

## Budding entrepreneurs getting real-life experience in Girls Inc. program

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Stephanie Poppe, facilitator of the Girls Inc. entrepreneurship program, gets a group hug from Sara Deboer (left), Avari Isom and Phiona

Raffington after a meeting where they pitched their business concepts to a group of business and community leaders. David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

- \$1/week provides school supplies to help students complete their homework.
- \$2/week provides an at-risk youth with a year membership to Girls Inc., including daily afterschool programming.

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of a weekly series that will highlight the work of the 25 local nonprofits funded by the United Way of Monroe County. United Way is in the midst of its annual campaign, which has a fundraising goal of \$1.3 million. Find out more at [monroeunitedway.org](http://monroeunitedway.org).*

Sara Deboer stood before the assembled panel of local business leaders and entrepreneurs with the poise of a Fortune 500 CEO.

She was nervous, of course. She'd given presentations before, but never to a group of potential investors.

Deboer had written a brief description of her business proposal on her tablet computer, which she planned to read to the eight men and women on the panel. But when it came her turn to pitch her idea, she set her nerves aside and spoke candidly.

Mail items, such as beauty products or snack foods straight to your door on a monthly basis, are becoming more and more popular, Deboer told the panel members. Her idea of a subscription box filled with goods targeted to Bloomington residents and Indiana University alumni would cater to an untapped market.

"They are succeeding rapidly," Deboer said. "This is an idea that is growing."

The business and marketing professionals agreed. They praised her ability to spot a trending business venture, and asked about her plans to finance the project.

Deboer told the panelists that she hadn't really thought through all the economic aspects of her business, and you can't blame her. She also

has orchestra rehearsal and her ninth-grade classwork at Bloomington High School North taking up her time.

Deboer is one of four high school students in Girls Inc.'s Exploring Entrepreneurial Experiences program. Every Tuesday for one hour, she and her fellow young entrepreneurs meet at the United Way agency to learn about business models, ideation and what it takes to found a startup company.

"So many people came up to me saying it's such a good idea, it'll go really far," said Deboer about what the panelists told her after the pitch, which took place late last month.

Exploring Entrepreneurial Experiences is an eight-week national Girls Inc. program that local entrepreneur and volunteer Stephanie Poppe has expanded into a new school-year-long project for Girls Inc. of Monroe County members.

In the program's first two months, the girls have each developed a unique business concept. As the program continues, they will learn more about business development, financing and basic Web coding.

"It really gives them a unique set of skills most girls at their age would never be offered," said Kristi McCann, executive director of Girls Inc. of Monroe County and Deboer's mother. "They're building their own community, as well."

The business community at large isn't always friendly to girls and women, Poppe said. As an entrepreneur, Poppe has presented business ideas to all-male groups of venture capitalists, and participated in business competitions that have only one female judge.

Exploring Entrepreneurial Experiences has done more than expose the Girls Inc. members to a field dominated by men, McCann said. It's also provided them with a strong female role model in Poppe, a designer, marketer and business professional.

"It's an opportunity to try to import some of the knowledge I've gained in my experience to the youth," Poppe said. "It's showing these girls that they can do it. It's a possibility."

The girls spent two weeks leading up to the panel pitch working on their presentations. Poppe assembled the panel of men and women to critique the girls' business concepts, and hopefully choose to invest in the projects they found most compelling.

"They asked some really tough questions ... and (the girls) didn't bat an eye," McCann said. "They had a lot of the answers already thought out in their heads."

Poppe encouraged the girls to explore their passions as they brainstormed a business concept. Phiona Raffington, a junior at Bloomington High School South, told the panel of business owners, social media experts and startup employees that watching a friend deal with depression and suicidal thoughts made her realize that resources for teens with mental health issues are scarce.

To fill that need, Raffington pitched the idea of an online resource to connect teens to mental health professionals and other teens going through similar experiences.

“I wanted to help other people I see suffering,” Raffington said. “I wanted to help the problem, not let it grow into something you can’t control.”

The panelists grilled Raffington just as the investors on “Shark Tank” would grill an entrepreneur on the reality show.

How would she use advertising to increase revenue? Would consumers take advantage of the service?

The questions were tough, but welcome. Raffington appreciated that the panelists treated her like an adult entrepreneur, not a high school student with a pipe dream.

“I really want to be a businesswoman,” she said. “I want to be in that field so I can take charge, take responsibility and be successful in my life.”

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