

Mackenzie McGreer

Michael Moore / Sentinel Staff | Posted: Saturday, June 27, 2015 8:00 am



Mackenzie McGreer, of Keene

Keene tween says "YEA!" to entrepreneurship

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McGreer's Letter Gal-ery

Young entrepreneur Mackenzie McGreer is the CEO of her own company, following her graduation from YEA! She is seen in her home in Keene with a display of her Letter Gal-ery.



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She regularly explores different area neighborhoods, taking black and white photographs of various sites, including signs, buildings, landmarks, architecture and nature. Each 4-by-6-inch image depicts a letter of the alphabet or other symbol. Using them, she creates artwork on the spot for customers, who can choose a few or several photos to spell out a word or phrase. She arranges them on a finished mat for a tailor-made piece of wall art, suitable for framing, and as a lasting souvenir.

"They're all very specific to the region," she said. "Some of the things I photograph are naturally shaped like letters. Sometimes I may turn a photo sideways to look like a letter. But I never use retouching applications."

For example, she designed a prototype to spell "dream", with photos shot in Keene. The "D" is the Stonewall Farm bridge, turned sideways. The "R" is the natural shape of a railing handle at Ingenuity Country Store. "E" is a spoke on the cannon at the Central Square Civil War monument. The "A" is from The Colonial Theatre sign, while the "M" is from Moe Momentum Clothing downtown.

In May, she and several YEA! classmates pitched their ideas to a panel of local investors for financial assistance at a public event held in Walpole, modeled after ABC's television show, "Shark Tank".

"It was a very scary and intimidating moment," she said. "I was the only girl."

To her excitement, she was awarded \$250 more than she requested. A few weeks later, the group held an outdoor trade show in downtown Keene to drum up interest and customers for its various ventures. In just a few hours, Mackenzie sold nearly a dozen works of art, surpassing her sales projection for the entire month. Soon after, in early June, the group graduated in a traditional ceremony on the Keene State campus as CEOs of their own businesses.

Meredith Speranza directs the Keene YEA! program.

"Mackenzie is great," said Speranza. "She's an amazing young girl. She's driven, motivated and enthusiastic. She was a great addition to the class. She's very smart and a quick study, but more importantly, she's eager to learn and to grow as a person, and now as a young businesswoman. She will have tremendous success in whatever she chooses to do with her talents."

Mackenzie's no stranger to entrepreneurship. Her paternal ancestry includes generations of business owners. Her father, Ted McGreer, owns Ted's Shoe & Sport in Keene. Her mother, Heather McGreer, isn't self-employed, but enjoys a successful career as assistant director of human resources at Keene State College.

"My entire family on my father's side are entrepreneurs.," said Mackenzie. "I've been at my dad's store since I was very little. I've always had an entrepreneur's mindset. And I have my mom's drive and motivation. I always thought having a business would be fun."

But, it's not her only interest. She said she also loves to sing and dance.

"My dad sang and played guitar with me since I was young," she said. "MoCo (Arts, the Keene-based performing arts organization) has been a huge part of my life since I was 3, and helped train my voice. I love singing and entertaining people. It makes people happy."

In past years, she's appeared in many of MoCo Arts' theater productions, most recently in the May 2014 production of "Pippin." She's also attended the New Hampshire Dance Institute's summer dance camps, including last summer.

Two years ago, she entered the Keene Idol competition, a singing competition for youth and adult vocalists throughout New England, now entering its 12th season. She didn't make it to the finals.

"I decided I was going to train harder, work harder and go back the next year," said Mackenzie, who returned last season to become a semi-finalist in the youth division. She placed fourth out of 30 contestants.

JoAnne Mead, a well known Keene vocalist and musical director, is her periodic voice teacher, and a longtime family friend.

"Mackenzie's parents are delightful, outgoing, positive people," said Mead. "It filters down to her. She just emanates happiness from within. She has a great voice. Her stage presence and facial expressions just light up the room. Whatever she's doing, she's passionate about it. She sets high goals, but it's her own doing, not her parents'.

"She's a kid that's focused, and gets the job done. She has a great sense of humor and is a lot of fun. When I watch her with other kids, it's obvious that she's a team player, who makes people feel comfortable. She's going to be a leader."

Academically, she already excels. Last year, in 7th grade, she made the high honor roll consistently throughout the year, and earned straight A-plus grades across the board in her final term. Her favorite subject is English, because she loves to write narratives and short stories. On top of that, she's a member of the National Junior Honor Society, through which she's actively involved in school activities and community service.

Athletics top her agenda too. In school, she plays field hockey, and later this year, she will begin her sixth season on the Keene Family Y Dolphins championship swim team, which competes throughout New England. In her free time, she says she enjoys family activities, including hiking Mount Monadnock, celebrating birthdays, and dining out.

For now, she's focused on business. She partners with Karen Lyle, owner of Creative Encounters, the art supply and framing shop on Main Street, for mattes at wholesale prices. She'll also create and sell her products there at various times during the summer.

Today from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., she'll bring her business to the annual Swanzey Touch a Truck event in the Market Basket parking lot. It's sponsored by UPS to benefit Hundred Nights shelter.

As her business grows, she said she may add wall decals and cards to her product line. She envisions someday hosting a contest, where whoever can identify where the photos were taken, and what they are, will win the art. She said she creates for customers mostly on the spot, but also takes orders, especially through her website, lettergal.com.

Despite her busy schedule, she still helps out at her father's store. She said he's taught her all about correctly fitting shoes, and she looks forward to working there when she reaches legal age. After that, she plans to go to college, and then to Harvard Law School to train to be a prosecutor.

"Because I have the entrepreneurial spirit, I want to start my very own law firm in New York City," she said.

On Nov. 5, a new YEA! program will begin at Keene State, and will run for 29 weeks, including extra field trips. Early offer applications are due by Aug. 7. Scholarships are available.

A satisfied graduate, Mackenzie says she will miss it, but highly recommends it to other potential young business owners.

"I loved it," she said. "It's a wonderful experience. I tell everyone, 'You really should apply.'"

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By Joan Geary Contributing Writer

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Just a few weeks ago, Mackenzie McGreer graduated in a cap and gown ceremony on the Keene State College campus. But she's not a

Keene State alumna.

Instead, Mackenzie, 12, was part of the inaugural class of the new Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!), hosted by the college. Now the Keene Middle School student, who'll enter 8th grade in September, is also president and CEO of her own business, called Letter Gal-ery.

"I loved YEA!," she said. "It was a lot of fun."

The program, which is part of the national Young Entrepreneurs Academy Inc., teaches area middle and high school students how to start and grow a real business from the ground up. It's in place in more than 100 locations in 37 states. In January 2015, it debuted at Keene State, which is the only site in New Hampshire.

For 22 weeks, Mackenzie and her peers met weekly on campus for classroom instruction and guest speakers. They brainstormed business ideas, were matched with mentors, learned about finances, and wrote a real business plan. They also took field trips to area companies, pitched potential investors, and held a trade show to attract customers.

"The program is amazing," she said. "It gives you a lifelong lesson about business. I really like that it's only for 6th- to 12th-graders. You're not dragged down by little kids, but you're not struggling to keep up with college kids either."

"It's not easy to write a 20-page business plan, or to ask investors for start-up funds. It was very time consuming, but it was fun," she said "YEA! did a lot for me. I'm very happy to be where I am."

Mackenzie conceived Letter Gal-ery in her third week of the program during a class brainstorming session. Combining her passions for photography, the arts and commerce, she creates unique, customized artwork, and permanent memories of the region for residents and visitors alike.

Here's how it works.