

Taking care of business

Unistream's young entrepreneurship program coaches groups of teens as they set up shop. And there's no kidding around here

By Tamar Troim

It's 4:40 P.M., and the meeting is starting late. A few minutes later Smadar calls everyone to the table, and they begin. The board members and the CEO are already seated. The outside consultant starts talking, mostly pointing out the management flaws. The CEO shrinks in her chair, and everyone looks a bit crushed and disappointed. Meetings at a company run by a group of Or Yehuda

teenagers often look like this.

As part of the project, run by the nonprofit Unistream at 10 centers across Israel, teens in grades 9 to 11 set up a company with the help of a business consultant. The project was started seven years ago by Rony Zarom, who decided to foster a generation of young business and social leaders while focusing on developing the periphery. The first center opened in Kfar Yona in 2002, and since then other centers have opened in Or

Yehuda, Ma'alot-Tarshiha - with a mixed group of Jewish and Arab teens - Afula, Acre, Upper Nazareth, Hatzor Haglilit and the Gilboa.

The Or Yehuda meeting proceeds. Eureka CEO Moti Franco, the group's business consultant, tries to get answers.

"What about the Web site? Is everything ready?" The answers are mumbled. Eyal, who is responsible for designing and setting up the site, apologizes: "We still haven't finalized all the details. We have a few ideas, but we haven't carried them out yet."

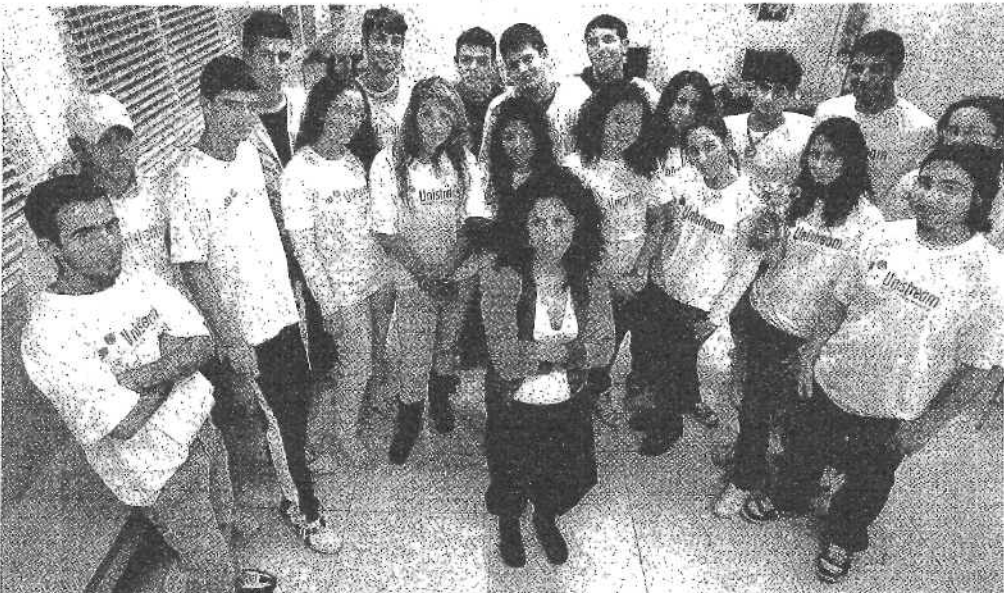
Franco gets angry. He knows how great the group's potential is and he does

not hesitate to show his frustration.

"When I was a kid," he tells me before the meeting begins, "my dream was to be an actor. I took part in every extracurricular drama and theater group near my home, in Lod. And then suddenly the young entrepreneurs group arrived. It greatly changed my thinking. Since then I basically knew that I wanted to be an entrepreneur. It's what gave me the first push."

Now he wants to pass the entrepreneurial spirit on to the next generation.

"I see a few kids here who I know we will be reading about in *TheMarker* in another 10-20 years. I enjoy coming, helping them and seeing



Photos by Dan Keinan

Nir (center) with the Unistream group in Or Yehuda.



Zarom. Wants to empower teens in the periphery.

their progress. It doesn't fit so well into my schedule, but I never miss a meeting."

Franco now asks about the group's meeting with Mickey Libros, a businessman willing to manufacture their product. Sapir, the CEO, says the meeting was very successful. Libros was excited and asked to see a model of the product.

"And did you bring the model? Is everything ready?" asks Franco. The answer is no. In two days, the two weeks Libros gave them to prepare a model will have passed, and the teens are still looking for pipes and boxes to build it. What is the product? The group refuses to say, but they hope it will win them Unistream's competition at the end of the year.

At this stage, Smadar Nir, the director of the Or Yehuda Unistream Center, intervenes. "The meeting was good and he wants to invest. You have to tell him what's happening, or he will decide he is not interested in the project and you will have to find another investor," she warns the participants. Nir, an industrial designer and management student, works at the center every day. There is currently a group of 11th graders in their second year in the program. Another group, for 10th graders, will be starting soon.

The participants are selected after a lengthy vetting process.

"Lots of teens want to get into these groups. This is not an organization that tries to help students with learning difficulties. On the contrary, the goal is to nurture young people with potential and take those with good grades and skills," says Nir.

The organization is funded by businessmen, and the centers are managed by volunteers. Some 400 businessmen offer consulting or workshops.

The organization has three main activities: Participants study to receive junior masters of business administration ("J-M.B.A.") certificates. Then, along with the business consultants, they set up a company and develop a product. Finally, the organization

encourages its participants to seek leadership and personal empowerment. At the end of each year, the organization holds a contest to select the entrepreneur of the year, and each group presents its project. Last year, the Or Yehuda group won.

"The group is very proud, and so are we, of last year's success. But we don't let them rest on their laurels, because there is still a lot more work to do. The goal is to show them that there are successes and there are also failures, and the work must always continue," says Nir.

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 Franco: "At their age, the closest thing to a business that I was familiar with was the neighborhood grocery store, and here they are telling me about stocks and options."

The teens also get involved in the community, for example, tutoring children with special needs and collecting donations for needy families.

Back at the meeting, the teens are discussing fundraising for the project. The participants must operate like a company in every respect, and are therefore required to find sources of funding for their company. How? There are a lot of ideas, from charging for private lessons at the center to selling secondhand items, and issuing stock in the company.

Franco asks what a stock issue is, and Sapir explains quickly: "We will give company stocks to businesspeople who want to invest in us with first options on the profits." Franco is pleased. "At their age, the closest thing to a business that I was familiar with was the neighborhood grocery store, and here they are telling me about stocks and options."

