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Painting their futures

With summer jobs as scarce as sunny days, some local students are creating their own

August 24, 2009

SUSAN DOWN
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

In a year when summer jobs have been as scarce as sunny days, some local students have decided to create their own work.

With a few weeks to go before it's time to crack open the textbooks again, they have learned their new businesses have potential beyond just a source for tuition funds.

Johnny Paterson has taken a professional approach to the old summer stand-by for cash-strapped students – mowing lawns. He has business cards and company shirts embroidered with a logo of his own design for his enterprise, College Lawn Cutters and Window Cleaners. Of course, it's not surprising considering he's a third-year business administration student at the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR

Katherine Ramkhelawan, 29, is painting interiors for residential and commercial clients as the operator of Sky Murals. She's heading to the Toronto School of Art for courses in digital illustration. (Aug. 14, 2009)

Summer company program facts

Summer Company is an Ontario-wide program funded by the Ministry of Economic Development & Trade that teaches young entrepreneurs –

Ontario.

Katherine Ramkhelawan (she uses the name Katherine Sunita for her art) is painting interiors for residential and commercial clients as the operator of Sky Murals. She's heading to the Toronto School of Art for courses in digital illustration in the fall.

As two of the 26 participants in this year's Summer Company program run by Enterprise Toronto, Paterson, 19, and Sunita, 29, both got \$1,500 in seed money at the beginning of the summer to invest in equipment. They also had coaching on critical business elements such as marketing, cash flow and budgeting.

Sunita's core business – face painting for children's birthdays – has expanded to include other interior painting projects for the same clients. "Generally, it's for people who want to make their children's rooms exceptional," said Sunita.

She offers a palette of other art services such as seasonal windows for retailers, a mural for an after-school centre and trompe l'oeil (trick the eye) murals in private residences. "It really transforms the space and in a country where it's winter for three-quarters of the year, it's nice to have colour in your house," she said.

Running a business wasn't the first choice for Paterson, who lives in Pickering. For the past three summers he was an inventory person in the trucking industry and mowed lawns as a sideline. But when Paterson started looking for a summer job back in January, he got the same answer everywhere: "No one was hiring a student team this year."

He turned his casual lawn mowing into a full-time business that allowed him to apply his textbook learning in the real world. His unique approach was to eliminate contracts in favour of week-by-week orders. "They love that because if it's not ready to cut it saves them money. Most landscapers want money up front for the year – up to \$1,000."

students aged 15 to 29 – how to set up and operate their own businesses over the summer.

- Participants in the program, which runs from eight to 16 weeks, can receive initial funding of up to \$1,500, and as much as \$1,500 more on successful completion of the program and return to school.

- Enterprise Toronto, part of the City of Toronto, delivers the Summer Company program in Toronto in partnership with the ministry.

This year, there were about 400 applicants for 26 spots in the Toronto program, close to half of the total applicants in the province.

- More information: enterprisetoronto.com

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Adding extra services has boosted his revenue goals. "Once I get a landscape customer, I mention I do windows, too," he said. "That's just gravy." At first, he had to research how to properly clean windows. "Now that I have some experience, I'm pretty good at it."

Success for the two students isn't always about revenue, and both say they want to continue after another year of studies. Paterson plans to send an email during spring break in advance of next season. Paterson's initial goal was to make about \$6,000, a figure he's already surpassed. His new projection is total revenue of close to \$10,000, and he estimates 25 per cent more next year.

In July, Sunita made less than half of her original optimistic projection of \$2,900 per month, but her August is already overbooked. However, she wants to continue because of the job's flexibility. "I can mould it into what I need," she said.

Word-of-mouth was the best way to market their services, both discovered. Paterson started with 12 customers – neighbours, friends, family. "I never really did cold calls. It was referrals from then on in," he said. "I would be working and someone would come up and say, do you have a business card?"

Sunita tried flyer distribution and advertising without success. "Most of my work has come from people who have seen things I've done," she said.

Running a business means lots of extra unpaid planning and paperwork, the students agreed. Said Sunita: "It's not like a nine-to-five job where you go in and do what you have to do and leave. I think about it all the time." Paterson found that business studies in school are different from real business challenges. Forget the mergers and acquisitions and high finance. The formula for success is pretty basic, he said. "There are three things to it: initiative, communication and hard work."