

NIAGARA COMMUNITY NEWS



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From left, Niagara Falls High School students Darren Robbins, Dale DeBacco and Phil Rulli have made \$6,000 in their school coffee business — and get to keep the money.

Teens gain experience and profit from coffee venture for business class

Students are among eight groups learning 'real world' enterprise

BY PAUL WESTMOORE

NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU

NIAGARA FALLS — When Dale DeBacco, Phil Rulli and Darren Robbins go to class early each morning at Niagara Falls High School, they are not only learning something, they are making money.

More than \$6,000 so far this year, and it's money they get to keep.

The seniors managed the feat by taking an entrepreneurial class under the school's business curriculum that required them to start a business, run it and make a profit.

Their business is Dynasty Coffee. It's only open from 7:15 to 8:05 a.m. daily, but the trio makes a good buck selling coffee, cappuccino, hot chocolate and Otis Spunkmeyer muffins (banana nut, blueberry and chocolate chip muffins). Students, teachers and school staff are their customers five mornings a week, Rulli said.

The trio uses the concession stand outside the Performing Arts Center.

"We decided to go into the coffee business because we knew there was a market for it," Robbins said. "We knew from experience teachers need their coffee before school starts. And it seemed like coffee is one of the marked-up products you can really make a profit off of."

"We use a distributor named Kimmins Coffee Service," he said. "We work with the owner, and he supplies us with quality doughnut shop-style coffee. If there is another competitor with Tim Hortons and Dunkin' Donuts around, it would be us. Our coffee is equal to what they serve."

And it must be good because Dynasty serves between 30 and 50 cups of coffee a day, charging \$1.25 for a large cup, said DeBacco, the group's speedy deliveryman. He keeps track of deliveries and all the income that results.

That's right, the business offers teachers and staff

direct delivery to their rooms and offices in 10 minutes — or the coffee is free.

To get the product to their customers, Robbins said, he and his partners decided delivery service was a must. They got a business phone hooked up at the stand so teachers and staff could call up and order.

DeBacco said the 10-minute delivery campaign has worked well.

"I'm never late for deliveries," he said, "so we never have to give away coffee."

Robbins said he and his partners also have used an advertising campaign, including a television ad on the Our Schools Channel at the school. Former school basketball star Paul Harris did a guest spot, dunking the basketball while promoting their coffee.

Their latest venture is iced cappuccino, which Robbins feels will boost profits as warmer weather approaches.

Rulli described the beauty of the entrepreneurial program: "It's a great learning experience because we don't have to stay in class. This is our class. We aren't learning so much from books. We're learning more from real life experience."

Joseph Bellonte, the teacher on special assignment who directs the initiative, said the program was set up to allow promising entrepreneurs to gain hands-on understanding about the business world and make some money doing it. He said students are running eight businesses at the school this year.

He said Dynasty Coffee has been a great experience because Robbins, Rulli and DeBacco had to reinvent themselves earlier in the year when the school administration forced them to close at 8:05 a.m. instead of 8:15.

That's because students stopping for coffee were coming in late for classes.

Bellonte said it forced the trio to find a way to get back their customer base, in turn sparking their creation of the delivery service.

"That's what happens in the real business world," Bellonte said. "You run in to a problem and you find some way to overcome it."

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