Young Money
Earn It. Invest It. Spend It.

REALIZING A VISION: STARTING YOUNG IN SILICON VALLEY

By Vanessa Castaneda
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"In a button down shirt and tie world, guys can get away with wearing jeans and a t-shirt to a business meeting. But when women show up like that, they can't get away with it," says Sylvia Scott, founder of **Girls CEO Connection**.

"A woman has to look the part to play the game, because, unfortunately, society makes girls think that they just need to be pretty and to get boys," Scott said. "I organized this conference to inspire young women to create profitable businesses and change the way people perceive women along the way."

Last year, The Kauffman Foundation, an organization that fosters understanding of entrepreneurship, revealed that **women-owned start-ups get less seed money to start their businesses** than those started by men. On top of that, 6.5 million firms were owned by women in 2002. While that's up 19.5 percent from 1997, it's only a fraction of the 22,974,655 firms registered in the United States that year.

Those numbers may rise quicker than ever thanks to Scott. She's giving young women the opportunity to acquire the valuable skills they need to compete with men and become the next generation of entrepreneurs. High school girls from all over Silicon Valley traveled to Stanford University on January 16, 2010 to attend the Realizing a Vision conference that she co-organized.

Scott collaborated with Stanford University's business fraternity Alpha Kappa Psi, *Young Money* magazine, and *Justine* magazine to invite speakers who could impart the knowledge necessary to develop the personal action strategies essential to creating new ventures.

The conference was broken down into three categories: Entrepreneur, Leadership, and Your Dream Team. The auditorium was almost all girls, with just a sprinkling of boys. In the History Corner, **Awista Ayub**, founder of **Afghan Youth Sport Exchange** and author of *However Tall the Mountain*, began the conference by sharing her story.

Ayub's parents wanted her to be something "successful," like a doctor or lawyer, so she began her career as a chemist. But when the Taliban regime fell, she didn't want to do that anymore. She wanted to start a soccer team and change the world. She packed up her car, moved back in with her parents and formed a non profit called Afghan Youth Sports Exchange, so Afghan girls could learn about leadership. She invited teens into the U.S. to play; they later returned to Afghanistan and started the first women's soccer team, changing the rules for FIFA, a regulatory sports organization. Ayub not only achieved a monumental goal, and secured funding from outside sources to make it happen, but she also empowered young women in Afghanistan to defy radical oppression and learn how to resolve conflicts as a team.

After she told her story, a young girl named Ann asked her how she was able to persevere through her family's disapproval and achieve her dream.

"You have to be aggressive and strategic," Ayub said. "If you're trying to get a sponsor, be sure that you can tell them why partnering with you benefits them. Also, get advice. Why repeat the mistakes that others have done?"

Ooshma Garg, Former President of Stanford Women in Business, also used the challenges she faced while starting Anapata.com to illustrate how a young girl can gain economic independence during her "Your Money, Your Power" session. She started her business in spring, 2008, during her junior year of college. Anapata.com is a web-based tool that connects diversity-focused law firms with law students seeking employment.

One of the crucial things when sharing her vision for her company was her attitude, she said. "People are much more attracted to you if you have an idea or are working on something. By talking about it and acting like you're going to do it, you can make it happen."

She identified small start-up costs, a short sales cycle, short payment terms, and recurring revenue as keys to successfully bootstrapping a business. In the long term, she said, providing amazing customer service, and tracking everything helped her retain clients.

To gain clients, you're going to need passion, says Courtney Macavinta, author of *Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect & Dealing When Your Line is Crossed*. The mother-to-be had lunch with 10 of the 76 conference goers, before she started her Leadership session called "Push your Passion to the Limit." Macavinta also stressed the importance of positive thinking on the future of an idea.

"Share the story of how you got your idea for your business. It doesn't have to be a Lifetime movie or anything, but when people see that you're excited, they will get excited too," Macavinta added.

If there was any one thing attendees could take away from event, it was that no excuse is strong enough to block women from gaining the resources necessary to start a business. Successful women hear the word "no" not as a barrier to their success, but as an opportunity to improve, to better their proposals. Be prepared, be enthusiastic, and be confident…you'll leave the t-shirt and jeans crowd tripping over their flip-flops.

Courtney and Ooshma's Top Seven Need to Know Networking Strategies

1. Don't be shy. Indulge your curiosity about others. (You never know who the people around you know.)
2. Be a giver, not just a taker. At networking events, offer to connect people to people you know, and they will do the same for you.
3. Do your homework before going to conferences, so you can ask speakers good questions.
4. Always feel equal to the person you're meeting. You deserve to be there just as much as they do.
5. Begin conversations with, "Hi. I'm a student who is starting a business about ___."
6. Share your story. People get excited when they hear the reasons you're excited about your idea.
7. Be the last one in the room who walks the speaker out. When you follow up, they'll remember you.

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Photos courtesy of Realizing a Vision Conference. Top photo: Ooshma Garg, Bottom photo: Courtney Macavinta