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LOGAN SQUARE & HUMBOLDT PARK Food & Drink

Here's A Cool Summer Job For Teens That Doesn't Stink (They Make Soap)



By [Janet Rausa Fuller](#)

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DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller

AVONDALE — Bella Ramirez could have washed dishes at [her family's restaurant](#) in Logan Square to earn money this summer.

Instead, the 16-year-old spends 15 hours a week researching the medicinal uses of plants and herbs, harvesting sage and thyme and calculating profit margins.

It's all in a day's work for Ramirez and the other teen interns of [Ruckus Entrepreneurs](#), a program of [Concordia Place](#) in Avondale.

The program employs 18 teens at a time, for three sessions a year, to make, market and sell a line of **bath and body products** using herbs they grow, dehydrate and infuse into oils. At \$10 an hour, it beats scooping fries, they say.



Teens review the method for making their Prestigious Pear Soap on a recent evening. [DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller]

“It helps with math. It helps you with teamwork and communicating with others. That’s a life skill we all need. And then you learn to make soap, and that’s really cool,” said Ramirez, who will be a junior at Von Steuben.

“I don’t think any of my friends are making products and in charge of marketing and figuring out what to name them and what they should look like,” said 18-year-old Alessandra Villafane of Melrose Park.

The teens maintain two gardens, one in a corner of the play lot at Concordia, 3300 N. Whipple St., and the other larger one at Carl Von Linne Elementary one block east on Sacramento.

Since the program’s inception in 2010, they have developed 20 products bearing the Ruckus label: soaps, salves, deodorants and lip balms (their best seller at \$3 a tube).



Ruckus Entrepreneurs products rely on locally grown and organic ingredients. [DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller]

The graphics are catchy and the names are cheeky — Bergamot Thyme Bomb shea balm, Pearapalooza lip balm — and they're free of the chemicals found in mass-produced brands.

What they don't grow, they buy locally or opt for organic. Some of the honey they use comes from a beehive on the roof of Von Linne.

[Local Foods](#) in Bucktown recently started carrying Ruckus products after seeing them at the [Good Food Festival](#) in March.

The teens also run an [Etsy page](#), and on the second Saturday of every month they do a pop-up booth at a Starbucks on the North Side. The location changes each month. Last week, they were at the Starbucks at Southport Avenue and Roscoe Street. On Aug. 12, they'll be at the Lincoln/Damen/Irving store.



Jars of dried herbs from the gardens they keep are ready to be infused into oil. [DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller]

Gwyn Siebert, teen program manager at Concordia, said the Ruckus program came about as a way to hang on to the youths who outgrew the center's after-school program. (Concordia also runs a daycare and adult enrichment and senior wellness programs; 73 percent of the families they serve are low income.)

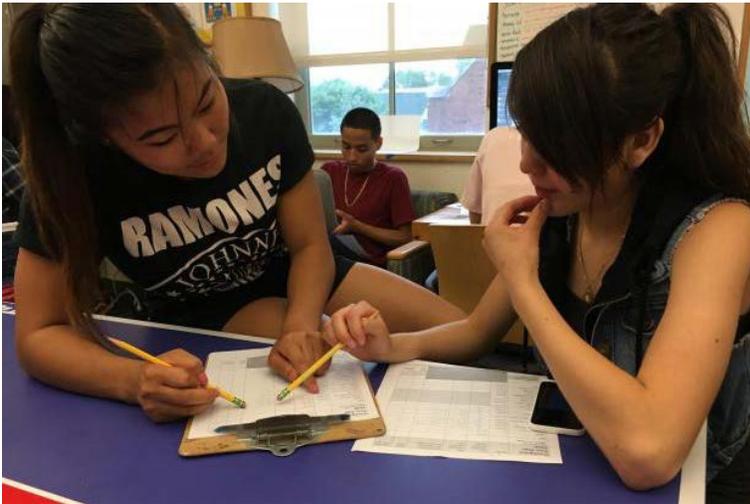
"Kids would leave us when they were 15, 16, because they needed a job. So it was, 'OK, how can we make jobs so they can stay?'" Siebert said.

The program launched with a few soaps, which were sold at the small farmers market onsite. The market was never profitable and closed after its third season, but the teens in the program kept making the soaps and found other retail partners such as Starbucks and After School Matters, which sponsors some of the interns.

Money is a constant topic. During the weekly sessions, participants talk price fluctuations of ingredients, product cost breakdown and personal finance in between brainstorming goofy but effective names for new products.

"They learn how all of our raw ingredients are commodities and so they see the cost of

lavender essential oil rising, and it starts making them aware of what's going on around the world," Siebert said.



Teens calculate the production costs of the soap they made during a recent session. [DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller] But making money isn't the chief goal.

For every bar of soap or tub of balm sold, one is donated to another organization with a cause. Currently, it's the [Night Ministry](#).

"Those who experience homelessness also need socks and lip balm and things that maybe you don't think about," Siebert said.

The Ruckus interns do know their product. Ask what role lye has in soap-making or what the [comfrey plant](#), an ingredient in their newly reformulated Soothing Salve, does to your body, they'll tell you.

"One benefit is it helps increase blood flow, to help the healing process, and it relaxes your muscles," said Rene Pineda, 19.

Pineda has been involved at Concordia since seventh grade, first in the after-school program, then in Ruckus when it started and now as a teen supervisor. His younger brother Hugo is an intern.



Ruckus interns prepare the infused oil base for their pear soap. Villafane also has been in Ruckus since 2010. Her mom works in the Concordia daycare.

Villafane said she finds herself reading labels when she's shopping in the body care aisle.

"You look at Carmex and you see all these ingredients you've never heard of," she said. "Being able to come here and know what's in everything, and deciding what goes in, it's cool."

Last summer, she and her mom also started growing tomatoes and cucumbers at home. This is Villafane's last turn at Ruckus. She graduated from Noble Street College Prep and is headed to the University of Illinois in the fall. She said she plans on studying business.



The mixture sits for two weeks to cure and harden into soap. [DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller].



Rene Pineda started at Concordia Place as a seventh-grader; he's now a teen supervisor. [DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller]



The Ruckus teens maintain a small garden at Concordia and another larger one at nearby Carl Von Linne Elementary. [DNAinfo/Janet Rausa Fuller]