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TRANSCRIPT

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EPISODE NAME: Growing Vermont: the Student-operated Store at UVM

Today on Across the Fence a story that's literally growing Vermont. You'll see how the University of Vermont is supporting local entrepreneurs in a store that operated by UVM students. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. There are a lot of different facets to running a small business and a one of a kind store at UVM touches on just about all of them. From inventories and marketing to products and planning the student-operated Growing Vermont store is a retail space where students can apply their academic lessons to solve real world business issues and at the same time build awareness of Vermont products and the positive impacts of buying local. Across the Fence’s Rebecca Gollin takes us to the university's Davis Center, the home of Growing Vermont.

Many college seniors have some sort of plan for the future - but for most, it’s not an actual business plan.

Michael Oyebola/Mida Lifestyle - “…in the next 5-10 years, there's going to be a lot of progress, in the form of, you know, having people invest in it, actually partnering up with people…”

University of Vermont senior Michael Oyebola has to have a business plan – because he already has a business.

Oyebola - “…Mida Lifestyle actually started in 2010, and Mida means an expression of surprise in an Estonian language…. whenever you put on anything that has Mida… it makes you feel comfortable, it brings out the best out of you, and that's the whole goal about Mida.”

A natural entrepreneur, Oyebola had already started developing his brand when he heard about an opportunity close to home.

Oyebola - I started with selling the clothes first to my friends, and from my friends, one of my friends actually works here… and she told me about Growing Vermont and I decided to bring my first print to the table and they just loved it.”
Elizabeth Strasser/Growing Vermont - “…for vendors to get in here, all they have to do is even just walk into the store and talk to us and say 'hey, I'm a Vermont vendor, this is my product' and what we do then is sign them up for the product advisory committee meetings…”

Strasser heads the product advisory committee at Growing Vermont, a student-run store at UVM that provides hands-on learning while supporting local businesses. Students take care of the marketing, financials, and day to day operations for the store. All prospective vendors have to come in and pitch their products; the students make a group decision about whether to carry it.

Strasser – “…they get 15 minutes to pitch it to us, it’s real laid back, easy process, it’s all students interviewing you, so it's, especially for new vendors, that's a lot less intimidating, and then if they are old hat vendors they really teach us how we should be doing that, so it's a give and take relationship.”

The end result of those meetings is on display here at the store, where new businesses are showcased alongside established companies like Lake Champlain Chocolates.

Store manager Chloe Wieland says that while students have a hand in every part of running the store, going to product advisory committee meetings and helping to choose the merchandise is a perennial favorite.

Chloe Wieland/Growing Vermont Manager – “… Some vendors come to us and they really know what their business plan is and they've got something that is really great and it's really easy to see why that'll be successful. Other vendors are just starting out, and they have a really good idea and they might want some support from the students on how to further that idea and I think that students get a lot from being able to both see those vendors who know what they're doing and to be able to support those who are trying to figure that out.”

Strasser – “Most people don’t get to touch inventory when they work in another retail store, it’s usually more like, ok, you sell it, but somebody else is completely in charge of it…”

Tyler Rousseau/Growing Vermont - “…I work on financials, so I deal with doing taxes and making sure vendors get paid. I like how we try and promote small business, I think that's pretty cool how we try and definitely keep everything in Vermont and try and, I don't know, it gives it more of a homey feel when you can say that were selling all local vendors and helping them grow and gain business knowledge.”

Growing Vermont is part of the Community Development and Applied Economics Department, where real world, hands-on learning is in the mission. The students who run the store are mostly work study students from a variety of disciplines – it’s not a traditional work-study job.

Rousseau – “You definitely get more responsibility than if you are just sitting at a front desk but then again you get the tradeoff of, you get more experience than if you were just sitting behind a desk…”

David Conner/ Growing Vermont Faculty Advisor - “They make the big decisions, they run the store. And the other part of it is that it serves as an entrepreneurial incubator for small Vermont businesses, so all of the items here in the store are made in Vermont, and the store serves a number of functions. 1st, it gives small, sort of start-up businesses a place where they can sell
their wares, as well as providing some key advice about how to price it, how to merchandize it. Things like packaging and product development; these are all services that students provide to the vendors.”

Across the Fence first visited the store in 2007 shortly after it opened to talk about the future.

(file footage) Michael Moser - “our goal is to educate the campus community about buying local and buying Vermont. We’re also providing academic learning, experiential learning for our students on campus. We are hoping to provide some business services back to the entrepreneurs we work with and the small businesses that we work with here as well.”

Jane Kolodinsky - the benefit of Growing Vermont is greater than just the CDAE Department. What we hope to do is benefit all Vermont entrepreneurs, and all students at the university…..

(end file footage)

Fast forward a few years and it’s clear that Growing Vermont is growing in value to the community.

Dan Allen/ Unknown Arts – “It's more than just money or how many t-shirts are flying out, it's a totally different market that we sort of get to penetrate by being here.”

Oyebola – “…Growing Vermont has been a great resource and a great opportunity for me to actually market myself…”

Allen – “I think because it's mostly college students that are coming in and out of the store we get to try putting some of our, I don't know, wackier shirts in here, most stores that we're in are a little conservative and like to stick to stuff that you know, has a good chance of selling to everyone but here we get to try some of our more intricate art work and more colorful shirts because college kids like to try things.”

Providing useful, research-based feedback to new businesses is one thing, but the students at Growing Vermont go beyond just offering pointers.

