

Young women learn of careers in commercial real estate



P. Kevin Morley / Times-Dispatch

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Published: August 1, 2009

Rising college freshmen girls took a stab at 'developing' vacant space in the former Miller & Rhoads building into mock commercial projects.

About 18 teenage girls were given the keys to several thousand square feet of prime retail property in the Miller & Rhoads building yesterday and told to turn it into a business.

The high school graduates, all headed to college, were part of a program designed to encourage young women to consider commercial real estate as a career option.

The young women were divided into groups and told to come up with plans to develop the space into a retail business. The groups were responsible for designing a coffee shop, hair salon and travel agency and finding a tenant.

What they did with the space and how they developed it was up to them.

The event was put on by CREW (Commercial Real Estate Women) Richmond, which is part of a national program that helps young women from economically challenged backgrounds consider careers in commercial real estate. They were participating in the Partnership for the Future program.

The teens spent the day at the old Miller & Rhoads, now the Hilton Garden Inn Richmond Downtown and Miller & Rhoads Residences.

After a morning panel discussion in which women who work in commercial real estate talked about their areas of expertise and why they chose the career, the students donned hard hats and toured the vacant storefront facing Broad Street.

Later, they presented their plans to other students and several experts on hand to mentor them.

Monique Johnson, who organized the day's event and is an underwriter for the Virginia Housing Development Authority, said the exercise was a good way to get the young women interested in a career dominated by men.

"Young ladies are not usually encouraged to explore these opportunities and often we end up in softer professions," she said.

"This program allows them to see that [commercial real estate] is something tangible they can look to," Johnson said.

Angela Harrison, an 18-year-old starting at Mary Baldwin College, said she enjoyed how complicated the process was.

"I like looking [at the empty space] and visualizing what it could be," she said.

Other students were hungry for customers.

The group developing the travel agency discussed how they could sell potential tenants on getting downtown clients, including offering discounts to local businesses, long-term contracts and winning travel accounts from executives.

"You want to make money and make your business successful," said 18-year-old Erika Pearson, who is headed to James Madison University.

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