

Firm sparks young entrepreneurs

By **CHRIS LAFORTUNE**
STAFF WRITER

Brian Jenkins started his Oak Park company, Entrenuity, as a way to teach kids entrepreneurship and help instill a commitment to community service.

Jenkins' formal education is in theology. But while studying the civil rights movement, the Austin man decided he wanted to find some way to give African Americans an opportunity to create wealth.

"The motivation was of being a Christian but not just talking about it, but serving other people," he said. "It was how to practically live out wealth creation not just for yourself as a capitalist, but wealth creation for the betterment of the community."

Entrenuity, based at 503 S. Oak Park Ave., Suite 211, provides youth entrepreneur training services, Jenkins said, including fundamental business plan training. Jenkins also provides training for teachers to bring those lessons back to students.

Through its direct services, Entrenuity teaches kids business skills including how to budget and save.

"Not only do they have that great education, but we take it a step further and they create a business," Program Coordinator Andrea Mills said. "We teach them about profit, inventory, financial investment."

The students learn entrepreneurial skills not from a book, but by starting and running a business, Jenkins said.



Members of the Kids Club, trained in business skills by Oak Park-based Entrenuity, sell bracelets Dec. 16 at a bazaar in Chicago's Cabrini Green community.

Service

Entrenuity also instructs young entrepreneurs that there's more to owning a business than just making money, Jenkins said. Business owners also work to serve the community.

"It's one way to teach bigger lessons to the youth in a fun context," Jenkins said. "It gives them more control on their own life, and it benefits the community to start a business."

Since its launch in 1999, Entrenuity has helped to start 21 businesses which remained op-

erational at least three months and had a minimum \$1,000 in gross sales. The top six businesses have generated an average \$75,000 to \$80,000 in gross sales.

"They're operated solely by the students we serve," he said.

Marc Henkel, after-school program ministry director at Agape Community Center in the city's Roseland neighborhood, received business educator training from Entrenuity.

"We had a card business going before that," Henkel said. "We used some workbooks, training the children in busi-

ness skills. But the Entrenuity program, it was the way it's all set up. It's a lot nicer."

Henkel said he applied Entrenuity's training to improve the card-making business using the Entrenuity training, switching production from screen printing to inked stamps. That enabled six more kids to join in, bringing the total staff to 10.

"They're all earning their income and turning a profit," Henkel said. "They're having a good time."

Employee ownership

The youngsters, all in seventh and eighth grades, receive \$5 an hour running the company, Agape Cards, and making the cards. They receive business training once a week and work on cards three hours a week. At the end of the year, they split the profits.

The program also includes homework help, recreation in the center's gym, Bible lessons and a computer lab.

"Most of the kids have been in the after-school program since they were in first grade," Henkel said. "They kind of look forward to being in the junior high part of it, being able to have their own business."

Each organization Entrenuity works with is responsible for securing any necessary work permits for youth participants, Jenkins said. For some businesses, the parents register the

business for the kids.

"We always teach them to follow whatever the law says, but the work permits have been an issue in the past," he said.

Younger students, Jenkins said, earn so little money that getting a work permit is not necessary. They participate to earn experience rather than cash.

"Like for third and fourth grade students, it's not an issue," he said.

Entrenuity also has worked since June 2003 with Kids Club, a group at Chicago's Cabrini Green community.

Cleaning contract

Kids Club members received training in janitorial services, Jenkins said, and started a company called the BKC Cleaning Crew. They received their first contract in May 2004, and now have a \$20,000 janitorial services contract to clean their own building.

"We started with a group of 40 students, and we broke it up into management and customer service teams," Jenkins said. "There are between six and eight kids currently managing it. They do all their own scheduling and customer service and manage it."

Jenkins said he has worked with schools and organizations in Chicago, though he has had interest from at least one group in Oak Park. His primary focus has always been on the city, he said.

"That's where the greatest need is, particularly in economic literacy," he said.

Jenkins said he does offer a faith-based component to his program, but it's up to organizations whether they want to use it or not. Having such an option gives him a larger market to service, he said, making him able to work in churches or public schools, and the goal, he said, is to reach out with Christian faith in a practical manner.

"Students who start in the public school environment cannot receive the revenue they generate," Jenkins noted. "They get it in the form of gift certificates, which turns the kids into consumers."

"That's one of the reasons I like after-school programs, because there's less restrictions like that."

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Kids Club members count the proceeds from selling bracelets they made.