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PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHEDRAL HIGH SCHOOL

Developing the Next Bill Gates

By Dan Rabb

Taking advantage of Boston's status as a hub of the innovation economy, schools are tapping into the city's startup ecosystem with classes and clubs that let students try their hands at being entrepreneurs.

While many schools give students the opportunity to learn about what it takes to start their own company, two Boston high schools saw their students take enterprises from the classroom to real world consumers last year.

In the South End, Cathedral High School gives students the resources to enter the startup world on school time.

Calling themselves the Cathedral Innovation Panthers, a student innovation club at the Catholic high school partnered with audio industry pioneer Tom DeVesto last year to create a Bluetooth speaker branded after the cry of the school's fierce feline mascot: the Roar. The first units of the Roar were unveiled last month and may hit stores this year.

The Innovation Panthers emerged from a chance meeting between DeVesto and a Cathedral staff member. One of the world's best-known electronics designers and a stalwart of Boston's startup scene, DeVesto was impressed by what he heard about Cathedral. Wanting to donate more than money, he asked if there were students interested in innovation and entrepreneurship who wanted to start a project.

While DeVesto handled some of the technical engineering for the Roar, students took charge of the development process, creating aesthetics and branding, choosing features based on consumer demand and manufacturing costs, and drafting prototypes. Beyond engineering the product, the teens raised capital and developed manage-

ment skills to bring the Roar to market.

In other words, they were entrepreneurs.

"I've never seen a more motivated group of kids," DeVesto said.

According to DeVesto, future iterations of the club may focus on growing the business or developing new products if other mentors bring new expertise to the table.

At Dorchester's Community Academy of Science and Health, students can participate in an extracurricular collaboration with BUILD, a national nonprofit that develops high school innovation clubs. After forming cohorts freshman year, students at the public high school use seed money from BUILD to create a product and business model that launches their senior year.

Almost every project created by last year's senior class was able to pay back that initial investment, but one student effort in particular received national recognition. Aroma Squeeze, a line of stress balls that release therapeutic scents, won BUILD's regional competition, sending the students behind the company to a startup competition in Las Vegas. Even after graduation, Aroma Squeeze is still up and running.

While not all of the BUILD projects turn into sustainable businesses, faculty mentor Nusirat Hasson says the program provides access to mentors from Boston's business community and teaches life skills students need no matter what career path they follow.

"There's a significant public speaking component. They have to dress up and they have to learn how to be a strong leader and leverage everyone on the team's strengths," she said. "It's amazing to see their growth and to see them come together as a team."

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