

One year on, savvy students incorporate to become real entrepreneurs



By Brock Weir

When the Classy Cyborgs, one of two robotics teams at Lester B. Pearson Public School learned that just 10 per cent of visually impaired people know how to read braille, they were alarmed. But, rather than settling back into their daily routine, put their heads together to do something about it.

That was last year.

Fast forward just a short time ? and a few prototypes ? later, they are now ready for the big leagues, officially incorporating themselves as a company to take their product to the next level.

Since the Classy Cyborgs came together as Grade 7 and 8 students last year, their product has evolved into an intricate network of programs, apps, and hardware designed to give those learning braille an up-to-date electronic way to get tactile with the words before them.

They still meet regularly, despite several members leaving Lester B. to begin high school this past fall, working with York University to get their tools ready for the market place.

?Now we can say, ?Hey, I started a company when I was 12!?" says student Sean Lloyd with a grin.

According to parent coach Lisa Andrade, the Cyborgs laid the groundwork to incorporate in October. As each of the company founders are minors, the parents had to sign as trustees for their kids, but each young innovator now owns 10 shares apiece in their new company.

?Each child is a legal company member,?" says Ms. Andrade. ?We wanted to incorporate because we had funding from an organization that invested in putting money towards their product development. We needed a bank account and to be an entity. We also have a provisional patent, so, since we're on the road to commercialization, that was one of the first steps. There was a 100 per cent buy-in from the students, 100 per cent commitment at meetings, and 100 per cent commitment from parents.?"

Nearly three months later, this buy-in is still as fresh and exciting as ever for these students, who continue to marvel at how far they have come.

?The big reason for this was to help the blind community after we found out only 10 per cent of the blind actually know how to read braille,? says student Sammy Emamian. ?We moved onto how to fix this problem and trying to solve what the CNIB says is a crisis in literacy. After we found our idea was so well received, it motivated us to start building the product with the help of York University. Me and three of my other colleagues right now are in data programing so we can program the thing itself while York University works on the mechanical design.

?After they approached us, they pitched the idea of having buttons on the braille simulator itself, so the child can navigate it without using voice recognition because Siri, one of the top voice recognition systems, is pretty crappy. It is not that well designed. We either use a pocketsphinx (voice recognition software), which is a group of words that the computer interprets as the closest word to, or we use these buttons for navigation.?

Now that they are a bona fide company, the Classy Cyborgs have their eyes firmly on the year ahead of them.

?We now have a working prototype and York University is working on making it more compact and to the design we had planned,? says Sean. ?We hope to have this on the market by 2017.?

Adds Sammy: ?Once we get it into market, and once we get the software off the ground and we do become a viable company with a unique product, we plan on reaching out to kids everywhere, in Africa where some barely know how to read, and third world countries which is a problem we plan to fix with the start-up money we get. Once we become a massive scale company, we could give out other products for the blind like how to learn music, or a modification pack where it teaches you math.?

But, could their product also be used for adults who haven't had the opportunity to learn braille?

?Of course,? says Sammy. ?It's for everybody and that is the beauty of it.?

Adds Sean: ?We will probably have some more adult stories to go with it??

?But we probably won't be the ones designing that, because, you know, we don't understand adults as much,? interjects Sammy. ?We're still kids.?