

Tomorrow's Entrepreneurs

For over a decade, I've trained urban students in how to start their own businesses and practice ethical values in the marketplace. Especially now, we cannot forget to invest in our future.

By *Brian Jenkins*
on February 2, 2009



Students Drika Benton, Henry Organ, Nicholas Bell, Imani Rhodes, Travis Cole, Shayna Duminie, and Tristian Williams at the 2008 Entrenuity Summer Business Camp.

As our country sinks further into uncertainty about its economic future, I find hope in the fact that some of us have been down this road before and lived to tell about it. In 1999 I was laid off from the company I'd poured my life into, my wife and I had just welcomed our second child, and I was struggling to figure out exactly how God was ordering *my* steps. To be honest, I didn't see it. For six years, I had been teaching youth how to start and operate businesses, and now I had to put those lessons into reality for the sake of my family -- and to see if I could live out what I had been teaching for years.

That is the snapshot of how [Entrenuity](#), a not-for-profit organization that teaches youth how to start and operate a business with integrity, was started. I didn't have an epiphany, an "a-ha!" moment, or even a business plan. For me it was an open secret, "Be obedient to the Lord's direction."

An Entrepreneurial Odyssey

My entrepreneurial odyssey more or less began in 1993. My passion and desire were to serve the Lord in the urban context. I did this by volunteering to work with urban youth at [Lawndale Community Church](#) in Chicago. My ultimate goal, however, was to earn a Ph.D. in theology.

Having just finished seven continuous years of education, earning an undergraduate degree at the University of Iowa and my master's in theology from the Wheaton College, my plan was to take two years off, work, save money, and return to academia to get that doctorate. Those were *my* plans.

But during those two years, I can now see that the Lord was preparing me to serve Him in a different way. It was during this period that I met my wife, Jenai, who would be my greatest companion and partner for the next phase the Lord would take me through. God knew I could not do it on my own.

It was during this period of pursuing Jenai that I was first introduced to the concept of entrepreneurship. Before then, I don't think I had even heard the word--at least not in a context that caused me to give it much thought.

I made two commitments during this time: one was to Jenai (we were married in October 1994), and the other was to serve the Lord in entrepreneurship as He saw fit. I'm proud to say that I've kept both commitments these 14 years later.

Not Business As Usual

My entrepreneurial journey has given me the opportunity to teach and impact thousands of youth with the hope, freedom, and ability to dream big. It was an opportunity first offered to me by my family and other trailblazers who laid the path I would follow. Having benefited from that pathway, it is my responsibility to widen it for others and create more possibilities. I'm convinced young people, particularly youth in our urban centers, must be given the freedom to dream--and in some instances taught to dream again.

Today, both public and private schools teach the Entrenuity course to their students. And during the summers, we host a weeklong faith-based camp, where urban high-school students learn business skills and receive a \$500 stipend to offset any summer-employment income they might forgo to participate.

I am convinced entrepreneurial training is a key component in equipping our current and future generations of leaders. If we are to inspire new ideas and possibilities, we must entrust our young people with the freedom to fail coupled with the freedom to succeed. This is a common bond that the student who just made his first sale and the small business owner who just sold her company share; they were given the freedom to fail or succeed.

Over the past 14 years, I have trained hundreds of youth workers, both nationally and globally, through Entrenuity's business curriculum. And, in turn, those youth workers have trained students who went on to start their own businesses. I have witnessed the Lord's faithfulness to us and others who have participated in this journey.

Case Study: Owning the School Store

In 2008, we saw several Entrenuity-inspired startups. However, Puma's Den, a school store at [The Potter's House School](#) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a prime example of both a teacher and students casting a vision for their own businesses and then laboring to make them realities.

In the fall of 2006, juniors Kelli Worth and Abby Vance signed up for the Entrenuity entrepreneurship class led by their instructor, Laurel Christensen. As part of their business plan, they identified an unmet need in the form of a "school store" to provide supplies, spirit wear, and packaged food items throughout the school year. They completed a market survey and even consulted with teachers to make sure their store carried the items teachers and students needed for their classes.

The following fall, Kelli and Abby presented their final plan to the teachers and the board of directors prior to the start of the school year to ensure they had the support of the teachers and administration. They completed the build out of their store, ordered their initial inventory needs, advertised and marketed to their customers, and operated a model business for other students to emulate.

The enterprising young business women rented store space from Potter's House, which strongly encourages its students to start and operate businesses in both the elementary and high school grade levels. Kelli and Abby also made several charitable contributions on a regular basis to the school and other organizations in their community.

Puma's Den (named after the school's mascot) was a major success and exceeded Kelli and Abby's initial revenue projections. The store met its customers' needs and generated an estimated \$8,500 in gross sales during the 2007-2008 school year.

In spring of 2008, with their graduation looming, Kelli and Abby were approached by various younger students who all offered to purchase the business and continue running Puma's Den. After entertaining several bids, Kelli and Abby sold their interest in Puma's Den to Miguel Luzon, a junior at Potter's House, for an undisclosed amount during the summer of 2008. Kelli Worth, Abby Vance, and Miguel Luzon now represent the first Entrenuity student business that has been started by Entrenuity students and sold to new ownership.

Puma's Den success is multifaceted. It began with an excellent instructor who dedicated herself to learning and then teaching Entrenuity's curriculum, investing time and resources into Kelli and Abby's class, and identifying students with the vision and commitment to start and operate their own businesses. And today, Ms. Christensen is teaching a new class of entrepreneurs--Miguel and his employees operate Puma's Den, and Kelli and Abby have successfully graduated high school with both a diploma and legitimate experience as small business owners. Their entrepreneurial journey has only begun!

Hope for the Future

Even now, as I ponder our nation's current economic crisis, I'm encouraged by the knowledge that Entrenuity is making a difference in the lives of urban youth who will be running the small

businesses and large corporations of tomorrow. No matter what, I know that there are a growing number of young men and women who have been exposed to the Entrenuity program, and who understand both the professional and moral principles related to achieving success as employees, business owners, and civic leaders.

It is in these times that I can look ahead into an uncertain future and better understand the Lord's call on my life. I can "look over my shoulder" and see how far my entrepreneurial odyssey has brought me, and it gives me hope for the future. We don't need to understand it all; we just need to remain faithfully focused on our call.

To learn more about Entrenuity, visit [its website here](#).



Brian Jenkins is president of [Entrenuity](#), a national training organization that teaches students how to start and operate businesses while incorporating ethical business behaviors in the marketplace based on biblical principles. Brian and his family live in the Austin community in Chicago.