

The entrepreneurs of Regent Park

Rotman school finds fledgling companies inside a neighbourhood of social housing
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Living in Cabbagetown, Michael Hartman and his neighbours were wary of the residents south of Gerrard St. E., and the sprawling social housing experiment gone awry, Regent Park.

Instead of continuing the chorus of harrumphing, the assistant dean and managing director of executive programs at Joseph L. Rotman School of Management decided to cross the street. He took his business skills with him. He found people with ideas, eager students for the Rotman Entrepreneurial School, a six-week course held in the spring for residents of Regent Park to learn how to create their own small businesses.

The school, now in its second year, accepts about 30 students and is run with the Regent Park Neighbourhood Initiative.

Volunteer professors and students from the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management help the residents refine their ideas, create a plan, learn about accounting and marketing and then present their fledgling businesses for critique. In the future, the program is looking to find sponsorship, or to connect with resources so that its students can find investors willing to back the entrepreneurs.

Most of the participants have been women, who have created plans for day-cares, clothing co-ops, yoga studios and designer jewellery aimed at specialty African clothing shops.

"They had great ideas, but they had so many ideas and they didn't know how to pitch them or who to pitch them to," Hartman said.

The free course hasn't yet created working businesses, but for Anjali Shah, it's been invaluable. She says she'll be turning the lessons learned in the gym of the Nelson Mandela Public School into her job teaching yoga - a small business she says she plans to expand by selling a vegetarian food product for families on the go.

A veteran instructor in recreation centres in the Middle East, Shah says she can now point out the mistakes she made when she started teaching yoga from her home.

"I started the yoga business 15 days after arriving in Canada," she said. While no one could fault her ambition, Shah says that she didn't have the network she needed to make the business a success. Her advertising was limited to flyers and pamphlets; she didn't yet know about the community centres and churches that could help her out.

Two years later, Shah took a day job but continued teaching yoga a few times a week on the side.

Eager to present her new product plan at the end of this month, she says the business plan her Rotman teachers helped her create is "fool-proof," a natural extension of her call to incorporate the teachings of yoga into everyday life.

"When I gave yoga retreats, people liked the food.

"They thought it was healthy and they would ask, 'Why not teach us how to make what you're giving us?'" Shah said.

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Though she plans to start out small, selling her spice and vegetable mixture at bake sales and cooking in church kitchens, she imagines that it will expand into a lifestyle line for the yoga community.

She says the yoga practised at upscale clubs is too commercialized, and she plans to keep her services and products affordable.

"We have a community and the community pushes us up," she said.

[Illustration]

Tannis Toohey toronto Star Anjali Shah pitches her yoga business to her class at the Rotman Entrepreneurial School last week. She plans to expand with a vegetarian food product for families on the go.

Credit: Toronto Star

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