



MOLLY DEVORE, THE TIMES

Emmani Ellis delivers her elevator pitch during a Monday afternoon class at Indiana University Northwest. Ellis is one of 48 students participating in the university's new Start-up Business Success program, which is a partnership between IUN and the city of Gary.

# Small biz start-up class

**MOLLY DEVORE**  
molly.devore@nwi.com  
219-798-7150

GARY — J'Kia Tatum's road to becoming a small business owner has been anything but linear.

Thirteen years of domestic violence led her to use alcohol as a coping mechanism. She felt like she had no one to turn to and began contemplating suicide.

"Getting sober gave me back my purpose in life," Tatum said.

Gradually, she began filling a binder with ideas, not knowing she was putting together the ingredients for a business plan.

Today she is the founder of Transparent Progression, a life coaching organization that specializes in working with people who are struggling with addiction, domestic violence and reentry after incarceration. Though Transparent originally launched in 2018, Tatum said she knew "nothing about business" at the time so her plans were placed on hold.

With support from a new partnership between the city of Gary and Indiana University Northwest, Tatum and over 40 other entrepreneurs are beginning to turn their visions into

reality.

## Supporting start-ups

Housed in IUN's School of Business and Economics, the "Start-up Business Success Program" began Sept. 25 and will run for four weeks. The 48 participants attend weekly three-hour classes where they learn the basics of starting a business. Guest speakers have discussed the importance of marketing, money management and how to define your target audience. Students get regular feedback on their evolving business plans.

"Who wants to give their elevator pitch?" Jana Szostek asked the room full of students during the Monday afternoon class.

Emmani Ellis quickly volunteered, explaining her No Limit Living LLC real estate development business in a few short sentences. Ellis is a student at Purdue University majoring in mechatronics and robotics engineering with a certificate in entrepreneurship and innovation. Born and raised in Gary, Ellis created No Limit Living because being away at school showed her just how stark the disparities between her hometown and other communities are.

"I have this robotics degree, but

I care more about making an impact than chasing this big check," Ellis explained. "With real estate we have the power to change what the city looks like. When people see different, they believe different."

Ellis hopes to fix-up some of the city's blighted buildings and help drive economic stability through increased homeownership.

Szostek, the director of IUN's Center for Professional Development and the Small Business Academy, said the class features a wide-range of business ideas — everything from snow plowing to assisting the elderly.

Tieanna Walker first wrote her business plan for Walker P&E Services in 2014.

"It was nothing like the one I have now," she said with a laugh.

Though Walker always knew her business would focus on teaching youth life skills, the start-up class has helped her nail-down her target audience: foster children. Walker entered the foster care system when she was three and later worked as a case manager.

These experiences showed her "the flaws in the system." Walker said children in foster care often don't have anyone teaching them about things like financial literacy

or career development.

The start-up class is part of city's larger small business grant program. Over the winter, Mayor Jerome Prince and the Gary Common Council approved using some of the American Rescue Plan Act funding the city was awarded to support small businesses and nonprofits. Ultimately 90 small businesses were awarded over \$1.7 million and 30 nonprofits were awarded \$487,637.

At the end of the IUN course, a select number of start-ups will also received grant funding. Arlene Colvin, director of Gary's Community Development Department, said \$350,000 has been set aside for start-ups.

A review committee, which includes members of the city's administration, the Common Council and IUN, will review the student's business plans to determine who gets funding. Students will also present their plans during an Oct. 25 vendor showcase. The showcase will take place from 7 to 9 p.m. in IUN's Library Conference Center, room 105. Members of the public are invited to attend.

Colvin said the city plans on pursuing additional grants to continue the small business support program.