

# How to treat a stutter

By: Dee Gill October 06, 2008

Nicole Loftus was so grateful for the city services that helped her build Zorch International Inc. into one of the fastest-growing companies in the country that she wrote Mayor Richard M. Daley a thank-you note.

In the letter, she offered to give back to Chicago in any way she could. Two weeks later, Mr. Daley called her to his office and asked her to be "Principal for a Day" at Orr Academy High School in West Garfield Park. The request was part of a program to get successful adults interested in working in disadvantaged schools.

Ms. Loftus accepted. After her day as principal, she realized she could give some of the students a reason to succeed in school by teaching them how to start their own businesses.

With the help of the mayor's office and Orr teacher Marvin Scott, Ms. Loftus started a Future Entrepreneurs Program for the freshman class. The course included business plan contests, advice from speakers from companies like Motorola Inc., PepsiCo Inc. and United Parcel Service of America Inc., and the opportunity to apply for summer internships at companies including Zorch, which supplies branded merchandise for some of the largest corporations in the world.

Ms. Loftus selected her interns based on their grades, attitude and persistence. "I waited to see who would follow up," she says.

Last year, Mercedes Pickett did. The 16-year-old was soft-spoken and stuttered, but she asked often about the position and worked hard on her assignments in class. Ms. Loftus gave her a chance.

When Mercedes arrived for her first day of work at Zorch in the summer of 2007, she was put to work calling vendors.

"The first one yelled at me," over an invoice problem that wasn't Zorch's fault, she says. "Then I had to call six more."

She also had to speak up in meetings to explain her results. That gave her more confidence talking to other people, on the phone and off. As she did, she realized her stutter was becoming less pronounced.

"Even my mother is surprised by how much I talk now," Mercedes says.

Last summer, she took an internship in the Chicago office of marketing company Digitas Inc., where she had a view of the Chicago River and Lake Michigan from her desk.

She still stutters sometimes. "But it doesn't stop me from anything now," she says.

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