

With grants, entrepreneurs follow passions

COREY BUTLER JR.

Posted: Wednesday, March 24, 2010 4:26 pm

Saman Bemel-Benrud, an art aficionado growing up, has parlayed his talent into T-shirt designing.

Nicholas Kang, a hockey player by skill, has become a coach.

Evan Uribe has always loved looking at the world through a camera lens.

The three men, as well as many other St. Olaf College current and former students, are recipients of the school's Finstad program grants through the Center for Experiential Learning.

The modest grant has allowed them to pursue their dreams, which the entrepreneurs say wouldn't have come without hard work, but especially without financial assistance from the program.

Every year students are given grants up to \$3,000 to channel their innovative and entrepreneurial spirited minds. Students must pitch an idea with social innovation and present a working business model.

Kris Estenson, social innovation and entrepreneurship coordinator for St. Olaf, said the grants afford students a rich opportunity to use what they learn outside the classroom. Each year, \$15,000 is given to students.

Bemel-Benrud, Kang and Uribe each received a grant to jump-start a business of choice; all three have experienced different levels of success.

"We're going strong," says Bemel-Benrud, who graduated last year and is now an apprentice with the college's art department.

His company, MFM Apparel, starting with a \$3,000 grant in the fall of 2007, continues to be an outlet for his creativity. Starting with five designs, the catalog has now expanded to 13 T-shirt designs. Comic books may come next for the company.

The Merritt Hockey School, based in Merritt, British Columbia, will hold its second hockey camp for budding hockey stars between the ages of 5 and 15.

Without the \$1,500 grant Kang received, 48 students wouldn't have been enrolled in the camp last year. This year, he says, 65 participants are expected.

And for Uribe, his summer is booked with 10 weddings to photograph.

While he started with a \$1,500 grant in November 2008, Uribe said it didn't come as easy.

He used the money to start a Web site, upgrade his computer and buy new lenses, but his gig as a general photographer wasn't panning out.

He turned his attention to weddings, but said to get weddings, he needed experience, and to get experience, he needed weddings.

Working as an assistant for others, he eventually built up a portfolio and now his schedule is filled with weddings to photograph.

Not bad for someone who has another year of school left before he graduates with a major in Spanish and political science.

Though, at this point, the degrees will play as a backup plan.

“I don’t know where the world will take me,” he says.

But one thing is certain: Recipients of the grants feel fortunate.

— Corey Butler Jr. covers arts, culture and youth issues. He can be reached at cbutler@northfieldnews.com or 645-1114.

GRANTEES AND THEIR IDEAS

- Mikael Witte and Eric Wilson — Band
- Jenna Wagner — Hand-knit items
- Will Voorhees — Internet-based movie rental service
- Eric Tvedt — Band
- Danielle Stoermer and Katie Godfrey — Cookbook
- Andrew Foxwel — Marketing, advertising and public relations firm
- Max Davenport — Clothing and furnishings company
- Aidan Currie — Organic root beer
- Mikael Pensec — Newsletter
- Lyndel Owens — Cookie and ice cream sandwich makers
- Jay Jovick — Content management service
- Wade Hauser and Jenna Wagner — Reusable lunch bags
- Saman Bemel-Benrud and Alex Mitchell — Apparel
- Justin Volling and Carl Numrich — Golf camp
- Evan Uribe — Photography
- Joseph Mitchell — Music production studio
- Nicholas Kang — Hockey camp
- Katherine Huber — Flower supplier
- Joseph Erickson and Kai Hansen — Media company
- Kevin Borek — Organic plant and tree nursery