Bootstrap U

With Camp BizSmart, Peggy Gibbs aims to instill pluck and resilience in the entrepreneurs of tomorrow.

By Christian Yungert

You've been given a task. A local Silicon Valley CEO has identified a void in the marketplace and it's up to you to fill it. You get a team of strangers and two weeks to invent, design, and market an innovative product. Not just any old product, but one that people will buy. One that makes money. And at the end of those two weeks, you're going to present your sparkling new innovative idea to a panel of proven entrepreneurs and CEOs from companies like Microsoft and Cisco.

There's a catch. You don't have business experience and you're barely in high school. No, this isn't some warped version of TV's Shark Tank. This is Camp BizSmart, a summer camp for kids ages 11-15 (there's a separate camp for teens 16-19) with a desire to make it in the business world.

“Our kids are going to graduate from high school and college and end up being hired by a company that no one knows, working on a product that doesn’t exist yet,” says Camp BizSmart co-founder Peggy Gibbs. “How do you do that?”

Started in 2008 by Gibbs and her husband Michael, Camp BizSmart is a live learning setting where hard-working youngsters acquire skills for a successful future. Using their cumulative business experience and networks acquired from working for Fortune 500 companies, at non-profits and in education, the Gibbeses have created a unique setting where they can share their knowledge and experience.

Each year’s camp features local, highly vetted and successful CEOs presenting business cases to kids and challenging them to create viable new products. In 2015 Zepp Labs asked campers to design a wearable device that helps lower sports injuries for teens. Xicato, a company specializing in LED lights, asked for a hospital lighting system that is suited to patient needs, promotes healing, and supports staff performance.

These are tough challenges, but they're very real ones—and that’s the point. “The modern curriculum doesn’t provide enough connection to real-world learning,” says Gibbs. “We wanted to develop something outside the usual educational system.”

The ZOG Theory of Life

Gibbs’s take on real-world learning is rooted in her childhood on a 100-acre Thompson seedless grape farm. Her work ethic comes from her father, who always managed a profit from his one-harvest-per-year crop. “When everything is tied to that, you can’t afford a misstep,” says Gibbs. “But the harder you work, the more you benefit.”

After marrying Michael, an industrial psychologist, the two moved many times. Relocating meant Gibbs frequently changed careers. “Each time I had to re-invent and sell myself all over again,” says Gibbs. “Do that enough times and you realize the importance of work ethic, attitude, and ability.”

Having discovered the necessary ingredients for success, Gibbs wants to teach them to the next generation. Like her high school civics teacher told her, “If you can show me that you know your topic, that it’s well-researched, and you can think critically about it,” says Gibbs, “I know you’ll be able to do it again.”

Camp BizSmart is about more than teaching professional skills, says Gibbs. It's about preparing kids for the challenges ahead with the simple acronym ZOG, which stands for “zest, optimism, and grit.” As she describes, zest is about passion for life and work, optimism is knowing you will succeed at your goals, and grit is never giving up—even if your group isn’t the one chosen to present before 250 venture capitalists in November. “If we are going to create young people that are successful and thriving in an uncertain and changing world,” says Gibbs, “they are going to need optimism and grit as qualities to pull upon.”