

YOUTH ENTREPRENEURS KANSAS



Photos by Mike Hutmacher/The Wichita Eagle

East High senior Hannah Wu, left, works on a project in her YEK class, as does senior Michael Nguyen, center. Teacher Shanna Zimmerman, right, says that the program's field trips to companies and guest lecturers from the business community drive home the information the students learn.

A way up for at-risk kids



Jeff Tuttle/The Wichita Eagle

Liz Koch, the chairwoman of Youth Entrepreneurs Kansas, has been with the group from its inception. Now YEK has programs in 18 high schools in Kansas, a new executive director and 10 employees. The program's goal is to help at-risk youths learn about business and entrepreneurship.

"My goals and what I look at as success (by way of YEK) is to change the way they (students) currently think about what is possible for them, their life, their family in the society, in the town, which they choose. It's how they look at things and realize the possibilities."

—Liz Koch, YEK Chairwoman

BY JERRY SIEBENMARK
The Wichita Eagle

Nearly two decades ago, Liz and Charles Koch listened to a pitch about a program to teach at-risk youth business and entrepreneurship — and to give them a shot at a better future.

From the pitch was born Youth Entrepreneurs Kansas.

Now in its 17th year, YEK will reach about 700 students in 18 high schools in Wichita, Kansas City, Kan., and Topeka.

It's a program that has become an important part of Liz Koch's life.

"It was through the fixing and tinkering that I became more passionate about it," said Koch, YEK's chairwoman.

From Koch's perspective, 2008 is a noteworthy year for YEK.

The organization has hired a new executive director, Kylie Stupka, a certified public accountant and former director of finance and administration for the Greater Wichita Convention & Visitors Bureau.

It's adding employees — it has 10 now — because of the program's growth.

And it moved this month from its longtime location in the basement

of Devlin Hall at Wichita State University to a remodeled suite at Koch Industries' headquarters in northeast Wichita.

The program also has grown beyond Kansas.

In 2006 it expanded into two high schools in Atlanta, where the program is named YEATL — Youth Entrepreneurs Atlanta — and is run by a separate executive director and board.

Last year, YEATL expanded into three more Atlanta high schools. More are planned.

"I want to be in every public high school in Atlanta," Koch said.

Despite the growth of the program, Koch is not satisfied. It's likely she never will be.

"Because if you're satisfied that means you're complacent, you're not thinking about what's next, what's next, what's next" she said. "We struggle to live up to what we want to do. We have all these great plans. But just getting them implemented, and the buy-in from schools, teachers, students, it's never going to be easy."

Changing kids' thinking

Many of the personal situations that YEK students come from aren't easy, Koch said.

And besides giving students insight into business and entrepreneurship, she hopes that YEK gives them something that's intangible but critically important.

"My goals and what I look at as success (by way of YEK) is to change the way they currently think about what is possible for them, their life, their family in the society, in the town, which they choose," she said. "It's how they look at things and realize the possibilities.... They cannot go and live life and experience life the way many of them live. No role models. No goals. No ambition.

"I'm not trying to paint some picture of something that's not realistic, but they can have a good life, and they can contribute to the communities they live in and feel good about themselves, generally."

YEK has given Marcus Villa, a Wichita West High School senior, self-confidence.

"It helped me realize I can do what I want to do... that now I know I can be successful and know what it takes to be



Jeff Tuttle/The Wichita Eagle

Kylie Stupka is the executive director of Youth Entrepreneurs Kansas. Through YEK, Stupka said, "we're trying to change the way a person has seen life and sees life and contributes to life."

successful," he said.

YEK instructors like Wichita East High School's Shanna Zimmerman said the support they get from the group, in terms of field trips to companies and guest lecturers from the business community, drives home the information they learn.

"The kids kind of see the real relevance of what we teach," Zimmerman said.

The idea for YEK was born from a visit by Steve Mariotti, president and founder of the New York City-based National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship.

Mariotti came to Wichita to talk to Liz and Charles Koch about his program, which to this day provides the school curriculum for YEK, and ask whether they would help support developing his program here.

"It just fit us to a T," Liz Koch said.

That's how the program started, in 1991 at Wichita North High School.

Koch said it didn't take long for her and YEK staff to understand that if they wanted YEK to really have an impact on at-risk kids, it was going to take more than an eight-week program.

So over the next 16 years, Koch, YEK staff and its board of directors developed a program

that is now a credit-earning course that lasts the entire school year.

It also provides summer training programs at companies such as Cessna Aircraft, Smith Barney, Associated and Security Benefit Corp.; awards college scholarships; and provides venture capital for students to start their own businesses.

And for those kids who graduate and want to stay connected, YEK has an Ambassadors Club, which offers them community service projects and continuing education programs.

"The things we offer them I really feel good about," Koch said. "And that's the community buy-in that's so necessary to make something work. I haven't found anyone else who wants to hang with their kids as long as we do."

Maintaining the mission

Nearly all of the schools that have YEK classes meet the organization's criterion of having at-risk students. And YEK provides the funding to support the programs in those schools.

The exception is Kapaun Mount Carmel High School in Wichita, which Stupka said has to provide its own funding.

Koch and Stupka said there is demand from some private schools like Kapaun, and others

that don't have an at-risk student population, to get the YEK program into their classrooms.

"We're trying to change the way a person has seen life and sees life and contributes to life," Stupka said. "And the demographic that we need to go after is not necessarily the demographic that is in those schools.

"That said, we feel like they should have that opportunity as well, so we're trying to reach a balance."

While Koch said she'd like to someday grow YEK beyond Kansas and Atlanta, she said the organization's focus remains on those two locales.

Koch wants to first make certain that the program is reaching every disadvantaged kid it can in those areas.

"It's just like we are in all the (public) high schools in Wichita, I want to be the same in Atlanta," she said. "And then we can worry about the other communities.

"My mission is the inner-city schools. Those are the kids I want."

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Now you know YOUTH ENTREPRENEURS KANSAS

- YEK was founded in 1991 by the Charles G. Koch Foundation.
- YEK converted from a private non-profit to a public non-profit in 1997.
- Since its inception, more than 8,200 students have graduated from YEK.
- In 2006, YEK awarded more than \$30,000 in scholarships.
- YEK provided more than \$18,000 in venture capital in 2006.
- More information on YEK can be found at www.yeks.org or by calling 316-828-3910.

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