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Junior Achievement was the right way to start

On the Business Beat
By Paul Dodson

Since this is my last Business Beat column, I decided to reminisce about a turning point in my life.

Back in 1956, when I was a junior at Benton Harbor High School, I had the good fortune to be involved in a Junior Achievement company.

Our company, Achiever Radio Corp., turned out to be one of the top Junior Achievement companies in the nation that year.

Junior Achievement was a life-changing experience for me, having grown up in a tough part of a bare-knuckle town.

In those days, Junior Achievement helped groups of young people set up real businesses that would last throughout the school year and then be disbanded.

Most of the companies were involved in manufacturing items for sale. Our company was different. We put on a radio show for three hours each Saturday morning, broadcasting over WSJM, an AM station in St. Joseph.

There were about 30 members in this company. Two of us actually worked on the air. That included me as newscaster and Steve (I forget his last name) as comedian and disc jockey.

In addition to having company members from Benton Harbor High School, we also had members from the three other high schools in the community. All club members helped collect news throughout the week from their schools and also gathered musical requests for our disc jockey.

We soon developed a strong listenership among young people, as we broadcast sports news and school events news while playing the music teen-agers requested.

Company members sold stock, at 50 cents per share, to set up the company and to provide funds for buying air time from the radio station. Members also performed all other jobs in the company, under the mentorship of an adult business executive, Mr. Troost.

Achiever Radio Corp. was especially successful in selling advertisements for the radio show. Our top salesman was able to get accounts with biggies such as Whirlpool Corp., Coca-Cola, and many other companies.

Soon we were rolling in dough. We made so much money that we paid wages to each company member, paid end-of-the year bonuses to each member and returned a 200 percent dividend to our stockholders.

So what's the point?

Economic education is a wonderful thing that pays strong dividends throughout life. On top of that, opportunities like this can help even kids growing up in a tough part of town.

Real-life work experience is extremely valuable to young people.

I have had wonderful experiences and have learned a lot in my 43 years as a journalist. I'm grateful to the people who helped me along the way and I'm particularly grateful to Junior Achievement for giving me the start.