

# Students explore cooperative solutions

## At Youth Entrepreneurship Symposium

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY ALLISON RUEF

LOCH SHELDRAKE — Sophomores and juniors from Fallsburg, Liberty and Monticello High Schools came together at SUNY Sullivan on November 7 to take part in the inaugural Youth Entrepreneurship Symposium sponsored by the not-for-profit organization YEG or Youth Economic Group.

Their challenge? To create a pitch for an entrepreneurial opportunity in Sullivan County using a worker cooperative model.

Eight groups made up of students from each district were guided by a professional coach (local business experts and entrepreneurs) and given 90 minutes to create their fictitious business venture. Each project had to meet a set of criteria that included employing worker-owners, that benefited people in Sullivan County, that was feasible, and had to be a product or service. The project had to address or solve a problem in the market and could be for-profit or not-for-profit.

Although all eight groups were sequestered with their coaches in classrooms, six teams came up with the same idea: A community/youth recreation facility. Team 1 called their facility “Sullivan Playground.” Team 2’s idea, “The Freedom Center” was pitched as “a place to go to be ourselves.” Team 6’s “SGL” or “Sullivan’s Got Life” facility would explore using the space at the Apollo Plaza as a teen club, sports & recreational facility and cafe.

What was glaringly obvious was that Sullivan County’s youth are very aware of the lack of “things to do” here and have a lot of ideas about how to change that. Most teams used a membership model to generate revenues for their business, but selling food and snacks, movie nights, arcades as well as income generated from rental opportunities was also popular.

Another idea, “Sullivan United Plaza,” proposed by Team 5, would create a retail space for local businesses in Monticello. According to their pitchman, “people don’t want to go to a deteriorating corner store.”

For Monticello student Mia Johnson, the day’s exercise proved to be an interesting challenge. “Coming up with ideas, putting a project together while

### About YEG

The Youth Economic Group is a youth empowerment program of the Rural & Migrant Ministry, Inc., a non-sectarian non-profit organization. YEG accepts members by application only and work to educate themselves and others by hosting community forums, rallies, fundraisers and by spreading awareness of social injustice issues. YEG operates Basement Bags, a cooperative business that produces hand-dyed and screen-printed reusable canvas bags.

getting to know everyone at the same time was a little stressful,” said Johnson. “It was fun, though. We all had the same idea – that Sullivan County needs activities for kids.”

The task of judging each project fell to Marc Baez (Sullivan County Partnership for Economic Development), Hillary Egeland (Director of Special Events, SUNY Sullivan), Thalia Lucas (YEG graduate and Pace University student) and Cathy Paty (President of the Sullivan County Chamber of Commerce). Their decision, based on a scoring rubric and private discussion determined which team took home the prize – \$500 scholarships to SUNY Sullivan for each team member.

The top prize went to Team 4, whose idea of “Reel Food,” a restaurant/movie theater combo encompassed an important goal of the exercise, and a trait of successful entrepreneurship – taking a single problem and trying to solve it in an uncomplicated way.



The winning team, Team 4, from left: Mirza Jared, Kieran Cavanaugh, Teshawn Phillips, Sierra Paterson and Devin Wiseman are presented with certificates from Tom Gatto, a representative from Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther’s office.

The team, led by their coach Kristine Ellis-Petrik, co-founder of Java Love Coffee Roasters in Bethel, was made up of Sierra Paterson and Mirza Jared of Fallsburg, Kieran Cavanaugh, Teshawn Phillips and Devin Wiseman of Monticello and YEG member Shivani Patel of Liberty.

“This is the greatest team ever,” said Petrik. “They really took the exercise to heart and tried to think of solutions. We had a great time and I’m really proud of them.”

The idea for the symposium had been percolating for a few years, according to Katia Chapman, Youth Empowerment Assis-



Kristine Ellis-Petrik, left, co-founder of Java Love Coffee Roasters in Bethel and winning team coach, is given a Basement Bag by YEG graduate and YES judge Thalia Lucas.



Jordan Drapkin from Monticello High School, center, explains the financial structure of her team’s entrepreneurial idea.

tant Coordinator and Intern Coordinator at YEG’s parent organization, Rural & Migrant Ministry. “We are hoping that this is the first of many YES events,” said Chapman. “We are so grateful to SCCC for hosting the event and to our sponsors, judges, coaches

and key-note speaker Omar Freilla, Founder and Director of Green Worker Cooperatives. Today was a chance to bring students together and explore entrepreneurship, innovation, teamwork and creativity and we look



Team 2 shows off their floor plan for “Liberty for All” a community recreation center concept that would be located in Liberty.



A scene from a classroom: challenge teams meet, discuss and create.

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**Kristine Ellis-Petrik**