

## Star quality that put small start-ups on the big screen



By Pamela Ryckman

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As the child of drug addicts, Rodney Walk-er's upbringing in a series of Chicago foster homes was not auspicious. Yet now, aged 20, he has been one of the top finalists in a business plan competition, has won a full scholarship to Morehouse College in Atlanta, and is the narrator of *Ten9Eight - Shoot for the Moon*, a documentary film that is about to go on re-lease in a mainstream US cinema chain.

Mr Walker's video production company, Forever Life Music & Video Productions, came second in the 2008 annual contest run by the Network For Teaching Entrepreneurship, in which more than 24,000 low-income youngsters outlined their business ideas in a bid for financial backing. It culminated in a face-off between 35 finalists in Manhattan, New York.

Mr Walker won \$5,000 (€3,350, £3,080), behind overall winner Jessica Cervantes from Miami, who received \$10,000 in seed money. She set up Popsy Cakes, which sells cupcakes on edible sticks, after she was taught to bake by her grandmother.

"I wasn't brought up to think school was important, but dev-eloping the business plan was fun. It kept me interested in my economics class," says Mr Wal-ker about his involvement with NFTE, a non-profit organisation that teaches at-risk, low-income young people entrepreneurial skills so they can find a "pathway to prosperity".

The film, by director and producer Mary Mazzio, follows 12 American teenagers as they progress through competitions hosted by NFTE.

*Ten9Eight* - the name suggests a countdown but also refers to the fact that every nine seconds an American adolescent drops out of high school - is a different proposition from Ms Mazzio's previous film, *Lemonade Stories*. That was also about entrepreneurs, but explored the role of mothers in the careers of extraordinary figures such as Sir Richard Bran-son and Arthur Blank, founder of Home Depot and a judge in the NFTE final.

Her latest documentary is a combination of fly-on-the-wall cov-erage of the regional competitions across the US in the months leading up to the 2008 finals; interviews with young entrepreneurs and the adults who have shaped their lives; footage from participants using handheld cameras; and the judges' comments and advice. \*

The film shows contestants introducing their ventures to high-profile judges, including Ralph Schlosstein, co-founder of BlackRock; Tom Scott, co-founder of Nantucket Nectars and Plum TV; and Kay Koplovitz, founder of USA Network.

By letting them tell their stories, Ms Mazzio hopes to demonstrate that anyone with drive can start a business. "It's something a regular kid can do. All you have to have is an appetite for calculated risk and some chutzpah," she says, speaking by phone from her production company, 50 Eggs, near Boston.

Steve Mariotti, the teacher who founded NFTE 22 years ago, believes children in poverty are well positioned to solve problems in their communities - and at a global level. They "have nothing to lose. They've been in recessions their whole lives", he says, speaking by phone from his home in New York. NFTE tries to highlight the advantages of their otherwise blighted surroundings: for instance, empty buildings and unemployment can mean low rent and labour rates for NFTE students' businesses.

"They're not aware of school rankings and class structure, the things that can burden more traditional families," says Mr Mariotti. "They don't care if someone is important - they'll still approach him for a sale."

Ms Mazzio says: "They've had to fight for everything, so you know they're going to work their tails off."

Ms Mazzio certainly had to work hard to get the film into mainstream cinemas. *Ten9Eight* will be released

internationally during Glo-bal Entrepreneurship Week, a series of events organised by more than 8,000 partner organisations - including NFTE - in about 80 countries (starting November 16). In the US, it will be shown in cinemas owned by AMC Theatres, a leading chain of multiplexes.

Initially, Ms Mazzio could not persuade a distributor to take *Ten9Eight* but, determined to reach an audience, she began "working the Rolodex" and eventually made contact with Robert Lenihan, president of programming at AMC Theatres, who was looking for high-quality and varied content to target minority audiences.

The result is an exclusive partnership between 50 Eggs and AMC. On screens that usually show Hollywood blockbusters, AMC will present *Ten9Eight* for at least one week in eight big American cities. AMC has also promised to market it widely with posters, trailers, websites and screenings for luminaries and community leaders. "This happened in a classically entrepreneurial way," Ms Mazzio says. "It was all about the hustle."

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