birthdays, retirements, and other events. It's not all serious, however. She's also decorated a Nightmare Before Christmas cake for a friend.

Noble will start college at St. Andrew's Presbyterian College in North Carolina this fall and will continue her cake decorating business when she's home during the summer and holidays.

"I like having control over what I do," Noble said. "I can say yes or no and refer [jobs I don't want] to someone who can do a better job and has time. I make my own schedule."

"I'm a perfectionist when it comes to decorating," she continued. "If it doesn't come out just the way I want, I'll trash it. It's got to be perfect."

Her advice to other teen entrepreneurs? "Definitely don't let it become the only thing that's important. Don't let it control your life. And find something you love. I love decorating cakes!"

The devil is in the details

Eric Alonzi and his two friends are into cars. But unlike many teenage boys who tend to spend their money on cars, these three found a way to let the money flow back to them.

"We needed money, but didn't want to get some minimum wage job," Alonzi explained. "We wanted to be our own bosses."

So the trio started an auto detailing business. Alonzo, and his partners, Alan Wayne and John Duni, provide curbside service to their customers. They come to customers' homes, bringing their own equipment, and will wash, wax, and polish the exterior and wheels of the car, and then clean the interior, including the upholstery and dashboard. They provide services in much of Chesterfield County.

Their new customers mostly come from word of mouth and from flyers posted in several Ukrop's stores. Their greatest challenge is getting the word out to potential new clients.

Does Alonzi like running his own business? "Oh yea, I'm the boss of myself, who I get, how much money I make. It's pretty nice."

The teens are fortunate enough to have a mentor who has a car restoration shop. "We get a lot of tips from him about how to make cars look brand new," Alonzi said.

Alonzi and Wayne are juniors in the humanities program at Monacan High School, and Duni is a junior at Trinity Episcopal School. Alonzi is second on Monacan's tennis team and plays basketball as well. College is in his future. He'll probably study business where his first-hand experience is sure to give him a leg up on most of his classmates.

Alonzi summed up the life of an entrepreneur pretty well. "You gotta go out, you have to be ambitious and can't wait for the business to come to you. It doesn't work like that."