



Photos by ANGIE BEAULIEU

Vicky Wu Davis, right, founder of Youth CITIES, works with Nalyn Yim on the newsletter, "What's Good in the Hood," a startup that was realized by Davis' program.

START-UPS AND SERVICE

Kids learn to run a business, and give back to the community, through Youth CITIES program.

BY ROSEMARY FORD

Wouldn't it be nice if someone actually taught you how to make money? Start your own business? Be successful?

Wouldn't you love to meet an "angel," and not the type with wings, but the type with money to invest in your idea or product?

Risk is an inherent factor in starting a business. Rewards are, too. For 39-year-old Vicky Wu Davis of Andover, teaching young people about the risks reaps rewards.

Davis started Youth CITIES (Creating Impact Through Innovation Entrepreneurship and Sustainability) four years ago to

help middle- and high-school students learn how to start a business to enrich themselves and their community.

Why?

When Davis was growing up in Nashua, she watched her mom struggling to earn enough money to take care of her family. Davis wanted to be her own boss and had lots of ideas about how to make this happen. When it came time for college, however, her mother wanted her to play it safe and study accounting. Davis followed her advice.

In addition to accounting, Davis focused on computer science at UMass-Amherst.

She also opened an IRA to deposit the money from her first job — another piece of advice from her mother.

"I think I had enough left afterward for a cassette," Davis jokes.

She knew nothing about entrepreneurship, yet while working full-time started a consulting company to showcase her financial skills. And at age 26 in the year 2000, Davis left her position at Nextel to start FrogHop — a software company that provides technology for social games and virtual worlds.

Ask Davis about her entrepreneurial experiences since then and she will tell you



Vicky Wu Davis, center, works with staff members Nalyn Yim, left, and Rayza Carrasco during a meeting for the newsletter, "What's Good in the Hood," which is distributed throughout Lawrence schools.

about ups and downs, successes and failures. She made a lot of valuable contacts. And ultimately, she turned the day-to-day operation of Frog-hop over to someone else. Then she started to look for new opportunities — and thinking about how she could be of greater service.

That's where Youth CITIES comes in.

Through this charitable program, Davis works with children interested in learning about business. The venture represents a natural progression in her life, she says. She gets to use the contacts and connections she made in the business world, especially through Frog-hop, along with realizing her vision for making a difference in the world.

"I didn't want to have to be retired to do what I love," she says.

The kids in her program come from Lawrence to Lexington. Lawrence and Lexington are two very



This newspaper is one of several start-up enterprises realized through Youth CITIES.

different communities, she points out. So her program brings together young people who may be rich or poor, and from very different schools or neighborhoods.

What they have in common, Davis says, is drive, tenacity and

enthusiasm. Their ideas grow from the things they love, be it dancing, computers, journalism or some other passion.

"Given the right tools, they can move mountains," Davis says.

Davis says she has been blessed

with smart, savvy, driven young people who want to learn. The experience has given her a whole new perspective on working with teenagers.

Her business card reads, "Founder/Executive Director/Mother Hen of Youth CITIES."

"Sometimes, when you do something like this, you are working so hard you need to laugh," she says. "It reminds me of why I do this and why teenagers are not so hard (to work with) after all."

In her primary program, a March-to-May Bootcamp meets regularly at the Cambridge Innovation Center for a series of classes and to hear guest speakers. From the "elevator pitch," to networking, to a business plan and more, experts coordinated by Davis explore many aspects of entrepreneurship. They also talk about balancing life and business — especially school and homework.



Vicky Wu Davis of Andover teaches young people the risks, and rewards, of starting a business.

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"They are not just brand-name people," Davis says. "They are people who really care about the project."

As their final project, students pitch their ideas to judges — reminiscent of the hit reality show "Shark Tank." Judges listen and choose a favorite. The winner gets \$1,500 in start-up cash.

"It can be nerve-wracking," Davis says. "I get it. I was in that hot-seat, sitting across from venture capitalists, making a pitch. I survived."

Davis' first success story was, "What's Good in the Hood," a bimonthly publication founded by Lawrence teen Gladys Gitau, who attended Davis' bootcamp and won the start-up money.

"Vicky is amazing," Gitau says. "To be able to do the work that she does with Youth CITIES, manage other companies, and still be a wife and mother is incredible. I admire her a lot."

She's also just a phone call away when they need help.

"She's a great mentor, and friend of WGITH," Gitau says.

Davis connected her with people

"It's not always a linear path. I don't expect them to be overnight sensations."

Vicky Wu Davis

Founder of Youth CITIES

in production and business at The Eagle-Tribune to learn about running a media organization. She also brought Gitau to her mentor, former Boston Globe writer Jerry Ackerman.

"Youth CITIES exposed me to business concepts and the idea of social change through entrepreneurship, a vehicle I want to use later on in life to give back to the community," says Gitau, now a freshman at Whitman College in Washington state.

Prior to leaving, Gitau trained other students to continue her work with "What's Good in the Hood." They write stories, sell advertising and adhere to a strict production budget.

"What's Good in the Hood' is doing well without me," she says.

"The new team is organized, perhaps more organized than when I was around."

This year's Youth CITIES winner started "Nerd Herd," an organization that teaches local youths to repair computers. While that winner also has moved on to college, he, too, trained others to keep up with the business.

Davis can't help but regret that many businesses ideas don't get a chance to come to fruition. This year she brought in professionals from the United Way's Young Professionals Group for more funding.

And yet, Youth CITIES isn't designed to end with the funding. Davis doles money out in increments to get these businesses going and help them remain stable. Her goal is to create an incubator for

teens and their ideas. She encourages risk-taking and experiments.

"As long as I see progress, I stay with them," she says.

While she knows that not all businesses will succeed, she thinks the students learn as much from failure as from success.

"It's not always a linear path," Davis says. "I don't expect them to be overnight sensations."

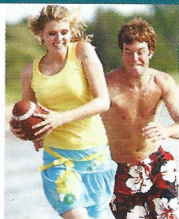
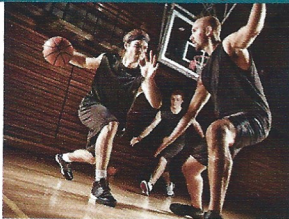
Because so many of them start with the question, "How do I make my corner of the world a better place?" even failed businesses make a positive impact. On Davis' balance sheet, that's a win. It's not the destination, it's the journey.

"I had to go through this zig-zaggy path to find out what I loved," she says of Youth CITIES.

That zig-zaggy path didn't stop with Youth CITIES, either. In addition to Youth CITIES, Davis is working on a game that helps children enjoy learning a second language.

Where did that idea come from? Another passion, of course: Davis wants to inspire her 4-year-old to embrace Chinese. **MVB**

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