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Entrepreneurs ready to get city's economy rolling

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BY TOM WALSH

Get ready, Detroit.

Dan Gilbert's first class of Bizdom U trained entrepreneurs is coming at you, aiming to start a revolution of grass-roots economic growth in the city.

Mason Levey, 21, of West Bloomfield has the first of Bizdom's start-up companies on the launching pad. It's a mobile marketing agency called Bablur that will enable users to send and receive marketing messages instantaneously via cell phone or notebook computer.

Tawnya Clark, 37, of Detroit, motivated by the closing of all Farmer Jack stores last year, is planning a new organic food market in the city called Local Roots, stocked entirely with Michigan products.

Harry Smith, 26, of Detroit says the city needs a family entertainment center with food and laser tag and believes he's the guy to provide it.

Bizdom U is a one-of-a-kind boot camp for young, would-be entrepreneurs, dreamed up and entirely funded by Gilbert, 46, the founder and chairman of Quicken Loans and its local mortgage lending arm Rock Financial and owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers professional basketball team.

"We're excited that after 2 1/2 years of developing the Bizdom U program, and years of thinking about the concept before that, we are now at the point where very soon we will see these live businesses start up in the city of Detroit," Gilbert said.

The first group of 13 recruits began the intensive residential program in January 2007. Seven have survived the rigorous program to graduate from the classroom stage. Now they're preparing business plans for their companies and pitching them to Gilbert, who will provide \$25,000 to \$50,000 of initial financing for each of their ventures.

Gilbert, who announced plans last November to build a Quicken Loans headquarters in downtown Detroit and bring other companies with him, said Bizdom U was inspired by his belief that Detroit's economic revival must come from the birth and success of more homegrown companies.

"Detroit is a place where government programs haven't worked. There have been lots of programs with good intentions ... but they didn't seem to work to create new businesses and jobs in the city," he told me nearly two years ago when he unveiled the Bizdom U plan. Graduates are expected to create and operate their ventures within the city of Detroit.

Gilbert, a Detroit native and graduate of Michigan State University and the Wayne State University law school, doesn't believe that the most promising business leaders of the future will all be college-bound, straight-A high school students. "We love PhDs," Gilbert told me, "but a specific kind of PhD -- poor, hungry and driven!"

Some of the people in Bizdom's charter graduating group are college grads, others aren't.

Levey is the youngest, Clark the oldest. Some are planning solo business ventures; others are teaming up with fellow Bizdom students.

Jordan Contreras, 27, of Livonia and Chanell Scott, 25, of Farmington Hills are partners in Guffly -- currently a blog (<http://guffly.com>) but soon to be an Internet retailer of products for the eco-conscious lifestyle. The business model is inspired by Woot Inc., a Dallas-based Internet firm that began by offering a new electronic gadget per day and expanded to peddle other products.

Rena Willis, 23, of Wayne and John Hughes, 24, of Detroit are working together on a concept for an online cosmetics business.

Willis entered Bizdom intending to start a restaurant but said she learned through the program about the importance of leveraging finite dollars. "With an online business, as opposed to bricks and mortar, you don't need as much money to start, and you require less manpower to grow," she told me last week.

Bizdom U is run by executive director Ross Sanders, a former Quicken executive, and training director Dan Izzo, a former Chicago lawyer who founded the Improv Inferno comedy club in Ann Arbor. Sanders and Izzo bring in lots of outside instructors: marketing and financial experts from Quicken and affiliated companies and guest speakers such as athletes-turned-entrepreneurs Earvin (Magic) Johnson, Dave Bing and Bob Lanier.

"One of the most difficult things was the group work ... having a lot of strong personalities," said Scott. "But we're almost family now; it's crazy how similar we are."

As the inaugural Bizdom class prepares to launch Detroit's newest companies in the next few months, a second wave of 18 new students has begun the one-year classroom phase of the program in space leased from Wayne State University.

Ultimately, the idea is to make Bizdom U a self-perpetuating thing, with profits from the companies started by the first grads plowed back into Bizdom to create future entrepreneurs.

A heck of a way to run a revolution, if they can pull it off.



Caption: From left, Jordan Contreras, 27, of Livonia, Tawnya Clark, 37, of Detroit and John Hughes, 24, of Troy talk about Bizdom U. Dan Gilbert of Rock Financial set up the program to promote entrepreneurship in Detroit.