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## Bizdom U grads set to go local - One-year boot camp develops entrepreneurs to launch successful area companies.

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**D**etroit — Just several weeks out of school, Mason Levey is ready to launch his own business, a mobile marketing agency that will employ 10-12 workers and operate out of an office in Midtown.

Such ambitions may sound lofty, but the 21-year-old has a sound business plan and plenty of expertise behind him. He is among the first students to graduate from Bizdom U, an intense one-year boot camp that develops entrepreneurs to launch and lead successful Detroit-based businesses. The school is the brainchild of business mogul Dan Gilbert, founder of Quicken Loans.

The program “is a lot of work,” said Levey, a Royal Oak resident who bucked the traditional college route when he couldn’t take advanced courses as a freshman. “You have to be disciplined to go after your dreams.”

Indeed. Of the 13 students who initially enrolled in Bizdom U, housed in leased office space at Wayne State University, seven graduated in the inaugural class and are in various stages of developing their businesses. The free program requires long days and hard work over 12 months, but provides real-world business training and financial assistance to launch city-based enterprises.

Josh Linkner, founder of Pleasant Ridge-based ePrize, an online marketing firm, is among the professionals who

helped mentor students, including Levey, during the past year.

“I saw it as an opportunity to revitalize the city and the region,” he said. “Dan (Gilbert) was right when he said it was up to us, as business leaders, to make the changes, and you can’t wait for the government to make it happen.”

Bizdom U’s second class began in July with 19 students, and the recruiting process for the 2010 class has already started, Executive Director Ross Sanders said. The program last week received a \$500,000 grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation to help more entrepreneurs launch businesses.

Programs like Bizdom U are an integral part of re-energizing the city and advancing the local economy, said Kirsten Ussery, a spokeswoman for Detroit Renaissance, a private, non-profit leadership organization that works to bolster economic growth.

“Programs that support entrepreneurs like Bizdom U ... are important for the city because they help grow and sustain en-

trepreneurial talent,” she said.

This year’s graduates and their plans are:

★ Chanelle Scott, 25, of Farmington Hills and Jordan Contreras, 27, of Livonia. The two are looking

to launch Guffly.com, an online retailer of eco-friendly products, by the end of the year. Their goal is to hire eight employees to work in an office in Russell Industrial Park.

★ Detroit Tawnya Clark, 38, who is getting “more and more excited every day” to open Local Roots Market, a grocer selling natural and organic Michigan-made food products.

Right now, she’s looking to lease space in either Midtown or downtown. The inspiration for her business came while she was living on the Wayne State campus (a program requirement) and had to drive several miles to find organic and fresh healthy food. She expects to hire 11 workers and offer internships



Jordan Contreras and Chanelle Scott plan to start Guffly, an eco-friendly online store, with the help of Bizdom U.

for high school students.

★ John Hughes, 24, of Troy and Rena Willis, 23, of Redford are developing an online business.

★ Harry Smith, 26, of Detroit is working on a business plan but hasn’t decided what type of company he wants to open.

★ Levey’s business will be called Bablur, and he plans to open later this year. The firm will market products and information through mobile telecommunication devices.

“We need more technology-based jobs here,” he said. “It’s going to help attract young people who might feel like they have to go to Chicago or New York to find (that kind of) job.”

### About Bizdom U:

Students must be at least 18 years old with a high school diploma or GED and undergo a screening and application process. They also must be willing to commit to a demanding and challenging training program and possess the drive, passion and commitment to make their dreams come true.

The program provides tuition, housing, meals, training materials and technology and helps finance the start-up costs of the students’ businesses. In return, the program has a majority ownership of any business it helps establish.

Students who pass all of their classes and prepare a realistic plan for a Detroit-based business as their final project will receive:

- From \$25,000 to \$500,000 from a “Bizdom Fund” over time to start up their business.
- A minority share of ownership in the business during the start-up phase.
- An opportunity to earn a greater share of ownership over a defined period of time as the business meets pre-set goals.
- For information, go to [www.bizdom.com](http://www.bizdom.com) or call (313) 833-7800.

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