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## Teens get one minute to make it



Business consultant Jay Rooke emceed the youth-networking event. Rooke quipped that he would have benefited from similar pitch practicing back when he was a teen trying to find dates.

BY PIO VALENZUELA  
SPECIAL TO THE INDEX-TRIBUNE

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A high schooler, a businessman and a mentor walk into a bar ... and that, in a nutshell, is what last week's teen speed networking event was all about.

But this was no joke – and it was no bar either. The Speed Networking with Youth event took place at the Hanna Boys Center auditorium and featured teens and professionals joined at tables in groups of six, with each person given a minute to deliver an “elevator” pitch to the group before the bell rang and they all switched tables.

“It’s a human experiment,” said Patricia Shults, executive director of the Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce, which put on the event with such partners as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Sonoma Valley, Teen Services Sonoma, the Sonoma Valley Mentoring Alliance and Sonoma Valley High School. The idea was to connect the Valley’s youth with local business leaders and professionals; linking kids with working adults has been a goal for several of Sonoma’s youth-based nonprofits, who view that as an important step for teens in familiarizing themselves with life in the career-oriented 21st century.

It wasn’t until the aforementioned youth organizations got together that they were able to approach that goal of targeting not just the specific groups of teens served by their agencies, but all teens in the Valley.

“We work collectively rather than in opposition with each other,” said Wendy Swanson, Sonoma Valley High School’s work-based learning coordinator.

The Chamber of Commerce already hosts speed-networking events for businesses, and when the four nonprofits came together and started working with the Chamber, a youth speed-networking event was a natural extension of that.

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The idea mixes programs already in place by the different groups: Teen Services' ready-to-work program puts teens through an eight-week course and subsequent testing and certification process through the Chamber; Stand By Me Mentoring's Road Map to Your Future sends teens on field trips to get a sense of different careers and jobs; the Boys & Girls Clubs' Future Focus program offers classes, workshops and field trips to help organize and prioritize their college and career goals. The SVHS' College and Career Center, meanwhile, provides various resources to help students succeed in their goals.

Jesus Morales, a sophomore attending Archbishop Hanna High School took part in the networking and said, "It was really fun seeing all the different occupations and how all of them connect with each other.

Throughout the short networking sessions, teens shared their goals and interests, while business leaders shared their stories and offered advice for the teens.

Networking with older generations isn't always smooth for teens – and the first few sessions found both adults and teens getting a feel for the inter-age networking, but as the evening went on the participants mostly hit their strides – and some entrepreneurs were able to refer students to people in the room directly related to their career choices.

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