

CREATURE FEATURE

HOW JASON O'NEILL GOT THE BUSINESS BUG



Photo courtesy of Nancy O'Neill

If you're among those griping about the so-called decline of today's youth, please leave Jason O'Neill out of the discussion.

The 13-year-old from Temecula, Calif., invented Pencil Bugs, little creatures made of Styrofoam, pipe cleaners and googly eyes that adorn pencils. Each Pencil Bug comes with a "Certificate of Authenticity" that includes name, birth date and care instructions – a nice touch that personalizes an otherwise impersonal pencil-décor experience.

But the real genius is the way Jason has created a business around his invention. Yes, Jason also is an entrepreneur, something that has earned him kudos and exposure from some of the nation's leading media, as well as schoolyard barbs from some jealous classmates.

Blessed with high-end public speaking skills, he addresses adult business groups and other organizations. Jason also was in an *ABC News Nightline* story about young whiz kids and appeared on NBC's *1 vs. 100* game show.

In January 2008, *Forbes.com* featured

him as one of 10 "Hot Role Models to Admire" who are 18 and younger. That list included Miley "Hannah Montana" Cyrus, Abigail Breslin of the movie *Little Miss Sunshine* and Nick Jonas of The Jonas Brothers band.

In 2007, nonprofit business-education organization Young Entrepreneurs of America named Jason winner of the "Young Entrepreneur of the Year" in the then-newly created Under 16 category – a category created because Jason was 11.

Make Your Own

Jason's journey began in 2005, when his mother was making some crafts for a fair. Jason asked if he could share in some of the profits if he helped her paint. She said no and told him to develop something on his own.

The tough-love tact paid off.

"Because she turned me down," he said, "that's what motivated me. I wasn't really frustrated. I was disappointed because I wanted to take the easy way. But had she let me ... I wouldn't have been able to do the

things I've done."

Jason took a business-like approach to Pencil Bugs. He sketched out his designs and made several prototypes. He conducted consumer test marketing at school.

Shortly after he made his first Pencil Bugs, classmates started ordering them. He began fashioning Pencil Bugs in quantity to keep up with demand. His business soon took root.

"One thing I learned is that your invention doesn't have to be really involved or difficult," he said in an essay to Young Entrepreneurs of America. "Sometimes the simpler, the better and those can sell just as well. My Pencil Bugs sell for only \$1.50 each and I found that people are very willing to spend that amount without a lot of thought, whereas they might have to think longer about buying something more expensive."

When it came time to get a business license, state tax ID, and file for a business name or DBA, his parents lent their full support.

"Kids," he noted, "aren't allowed to sign anything legal."

COLLEGIATE INVENTORS AND THE WINNERS ARE ...

Timothy Lu of Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently won the National Inventors Hall of Fame Foundation's 2008 Collegiate Inventors Competition and pocketed the \$25,000 grand prize.

Lu, 27, is a California native in the M.D./Ph.D. program at the Harvard-MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology. Lu created a sustainable source of

antimicrobial therapies – a better way of fighting germs. The tools Lu developed may see broad use such as attacking superbugs, treating diseases like cystic fibrosis, and preventing food contamination.

Graduate winner: Paul Podsiadlo, 30, of the University of Michigan for his Ultra Strong and Stiff, Optically Transparent Plastic Nanocomposite. He envisions his structure being used for anything

from body armor to biomedical coatings. He won \$15,000.

Undergraduate winner: Greg Schroll, 22, of MIT, for his spherical robot. It has many potential uses including surveillance, reconnaissance and disaster zone assessment, especially in situations where conditions on the ground are not safe for people. ■

Visit www.invent.org/collegiate



Supersize Him

Like any good businessman, Jason has developed a retail-enabled Web site and, through Café Press, expanded his product line to include bookmarks, dog bowls and, (whoa!) even thong underwear.

He's also written a book, *Zweeeba*, the adventure story of a boy who finds a Pencil Bug, which possesses magical powers. Jason's now hunting for a publisher.

"I want to develop a Pencil Bug cartoon or movie or a board game or video game," he said. "I want to be like a big company with all these product branches."

The goal is to make enough money while he's young so he doesn't have to work later on in life.

That's not to say he's a cold-hearted capitalist. He has received a small college scholarship from the Kohl's Kids Who Care Program, was awarded a Young Philanthropist Award for his charitable contributions to help foster kids, and he puts together gift bags for children at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego.

When at speaking gigs, Jason offers these words of wisdom: A business venture is hard to do all on your own and "make sure you don't give up."

As a stockholder in Microsoft, the straight-A student lists corporate scion Bill Gates as among his heroes. But two others are ahead of even the brainy Bill Gates – Jason's mom and dad.

"They're the ones who have encouraged and motivated me," he said. "Without them I wouldn't be where I am today." ■

Visit www.pencilbugs.com

THE YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR SOCIETY MORE THAN A MOVIE ... OR MORE LIKE AN INFOMERCIAL?

The movie trailer for *The Young Entrepreneur Society* begins with a satellite sweeping over Earth. A menacing voiceover, evoking one of those political attack ads from not so long ago, intones: "Society has programmed us to follow a certain path."

We're shown Orwellian rows of people, laconically gazing at a montage of the elusive American dream – go to school, work hard, live comfortably. The reality, we're told, is we're "stuck in a cycle of debt, stress and disappointment."

Pretty downer stuff.

But then Louis Lautman's independent film explodes with *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, mansion-and-champagne imagery, showcasing how young entrepreneurs – "rebel millionaires" – have bucked the odds, confronted risk and charted their own financial destinies and dynasties.

Normally, this space in *Inventors Digest* is reserved for young innovators under 21. Yet the 31-year-old Lautman of South Beach, Fla., possesses infectious enthusiasm – like a big kid trapped in an adult's body. And some of those featured in the film started businesses when they were in their teens.

"My movie was my vision since very early in life," he tells us. "I always knew I'd make a movie and it would be about business. It's a childhood dream."

His goal was to plumb the insights of young entrepreneurs who struck success on their own and offer an inspirational message, rendered on celluloid.

To be sure, *The Young Entrepreneur*

Society is a compilation of uplifting interviews from 40 young entrepreneurs and older mentors – 150 hours of footage condensed in a 75-minute movie.

"Everyone featured in the film does what they do out of love and have made a lifestyle out of it," Lautman says. The central message is, "I don't have to work for someone else."

Many of the entrepreneurs featured in the film are motivational speakers, fast-talking real estate agents and folks you've never heard of. (Mmmmm ... real estate. Wasn't that the complex derivative-driven, no-money-down bubble sector that burst, helping fuel the financial crisis?)

There's no Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin. No Digg founder Kevin Rose. No Threadless apparel phenoms Jake Nickell and Jacob DeHart. (Lautman does serve up mixed-martial arts promoter and edgy apparel TapOut co-founder Dan "Punkass" Caldwell, and former *The Apprentice* contestant Katrina Campins.)

Lautman deserves an "A" for effort. And he should get a pass on who he was able to get on camera. It's hard to gain access to the A-list when you're just starting out.

Lautman is seeking sponsors to get his film wider distribution and is embarked on a screening journey in January. The single workaholic says he's prepared to screen and bang the pots for the movie seven days a week.

"This is more than a movie," he adds. "It's a movement." ■

Visit www.theYESmovie.com