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3 South Florida students featured in film about budding entrepreneurs

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Three teenage entrepreneurs delivered their elevator pitches to global audiences this week as cast members of a new documentary about young start-up starters.

Nineteen-year-old Jessica Cervantes and 15-year-old Alex Niles of Miami and Macalee Harlis, 18, of Fort Lauderdale, starred in *Ten9Eight: Shoot for the Moon*, a film tracing the journey of a dozen high schoolers vying for a \$10,000 prize in a national business plan competition.

The movie, which opened in select theaters last Friday, was screened at the University of Miami Wednesday evening as part of Global Entrepreneurship Week.

Alex's custom-built guitars, Harlis' light-sensitive football visors, and Cervantes' cupcakes-on-a-stick went up against eco-friendly dog biscuits, chemical-free lotion, organic candles and other products invented by students in other parts of the country. Each entrepreneur presented their business plan to industry executives in New York last fall during the national finals of the competition, which was sponsored by the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship, or NFTE.

"We are excited that South Florida was represented by three inspirational young entrepreneurs in the movie," said Alice Horn, executive director of NFTE's South Florida offices. "South Florida's diverse community is passionate about entrepreneurship. For many immigrants, it is often the path to the American Dream." Harlis, who graduated from Dillard High School and now attends the University of South Florida, created MAC Shields to help football players deal with changing environmental conditions during a game. The clear helmet visors turn dark when bright sun or lights shine on the field.

"My teacher had on transition glasses and as soon as I saw them I said, 'We've got to get those on a football helmet,'" the former football player told the judges during the event.

Alex, one of the youngest contest participants, won the regional competition with a business plan for custom guitars, which he made with help from his uncle. He won \$1,500 and a trip to New York to compete in the national competition, where \$10,000 was up for grabs.

"My guitars are better because I use better materials, better wood," he said. "I think my business plan is very original."

Cervantes, a graduate of John A. Ferguson High School, launched Popsy Cakes, which bakes popsicle-shaped cupcakes, last year after taking an entrepreneurship class. The class taught her how to turn her love of baking into a business, she said.

"My grandmother was actually one of my inspirations for my business," she said during the film. "She had a big, big sweet tooth. She taught me how to make millions of desserts."

The brightly colored cupcakes were a hit with young kids, who could enjoy sweets without making a mess, she said.

They were a hit with the contest's judges too. Cervantes beat out the other finalists for the \$10,000 grand prize.

During the competition, participants were grilled by business leaders like Home Depot founder Arthur Blank, Boston Celtics owner Wyc Grousbeck and USA network founder Kay Koplovitz. The judges asked questions about profit ratios, unexpected costs and marketing strategies.

"I actually think she has an actual scalable business there," Koplovitz told filmmakers after Cervantes gave her eight-minute presentation.

Since the competition, Cervantes has continued to juggle schoolwork and entrepreneurship. Currently a student at Miami Dade Honors College, she spends much of her free time working with a commercial bakery to expand her business.

Ten9Eight gets its title from statistics showing that a high school student drops out of school every nine seconds, the film's producer Mary Mazzio said in a statement.

"The message is a hopeful one during tough economic times," she said. "If this film inspires even one more child to stay in school and realize their dreams, then we have all won."

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