

EDUCATION

'Future of education:' NJ students, Zuckerberg Institute partner to help local businesses

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WOODBIDGE – Fifteen township high school students and three businesses have taken to heart the mantra of "Think Globally, Act Locally."

The teens and businesses have connected through the Zuckerberg Institute to launch the High School Post Pandemic Task Force Woodbridge.

As Task Force members, students work alongside local female and minority-owned businesses directly affected by COVID-19. Their mission is to solve real-world problems and once again see the businesses thrive in their neighborhoods.

The Zuckerberg Institute has granted the Task Force the superpower of empowerment.

"A lot of people come to work with us because they want to be the next Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Melinda Gates, and we always think, 'That's great, but start in your own town,'" said Michael Littig, a co-founder of the Zuckerberg Institute. "Start in your own school. Start in the place you live."

During 90-minute weekly sessions over three months, the Zuckerberg Institute and a team of professionals have been mentoring students to develop innovative solutions to support local businesses. Global leaders join online sessions and give feedback to the students. This team has included the Dalai Lama; Zoom Global Chief Information Officer Harry Moseley; Lindy Elkins-Tanton, head of NASA's Psyche Mission; and Facebook's Randi Zuckerberg, a co-founder of the Zuckerberg Institute, creator of "Facebook Live" and bestselling author.

The first few weeks of the program center on leadership, teamwork, research, how to come up with ideas, innovation and entrepreneurship, said Littig, who runs the program with Zuckerberg and fellow Zuckerberg Institute co-founder Brian Patrick Murphy.

"Businesses come on and share the problems that they are facing and immediately the students get right into it," he said.

The premise is to treat "students like colleagues," he said.

"This is the future of education," Littig said. "The ideas they are going to come up with — they don't exist. They have the innovative ideas and we are validating them."

The students then pitch the ideas to the businesses, refine them and bring them home to "do the work."

The ideas have included creating an event, redesigning a website, social media and marketing plans, revamping logo designs, updating menus, negotiating contracts and finding less expensive but higher-quality materials.

"These are very specific things," Murphy said. "This is not theoretical. These students are doing work. It's amazing. And they are exceptional."

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The future of education

The businesses are nominated by the students. Once a business is chosen, teams of students create personalized action plans. When plans are approved, they are transformed made into a reality.

"We were so blown away by the high school students," Murphy said. "They have ideas and are not held back by all these preconceived notions — they live in a whole new world."

The students are in the "Action Plan" phase of the program, said Nathaniel Elson, 17, a senior at Woodbridge High School. Nominated to participate in the program by his Sports Marketing teacher Ian Nowicki, Elson brought Olivia's Catering and Dining in Rahway to the attention of the Task Force. He then was assigned to help Olivia's along with Dhruv Patel of J.F.K. Memorial High School and Jasleen Dhaliwal of Colonia High School.

"I was very grateful they chose his business," Elson said of the East Cherry Street Caribbean restaurant. "(Owner) Roger (Clennon) has been struggling and I'm glad I can help him get back on his feet."

Recruited by the International Soccer Academy in the United Kingdom, Elson will attend York St. John University in York, England after graduation to pursue a degree in

exercise science alongside a pro-level Soccer Development Program. His dream is to be a professional soccer player, but if that does not pan out, Elson aims to be prepared to open his own soccer training business.

"I thought, this could be a wonderful opportunity for me now and in the future," said Elson. "I have learned a lot — how to create a business, how to plan, make goals in life, how to really help someone too. In the last eight weeks, I have learned so much more about creating a business and strategies about how to run a business. I have a better idea of making goals specific and making them more reachable. I've been following these myself and I have been reaching the goals that I have set. It inspires me to create my own business someday."

Why Woodbridge?

Littig connected to the township through his friend, Sam Friedman of Atlantic Realty Development, who, in turn, brought in township Chief of Staff and Director of Redevelopment Caroline Ehrlich. Littig and Murphy credit Ehrlich and Mayor John E. McCormac with helping to jumpstart the unique program.

"I've always found Woodbridge to be a very progressive type of town," said Littig. "They were so open and welcoming and were willing to say, 'Yea, this is really interesting — Let's go and push this forward.'"

School administrators and teachers selected 15 students from the township's three high schools. Along with Dhaliwal, Patel and Elson, the student group includes:

Colonia High School

Himit Shah
Madison Ferreira
Brandon Ribeiro

John F. Kennedy Memorial High School

Krish B. Patel
Anuj Patel

Woodbridge High School

Shakeel Guerrier
Angela Montauban

Meaghan Motz
Michael Nycz
Isabel Reyes
Taylor Deliman

"This is a tremendous opportunity for our students to garner real-life experiences and to help our local economy in the process," said Superintendent of Schools Robert Zega. "The energy in the initial meeting was extremely positive and I think we can expect some significant accomplishments from the Post Pandemic Task Force."

Besides Olivia's, Knot Just Bagels and European School of Dance, both located in the township, are participating in the program. Previously, the Zuckerberg Institute worked locally with Gem Limousine and Strawberry Pub and Pizza.

The genesis for the program came from Zuckerberg who, seeing how the world was impacted by the pandemic, suggested a high school task force, Murphy said. A six-week course was created last summer and students around the country participated.

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While that was "awesome," Murphy said they all then saw the "absolute devastation" of the pandemic. While the six-week program developed solutions to issues, the three-month pilot program with township students puts the solutions to the test. They answer the question "What can we really do?," Murphy said.

According to Murphy, students know the businesses in their own backyard, make personal connections to them and the unprecedented struggles and losses.

"They see it matters and they have skin in the game," he said. "And the community feels good about it — who doesn't want a bunch of high school kids come and save the day. It's really a beautiful experience watching these kids make a difference."

Sharon McAuliffe, owner of Knot Just Bagels, can attest to the pandemic's hardships and the hope the high schoolers have brought.

Due to township downtown redevelopment plans, her business of 17 years had to relocate. Then, the pandemic slowed the re-opening process at the new site — 93 Main St. — to a snail's pace. The goal now is to be open in the new space by the end of summer.

"Everything is taking so much longer because of COVID," said McAuliffe, whose store was voted "Best Bagel Shop in Central Jersey" by Home News Tribune readers 12 years in a row. "But, what has been amazing is the support from the town — and then this came along and it is great."

NJ Board of Education: Longtime Woodbridge educator named new Superintendent of Schools for district

McAuliffe said the students "know what is going on in the industries' and are really trying to help us."

Littig also sees the program as a way for the students to "do something that matters."

"It is so important to this generation to do something that is meaningful but most importantly, has impact," Littig said. "That's what we provide them — we ask what impact do you want to make? How can we inspire you? Literally, changing someone's website, putting them on social media — that's an impact. We can measure that."

With the Task Force, the Zuckerberg institute hopes to foster more "doers."

"It helps when Randi tells stories about Facebook," Littig said. "She'll say, 'Yea, we tried eight ideas before we got to this one thing. And this one thing changed the whole world.' The eight ideas failed. So, really it is about fostering a place of failure, conversation, ideas and that's the beginning of their education in many ways. That's why we are excited to work with them."

For more information on the program, go to www.zuckerberginstitute.com/taskforce-woodbridge.

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