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Students learn about buying and selling at VCU event

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Recycling is hot, especially when trash turns into eco-friendly fashion.

Consider the motto of Beautiful Belts: You're never pretty unless you're recycling.

These soda-can tab tops threaded together into belts, necklaces and bracelets sold out fast at the 2009 Mini-Economy Market Day held at Virginia Commonwealth University's Siegel Center yesterday.

The price: \$2 to \$10 -- at first. Then demand took over.

Bracelets tripled in price to \$6 from \$2, and large belts hit \$14, \$4 more than the original price.

"We really had to up our prices at the end," said Emma Stith, 9, a fourth-grader at Greenfield Elementary School in Chesterfield County.

In its eighth season, the Mini-Economy day challenges students to come up with a product, make that item and then market it to an audience.

This year that audience consisted of nearly 900 students from 16 schools across the region. All made their own merchandise and used fake "VCU bucks" to spend on products created by other students.

"You can tell the classes have been talking about the environment," said Audrey K. Thompson, director of development for the Virginia Council on Economic Education, which organized the event with the VCU Center for Economic Education.

In this crowd, the young "greenpreneur" did well.

Business was brisk at the Whacky Shack by Nikki.

Nikki Nadolski, 9 and a fourth-grader at The Steward School in Henrico County, used old Popsicle sticks, wine corks, boxes and outdated compact discs to create his Whacky Box stress relievers.

The \$5 cubes had several faces: small drawn-on, Popsicle-lipped and painted (orange or yellow).

"You can scream at them, and they don't get mad at you," Nikki said. "They're great stress relievers."

Each cube cost about \$2 to make, he said.

That gave him room to change prices if he needed to, another business lesson.

"They learned what being an entrepreneur means as far as lowering the prices if they feel like it and raising it when they can," said Tom Shalaski, a volunteer from Rivers Edge Elementary School in Henrico.

International wares also captivated the attention of many students at market day, sponsored by First Market Bank and Ukrop's Super Markets Inc.

At C.S.A. Peruvian Instruments, the price for flutes fluctuated.

"How much?" a shopper asked.

Proprietor Adam Aboulhosn started at \$50 but quickly dropped the price when his customer began to walk away. "Wait, wait, we'll make it \$45," the fifth-grader at J.G. Hening Elementary School in Chesterfield said.

"Fifty," countered partner Stephen Williams. "We only have a few left."

The flutes started at \$35 but increased as people began to play these instruments made of painted PVC piping attached together by hot glue.

Were they authentic? "That's how they make them," Aboulhosn said, "only out of different material."

As in most years, items sold out fast. Many students did not have enough product to go around. "I learned you need change and you need to make a lot of merchandise," fifth-grader Shaun Rustin said.