

High school students cooperate shouldering the burdens of T-shirt business

By Elie G. Kaunfer
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Step aside, Ben and Jerry's. The new hip politically correct business in town is Raucous, a T-shirt silkscreening co-op based in Roxbury and run mainly by Cambridge Rindge and Latin students.

No bosses, no dress code, men

and women on equal footing. The owners, six high school juniors and two professional graphic artists, vote on every decision and split the profits. "We didn't want to work for no one," said Paul Furtado, 17. "If everybody had a piece, they would offer more."

Owners recently finished a contract for 400 shirts and predict the company will have made \$15,000 by

the summer's end.

But even if the company does not make the Fortune 500, the youthful owners are gaining practical business experience. The students are reading more than they ever did for class, and almost all want to run their own business after college.

"We are going to make it because we know what we're doing," said William Penrose, 17.

No one is in charge of Raucous; the nine employees (all but two are under 18) conduct group interviews of prospective partners and rotate who chairs the business meetings.

When they needed to hire another employee, the male co-owners suggested a female candidate, in order to make the two women already in the business feel more at ease.

"[The men] took into consideration there weren't many females in the group," said Jessica Cruz, 16. "They brought it up. They weren't thinking of themselves only as men."

The racial makeup of the company would please even Lani Guinier. The owners are black, Hispanic and white.

So far, the business seems to be working. Although all advertising is done by word of mouth, the company made \$2,400 on its first contract.

"Some people respect us, and some don't believe us," said Tony Santiago, 16. "Some people are still brought up the traditional way where you have to work for someone."

Anthony Van Der Meer, a graphic arts teacher at the high school, heard that a few students wanted to start silkscreening companies. Van Der Meer suggested the students

combine their efforts, and then joined himself.

Each member contributed a minimum of \$250 and, after finding office space on the fourth floor of a building on the Roxbury-South End line, spent two days cleaning and painting. They only had trouble when they applied for a "Doing Business As" license.

"It's easier to become a criminal than to start your own business," Santiago said. "If I shot someone, I'd be tried as an adult, but they wouldn't give me a DBA because I'm under 18."

The company never got a DBA so it copyrights all its wares said Penrose.

The company got its name when Santiago was flipping through the dictionary, saw the word "raucous" and decided, "It has a hip-hop appeal, and it shows that we want to cause a commotion."

The company attitude reflects the youth of Raucous. No business desk graces the 1,200-square-foot office. The owners hold meetings while slouching in cushy sofas that a relative donated.

But the relaxed atmosphere hasn't replaced professionalism. William Penrose, 17, proudly showed off the file cabinet and the lockers where working clothes are stored.

"We're not all sloppy. Everything is in order," he said.

But don't let the exterior fool you. These kids are in it for the cash. Penrose went to the business' first customer, Just-A-Start Corporation of Cambridge, to bargain for more money.

"I didn't think [the original price]



GLOBE PHOTO / MICHAEL QUAN

Members of the co-op, from left: Paul Furtado and Tony Santiago.

was enough," he said. "We moved up the price 40 cents a shirt."

And Raucous has experienced the same growing pains that any new business feels. The members spent about 50 hours printing the shirts - 40 hours longer than they hoped - and lost 50 shirts to printing errors. And, of course, arguments slowed production.

"We're like a family," Santiago said. "We argue and then we're friends again."

When production gets rough, the owners look to inspiration from role models. An imposing poster of Malcolm X hangs on the otherwise bare wall by the silkscreen press.

"By bringing that in here, we're letting people know we're going

somewhere," Penrose said. "We're not just going to sit in the projects all our life."

Van Der Meer, the only member of the group older than 26, said the business has been a positive educational force as well as a money-making venture.

"They'll do much better in school than they've done," he said. "They have more focus. Now school becomes more relevant."

Each of the owners undertook reading programs to research different aspects of running a business. They share relevant selections from the books at meetings.

"I used to straight up *hate* reading," Penrose said. "Now I don't mind reading a book a night."

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