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Allegany County high school business students (in front, from left) Ashley Powell, Erica Carter, Kevin Burdick, Eric Gilbert (in back, from left) Kristi -Jo Webb, Lacy Alessi and Riley Fuller, along with BOCES representatives Barbara Van Wicklin, Penny Williams, and Michael Doyle attend a New York Yankees games on Sunday with Michael Lastoria (in back, second from right), a Fillmore native and CEO and co-founder of Innovation Ads, and his employee, Isaiah Mossisui.

Ad exec and Fillmore native inspires students to reach their goals

By KIP DOYLE, Olean Times Herald

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NEW YORK - When it comes to achieving success, personally or in business, there is no trait more important than being goal-oriented.

This was the lesson passed down from Michael Lastoria, a Fillmore native and CEO and co-founder of a multimillion dollar advertising company, to a group of seven goal-achieving Allegany County high school students this past Sunday.

Last spring, the business students went on a BOCES-sponsored field trip to New York City, where they met Mr. Lastoria, 26, at the offices of Innovation Ads, the company he co-founded. During the meeting, Mr. Lastoria made a challenge to the students - set a concrete goal, write it down on paper, and achieve that goal by next year. If the students met their goals, they would be rewarded with a round trip to New York City to attend a New York Yankees game.

Out of the 20-plus students, seven were able to reach their goals and attend the game Sunday. The students were chaperoned by representatives from BOCES.

Those students, Belfast sophomore Eric Gilbert, junior Riley Fuller and seniors Lacy Alessi and Kevin Burdick; Scio junior Erica Carter and senior Ashley Powell; and Friendship senior Kristi -Jo Webb each made good on their goal, which included raising their grade point averages and being on the honor roll.

The morning flight from Buffalo Niagara International Airport to John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City was the first-ever plane ride for Miss Webb, who said she had been inspired by her previous meeting with Mr. Lastoria.

"I was struggling a lot in almost all of my classes," she said. "Now, I am almost at the top of my class."

At one time unsure of what she wanted to do after graduation, Miss Webb is now looking forward to college and a career in business thanks to her



experiences with Mr. Lastoria and with BOCES.

"Mike inspired me in a lot of ways. Setting goals is part of what it takes to make a career," she said.

After touching down in New York City, the students marveled at the sights while being taxied from the airport to Yankee Stadium - the skyscrapers, huge arenas and millions of diverse people, all a world away from Allegany County.

Outside of the stadium, diehard Yankees fan Kevin Burdick spoke about the excitement of his first-ever opportunity to see the Bronx Bombers play live.



"If baseball were a religion, this place would be Mecca," he said.

Seated behind home plate at one of the world's most revered stadiums, the students witnessed top Yankee s players like Alex Rodriguez and Derek Jeter take on the California Angels in the last game of a weekend series.

Mr. Lastoria and his assistant, Isaiah Morrisui, met the students at the game. Although a lifelong Cleveland Indians fan, Mr. Lastoria explained that the Yankees represent success, not just as a team, but as a company.

"That's why I didn't take them to a Mets game," Mr. Lastoria joked.

As a star athlete in high school and college, Mr. Lastoria understands the similarities between achieving in sports and achieving as an entrepreneur, where both success and failure are often determined by work ethic, he said.

Taking time to listen to each student explain their future goals and appreciation for the trip, Mr. Lastoria said that he enjoyed his first experience mentoring high school students.

"(High school students) are brutally honest, you can really see if you have had an effect on them or not," he said.

Although the Yankees lost the game, the big-city experience continued later on at Micky Mantel's, a restaurant, where the group ate The Mick's favorites while surrounded by a world-class collection of autographed sports memorabilia.

During dinner, Miss Powell told Mr. Lastoria just how much her goal-setting experience had helped her achieve this past school year. Miss Powell has improved her grades and is now part of her school's honor roll.

"When someone asks me about how much I have been affected by what you have done for us, they are astonished," Miss Powell said.

When discussion turned to the celebrity clientele that attend one of Mr. Lastoria's other business ventures, a trendy New York City night club, he warned the students to avoid the pitfalls that have landed many young, successful people in hot water. He told the students to be patient, loyal and to not overindulge.

"There are very few loyal people in this world, everyone is so into immediate gratification," he said.

While the students were gracious over the big-city treatment they had received, the afternoon was also rewarding for Mr. Lastoria because he was able to host students who had a rural upbringing not unlike his own in Fillmore.

"The biggest takeaway for me is knowing that these kids have now seen what's out there," he said.