

SPEAKERS' OBJECTIVE: INSPIRING FUTURE SELF-STARTERS

U-T San Diego 12:01a.m. May 12, 2013, updated 06:47p.m. May 10, 2013

“Keep your dreams close to your happiness,” Fernando Aguerre counsels the rapt audience of eighth-graders at the San Diego Youth Leadership Summit launched recently at the University of San Diego.

Most of the kids are from rough Title I schools in City Heights, and most are Latino. The rest are from academies like Bishops and La Jolla Country Day.

“Your roots, your culture, what others may see as your limitations, these can be your strengths,” Aguerre says — and he should know. He and his brother Santiago, immigrants from Argentina, turned \$4,000 into tens of millions, creating Reef surf fashions with one of the killer San Diego branding slogans of all time: “Life is too short. Don’t waste it. Go Surfing.”

The summit, which in March featured John Gartman, the inventor and intellectual property lawyer who used to counsel Microsoft’s Bill Gates, is not your usual classroom snooze. Its goals are to foster entrepreneurship at an early age, build leadership in San Diego communities, and heighten a conservation ethic. The students are self-selected (among the hundreds who applied) and highly motivated. Between talks, they work on projects and inventions with mentors over a secure social media platform.

“I went through 23 years of school education and not even one teacher told me how to make money with any of the knowledge I was given,” Aguerre almost shouts, his Prada sunglasses perched on the edge of the lectern. He wears a surf T-shirt, jeans and designer shoes. “This is a giant failure of our education system. American kids are told to get a job, rarely, ‘to start a business.’ We focus on employee culture rather than fostering entrepreneurial culture.”

It’s an unusual experiment taking place at Mother Rosalie Hall, part of USD’s Changemaker Initiative, with a potpourri of partners, including Susan Guinn’s Kids’ Eco-Club (which provides the secure website), Public Conversations West with Meenakshi Chakraverti, the USD School of Leadership with Zachary Green, and Intellectual Capital. The summit is partially funded by Price Charities and the Invention Foundation.

High-tech San Diego is predicated on entitled students from the best neighborhoods and universities. But is that right? If entitlement — the skills and encouragement given to bright and wealthier kids — were spread to equally bright and motivated, but perhaps unsupported kids from poorer schools, wouldn't the ecosystem of San Diego's entrepreneurial culture be made even more robust (to use the fashionable parlance of today's business school gurus) and the city enriched in every way, taxes, jobs and safety?

Some of the eighth-graders walked three to four miles to be picked up at 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday. A car was sent to find one boy during Gartman's lecture. His family had been evicted earlier in the morning.

Naturally, the change-making inventions and projects the kids come up with in facilitated small groups after Gartman and Aguerre are done reflect differing backgrounds, from "spell-checking pens," to a lost-items tracking system that could be instantly posted to a website, to flying skateboards, to battlefield Skype systems. There's even a time machine that actually would, as an educational tool, use contemporary technology to talk about the past, such as "Anne Frank's Twitter Feed." Other ideas: how to deal with bullying, providing sports gear to the Monarch School for Homeless Children, and escorting kids home so they don't get robbed in inner-city parks, or have to witness unmentionable financial deals taking place in the bushes.

"There are no bad ideas," says Lucia Iberra, one of the mentors with Public Conversations West (kind of like no bad dogs).

But other questions are raised by the summit. How young can you be to be an entrepreneur? Are entrepreneurs born or made?

Aguerre bristles at that last question. "You think for 100 years people thought you had to be a white guy to be a great golfer? I give you Tiger Woods!"

But Aguerre and his brother sold strawberries from their mother's garden to beachgoers when they were kids, and fixed surfboard dings for money, and then ran surf contests (and bikini festivals,) and set up moving dance parties, before launching the first board-shorts business in Argentina. (Hundreds of kids lined up outside their store to get the week's newest designs, just as they do today at Diamond Supply skatewear on Fairfax in Los Angeles.)

Explains John Gartman, “Back in Texas, I sold personalized Christmas cards door to door, mowed yards, cut cedar trees for fence posts, sold fire alarms, had a hay-hauling business, worked on people’s electronics, and so on. And yes, I started early on inventing lots of gizmos and taking virtually everything apart to see how it worked, whether I owned it or not — from telephones to my high school football coach’s car dashboard. I even put some of those things back together. By the time I was 15 or so, my mom used to joke that I’d had more jobs than most retirees.”

Which brings us to the concept of hard work.

“Business is hard work, but you won’t want to work hard unless you are doing something you really like,” Gartman had said, echoing Aguerre’s line about working from the heart. “You won’t be truly creative either,” Gartman adds. “Sounds goofy, doesn’t it?” he asks the kids, who don’t seem to find it goofy at all, “but you won’t find out what’s in your heart until you — what? Any answers?” Nobody raises a hand. “Until you learn how to turn off your mind. Because the mind and the heart work differently from each other.”

And then Gartman, who once suffered the worst defeat of his life by losing a case for \$1.5 billion only to return to court and win it all back, quickly puts his “6-Point Personal Business Plan” up on the whiteboard for all to see:

1. Creativity falls in love with those who follow their heart. Listen to it.
2. Creativity will answer the exact inner question you ask yourself, in the emotion that you ask it, often without effort and at random times. Pay attention to your inner questions.
3. Creativity takes you where you focus on going — good or bad. Choose to focus on where you want to go, not on what you want to avoid.
4. Creativity opens the door only after failure bangs loudly a few times. Embrace failure as the next welcome rung on the ladder to success.
5. Creativity hangs out with the friends of those who lead softly and without regard to whether they’ll be recognized. Let the troops think they did it themselves.
6. When Creativity sees a fork in the road, it takes it. It knows there are many right answers and that forward-looking execution makes all the difference.”

Good advice for eighth-graders (and the rest of us) whether they are walking home or getting picked up in a white Lexus. That's spreading the entitlement, San Diego style.

Steve Chapple's Intellectual Capital covers game-changing people, ideas and perspectives. He can be reached at intellectualcapitalchapple@gmail.com