Jane Kolodinsky, Community Development and Applied Economics - “We've done research on audience, we've done research on what kinds of products are a best fit for the store and how best to arrange the store for maximum sales-ability of the different products and we've done research into how Growing Vermont, as a service learning model, can actually move entrepreneurship education forward…”

For many of the students who work here, the real-world experience they get here on campus translates to real world experience in the workplace.

Strasser - “…I can tell you that it’s already gotten me hired at a job before, just having that on my resume and having these experiences, it’s already put me to the top of lists…”

And for the vendors here, Growing Vermont could be the beginning of something big.

Oyebola – “I've been dreaming about this my whole life…”
Giving students the chance to run a business, while helping new businesses learn how to be more successful, Growing Vermont is still spreading its roots. In Burlington, I’m Rebecca Gollin with Across the Fence.

Thanks Rebecca; joining me now is UVM Professor Jane Kolodinsky. Jane is the Chair of the Community Development and Applied Economics Department and she currently serves as the Co-director of the University Center for Moral Studies. Nice to have you on the program again. Success in business is often determined by the profits of course so how does something unique as Growing Vermont which is both a business and a classroom define success?

Jane.: I think in the great scheme of things it would be a vibrant Vermont economy because we are looking at local but that's really hard to measure. So we go back to something like the four P's and four C's price, product, place, promotion, and consumer demand, cost, competition and channel, and try to help entrepreneurs who are vendors of the store to understand how those components can add to their success and to teach students through this service learning component why those components are part of a business success.

Judy.: So as the young man in the video was talking about his tee shirt business he loved designing the tee shirts but then there's so much more to it from going from making a few key shirts to being an entrepreneur.

Jane.: Absolutely.

Judy.: Can you give me some examples to share with our viewers some of the products that have come through that have gone on to have their own niche.

Jane.: Sure. I don't want to name any names because that would be giving free advertising to certain products and I want to give equal billing. But anything from clothing to jewelry to plants to some food products that are processed. There is a whole variety of products that have come through the store and it's always changing.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about that and why is that the philosophy that there's always a change in what's in store.

Jane.: The mission of the store is to help entrepreneurs to launch their products and as we saw in the video some products are constants such as Lake Champlain Chocolates. You don't need a whole lot of our help but a lot of other products that are new and vendors might not have a lot of experience we want to try to bring them up to make them successful to. So they can reach a wider market.

Judy.: We saw the UVM students who work directly with Growing Vermont are there other learning opportunities for UVM students?

Jane.: Absolutely. We've incorporated some service learning components of the store into marketing classes. Consumer behavior classes research methods and students from all over the university have participated from sociology public communication and the business school as well.
Judy.: That's exciting. Let's go back to the opening of Growing Vermont back in 2007. What's changed and what has stayed the same?

Jane.: I guess the thing that stayed the same is change. We face the same challenges of choosing vendors of identifying students to work with a whole variety of the chain of product development and placement and finance. Working with new vendors every month so change is a constant at the store.

Judy.: I suppose some things would be more popular than other parts of running a business as far as marketing vs. finances?

Jane.: Students love the marketing part. They love the design part. The finances are a little more challenging.

Judy.: As department Chair and former adviser to Growing Vermont, what do you see for the future for this particular project?

Jane.: Formula that helps us to deal with the constant change. And we're also looking for more stability in terms of any business that takes years to break a profit. While profit isn't our motive we do have to have a sound financial base to continue doing what we're doing to help both students and the vendors.

Judy.: Do some things in the stores change given what's happening on campus?

Jane.: Absolutely. When parents week and arrives the merchandising might change to appeal more to that audience. When there are conferences on campus and during the summer merchandise might change a little bit then as well to meet that different than made up as we saw the video students are a different market than their parents and perhaps other adults.

Judy.: So it really is teaching the students as well to take advantage of their changing marketplace depending on what's happening.

Jane.: Absolutely.

Judy.: So if someone's watching and is a Vermont vendor Growing Vermont might be able to help? What does a vendor have to do to take part in this venture?

Jane.: I think all they have to do is contact Chloe Wieland who is our current market manager for the store and get on the list. I do not know how long the waiting list is and it gets longer all the time as more vendors find out about this opportunity.

Judy.: Are there some items that have been more popular than others?

Jane.: I think the tee shirts and the clothing items have been extremely popular as have some of the jewelry items. Price point is absolutely critical when you're looking a student market.

Judy.: Is that difficult because students don't have a whole lot of money so you have to be competitively priced but also make some money for the entrepreneur?
Jane.: That's the ongoing challenge is how to price things correctly with the correct merchandise in the store but if a student wants it they'll find out a way to purchase it.

Judy.: As far as the future for some of the students do most expect to go on to work in the business world?

Jane.: I think a lot of our students do expect to be entrepreneurs in the future and by working at Growing Vermont and gaining that experience they’re better able to go out into the world and actually be an entrepreneur in the future. Some might actually stay in Vermont.

Judy.: I go back to the young man in the video that was marketing tee shirts. That's fairly unusual to have somebody who's so focused on this as his dream at a young age.

Jane.: Maybe for the broader audience it appears unusual but I chair our department which community entrepreneurship is one of the majors and we have so many students with a goal in their life.

Judy.: How long do the students usually stay involved in this project?

Jane.: It depends on when they start. If a student begins as a first year student they might participate for their whole four years at the university so it can run the gamut from one year to all four years.

Judy.: All right. Well for more information on the Growing Vermont store you can visit the website that is listed on your screen. The store is located in the UVM Davis Center at 590 Main Street in Burlington. Growing Vermont is open Monday through Friday from 9AM to 4 PM. Thanks so much for joining us and talking about this.

Jane.: Thanks Judy.

Judy.: That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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