A great blog post from LA weekly about Yvette Monje, Animo Watts Charter High School.

Yvette Monje, High School Entrepreneur, Answers the Question: How to Make a Profit Off the Prom?

Ted Soqui
Yvette Monje

Yvette Monje's mom worries about the safety of her daughter, who is rapidly approaching womanhood. "A man might try to talk to me," explains Monje, a beautiful, dark-eyed high school girl from South L.A. Although she welcomes the advice from her mom, a UPS accountant whom she admires, Monje is a teenager and she shrugs off fear.

Her thoughts of home in a corner of L.A. many Angelenos know only for its crime are of "our quiet street and great neighbors, who I love. Our barbecue every weekend."

Her mom and stepdad are committed to making sure Monje, a student with promise, enters college next fall. To that end, they removed her from a troubled mainstream school and enrolled her at Animo Watts Charter High School, where, Monje says with a chuckle, "Every teacher is on your case." Her grades in biology, which fell to a D at her last school, roared back to A's.

Now, she happily ticks off her favorite classes as if listing hot new video games. "I like British literature, anatomy, physiology" -- she laughs at how weighty it must sound -- "and trigonometry!"

She's getting A's in all.

Also jammed into her daily schedule is Young Angels of America, a nonprofit program created by former entertainment industry executives Brook Dougherty and Debbie Koerner. Young Angels teaches kids in dicey neighborhoods to become businesspeople. It's a radical idea with a simple premise: With guidance from professional volunteers, the kids launch entrepreneurial school projects and productions that make money, and then use the profits to enhance their schools.

When she heard about Young Angels, Monje recalls, "My math teacher said it was an after-school program about fundraising, and I thought, 'Oh, selling chocolate on the street.' Instead, it was about having school dances, holding auditions to produce talent shows, setting up and running the student store."

Out of some secret place, a fledgling businesswoman arose. Says Monje: "Right away I

thought, 'How do we make a profit off a school dance? Well, get a DJ, finger food -- and sell tickets for $5." Monje and the other teens were shocked by their $700 profit.

They analyzed their results and "debriefed" to review their mistakes and discussed what to do with the windfall. Everyone agreed, Animo Watts needed soccer uniforms.

Profits from another school dance went to subsidize the price of Animo Watts' first-ever yearbook -- the idea being that seniors from every background should be able to afford one. The young entrepreneurs drove the yearbook price down from $65 to $35.

The Young Angels program pairs kids from tough areas like South L.A. and Watts with kids from Brentwood and other Westside schools. The kids work at each other's events, sharing the load and cross-pollinating. The kids with greater resources underwrite some of the costs of the fundraisers, and both sides learn something.

A "sister team" of Pacific Palisades and Watts Animo students in April netted several hundred dollars selling barely used prom dresses at a Westside yard sale. The profits are helping pay the $13,500 cost of throwing an elegant oceanside senior prom -- another first for Animo Watts -- at Annenberg Beach House.

The rest of the prom fee will be paid by the Watts students out of the $200 in weekly profits being generated by the bustling Animo Watts student store. Monje says, "Everyone, including a lot of kids who didn't care at first, is excited now about having the prom on the beach."

As the boss who oversees the "workers" in the school store the kids set up, Monje has learned diplomacy, marketing, psychology and management. Not everything has worked out. In the one failure that still rankles, she sought to meet with the school principal. The question came back, "What's this about, Yvette?" Monje's vague response: "The vending machines."

To be more exact, Monje had determined that if the students could control the revenue stream generated by the candy bars and junk food that flies out of the vending machines, the kids could plow the profits back into school needs. Under the current setup, "The schools get only 10

percent of the money!"

The principal looked into her idea and told Monje she was sorry, but the vending contract couldn't be broken.

The June 4 prom is just days away. The crazy dream of the seniors at Animo Watts -- of a real prom, with all the upscale trimmings -- has come true. And of course, more than one boy in Watts has invited the disarming Yvette Monje to be their date. Are these all boyfriends? She laughs quietly, rolling her dark eyes. "I'm too busy for boyfriends!"

Original Article can be found here:
http://blogs.laweekly.com/stylecouncil/2011/05/yvette_monje_high_school_entre.php