

minors with

MAJOR IDEAS

Young entrepreneurs from local Archdiocesan high schools competed for cash at Drexel this past spring in the Charles D. Close School of Entrepreneurship's inaugural Rising Starters business plan competition.

By Beth Ann Downey



And the top prize goes to....
**Hailey Gibson,
Faith Busanic,
Michael Skros
and Shaun
Vassil, for
coming up with
a peanut jar
squeegee.**

IT'S HARD TO TELL FROM AFAR, but up close, one can see that Zachary Kelly's glasses are taped on both sides and smack dab in the middle. This, he reveals later, is a bit of showmanship.

The 16-year-old sophomore from Bonner Prendergast Catholic High School is one of dozens of teenagers from Philadelphia Archdiocesan schools gathered in Behrakis Grand Hall on Drexel's University City campus to pitch their business ideas at the inaugural Rising Starters Competition created by the Charles D. Close School of Entrepreneurship. Kelly runs his fingers over the tape as he rocks slightly in his chair. It's time to focus.

Kelly has made it to the final competition with hopes of winning a cash prize for ReadAble, a service he invented that facilitates in-person readings or custom-request audio files of reading material for individuals with mobility difficulties. He got the idea after spending a stint in the hospital where he depended on others to help pass hours of inactivity.

"It works well for students because you could send notes," he said of ReadAble's business model, "but the way I came up with it is the person-to-person interaction — the feeling of having someone to talk to."

Kelly takes the stage. His presentation is dynamic — one of the only to include music and a demo. His PowerPoint is sprinkled with photos and quotes from real and fictional superheroes — more nods to Superman like his taped glasses — to send a message about his service coming to people's rescue.

He's even wearing a Superman suit under his regular clothes that he plans to reveal in a grand finale. The Clark Kent disguise was a hit with kids at his high school. But today, things don't go as planned. He runs out of time, and in the end, ReadAble doesn't make it into the final round.

But Kelly is in good spirits. He resolves to take what he learned from the winning presentations — like firming up his revenue projections, incorporating graphs and maybe working with a team — and perhaps enter the contest again next year.

"Entrepreneurship is about failure," says Nick Bayer, founder and CEO of the Saxbys coffee chain and adjunct professor in the Close School, during his keynote address. "We go along in life for so long trying to not fail, and entrepreneurship really does the opposite. It is the idea that you're going to fail, you're going to fail repeatedly. Can you pick yourself back up, and can you go back and not just compete, but compete with an even bigger smile on your face? Compete with even more energy to go out there and make a difference?"

ONLY TIME WILL TELL if the students pitching ideas today will go on to compete for bigger prizes in life, but starting them on that path is the point of the program.

"All those involved with bringing Rising Starters to fruition share a collective goal to ignite an entrepreneurial spirit in high school students," says Donna De Carolis, who has served as dean of the Close School since its founding in January 2013. The Close School is the nation's first degree-granting school of entrepreneurship that is independent of a business school; in five short years it has earned a place among the "Top 25 Undergraduate Schools for Entrepreneurship" by *The Princeton Review*. This fall, it will welcome its largest freshman class yet.

De Carolis believes that entrepreneurship education empowers everyone, and through Rising Starters, she aims to share Close School's unique focus on developing an entrepreneurial habit of mind — an innovative approach to thinking and doing in life and profession.

This type of programming isn't just about the idea, according to De Carolis. "Rising Starters is about leadership skills, teamwork, effort and innovation," she says.

Not every high school has entrepreneurial programming, and many are seeking more ways to inspire young people to be self-starters. Drexel co-organized Rising Starters with Faith in the Future Foundation, which operates the local area's 17 Archdiocesan high schools. The foundation's

support helped the program reach high schools that are less likely to have entrepreneurship programs of their own.

The competition awarded a total of \$5,000 in cash prizes to three winning individuals or teams to be used however they wished. But the contest's most enduring reward is how it builds character, says Damian Salas, assistant dean and teaching professor for the Close School. An entrepreneurial mindset harnesses one's ability to think differently and disruptively to advance organizations and solve challenges, he says, and it applies to everything from marketing to computer science.

"The skills learned at the Close School aren't just about starting a company," says Salas. "We teach students about resilience, initiative, creative thinking and social responsibility. We work with students to take their ideas and make them a reality."

DURING THE 15-MINUTE break before the ultimate winners are announced, everyone is on edge.

Perhaps most anxious of all is Edith Kirk, an entrepreneurship teacher from Archbishop Ryan High School, who let out a cry of excitement when her students were called to present their idea for a no-fuss hair gel comb in the final round.

"I feel like I'm walking on air," she says.

"Entrepreneurship can be used as a spring board for any career," she adds. "Even them getting up there tonight and speaking in public, developing something and following through to its fruition, those are skills you can use in any job."

Other ideas contending today include a SEPTA smartphone app, an apparatus to house and charge multiple electronic devices, and a web service that helps students match with volunteer opportunities.

Finally, the top winners are announced. Third place: Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls. Second place: West Catholic Preparatory High School.

First place goes to Bishop Shanahan High School, for a peanut butter jar with a built-in squeegee that scrapes up every last drop. An onslaught of photo-taking commences.

"This is amazing," says winning team member Faith Busanic. "I can't believe we've come this far from January."

"I'm just shocked," says her teammate Michael Skros.

When asked what they plan to do with the winnings, the seniors look at each other questioningly. They feel lucky to have simply made it this far, given that Hailey Gibson's idea for a self-scraping peanut butter jar had actually been turned down by other groups she tried working with during a similar competition last year. "No idea is a dumb idea," Gibson says.

Rising Starters judge and adjunct professor Roger Lee '12 says he could see at least half of the ideas submitted to the contest one day going to market.

"Don't give up," he told the contestants who didn't win. "There are going to be so many 'nos' along the way, and I could just tell a few of you were used to 'yeses' all the time, and unfortunately that's not life. Keep going, and don't let age be a factor. Yes, you're a minor, but so what? You've got major ideas."