

We look at how a scheme called Head for Business has helped three budding entrepreneurs

Get ahead in business



‘My aim is to develop a range of clothing that highlights a positive message’

Ross Fonteyn

Anyone who's seen an episode of BBC2's *Dragon's Den* will know that starting your own business is no walk in the park. Not only do you have to come up with a foolproof idea or invention, but you have to convince people to invest in it.

To turn the risks into rewards, it helps to have a mentor or guiding hand who's been there before or knows the industry well. Fortunately, creative entrepreneurs in Lewisham can turn to Head for Business. It is a support agency, based at the Albany in Deptford, that provides free help and advice to those looking to start a businesses or develop an existing one.

Head for Business works closely with the Lewisham Business Advisory Service (BAS) and is funded by a number of partners including the London Development Agency (LDA). It offers a variety of courses such as 'Is enterprise for

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Business planning helped Gilmar

Budding inventor and designer Gilmar Blackwood found that Head for Business helped him progress enormously with the business side of things. Though still studying the trade on his project design course, Gilmar has been involved in designing toys and furniture as well as his own personal projects. He is currently working on a fragrance-emitting lamp, which he hopes manufacturer Procter and Gamble will be interested in taking on. 'It's my debut project and has really taken off,' says Gilmar proudly. 'The way

things are going I could be a millionaire by the time I graduate!'

Gilmar found out about Head for Business through youth support organisation Connections, and decided to join one of their programmes with a fellow designer friend. 'The tutors seemed to have a lot of knowledge and were very helpful with making links, writing CVs, business planning, contacts and dealing with tax,' says Gilmar. 'I would definitely recommend Head for Business to other young entrepreneurs.'



Gilmar Blackwood

Lara launches Rice2Go

Having left her job in marketing, Lara Omoloja was looking for a change: 'I had always wanted to start my own business,' she says, 'but I didn't know how to go about it or have enough confidence.'

Then one day while in the Albany, Lara saw an advert for a free course run by Head for Business. 'I always thought these kinds of organisations would charge you,' she says. Lara soon found herself signed up and gaining valuable support. 'There were nine other women on the course all coming from similar backgrounds and life experiences to me. We all wanted to explore our own way, be ethical, be fair but make money as well.' These were principles that Lara found were reinforced throughout the course.

Although having your own business can mean more flexible hours and greater control, it's important to think of what life will be like while the business gets on its feet. Lara found Head for Business's practical approach very useful in helping her to develop her plans for

me?' and 'Business skills'. Workshops cover everything from cash flow and business plans to selling, pricing and legal issues.

One service they provide is support for young people aged

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Lara Omoloja

a rice catering company: 'They took us through everything, right from why do you want to do it? They were kind of like my sounding board. They made me think about things like juggling work with family and helped me reframe my idea.' The team also helped provide Lara with practical information, such as how to get funding, start a business plan and research the market.

The idea for selling rice dishes came from Lara's love for this world-popular dish: 'There are about 140,000 varieties of rice in the world. Restaurants serve rice but don't really focus on it. I thought there are noodle bars, why not rice bars?'

Although Lara says her company Rice2Go is a 'micro business' at the

moment, she has already set up a market stall selling dishes. 'The stall has been my test bed,' she says. 'It's very much aimed at the lunch-time market – and I think it's got a lot of mileage in it. I'm learning all about food and the industry at the same time – like the accreditation you need before you can supply stockists. Although I'd prefer to sell to independent shops, I'd like to sell jollof rice or jambalya to a supermarket deli like Sainsbury's.'

Rice2Go now sells everything from plain basmati rice to gourmet black rice – one of the best rices for you as it's very rich in fibre, says Lara – as well as red rice, Benechin from a region in Gambia, vegetable fried rice and lemon grilled chicken – all freshly made.

between 16 and 23 through the Young Enterprise Programme (YEP). For proof of its value, look no further than YEP graduate Ross Fonteyn, 20, whose brand of urban street wear, Who Else?, was recently voted Best Menswear Label at the FashionExpo event in London. Since winning the award, Ross has been given the opportunity to showcase his Japanese Manga-inspired clothing range in Debenhams' flagship store on Oxford Street.

The Head For Business course helped Ross to take his one-off designs further. 'Most importantly we were being creative and developing our ideas,' says Ross. 'YEP gave me my first real taste of the fashion industry in a very practical way. My confidence in my

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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ability as a clothing designer has really grown as a result.'

Ross now plans to apply for funding to develop his label further: 'My aim is to develop a range of clothing that highlights a positive message and attitude. I plan to be the number one supplier of quality street wear.'