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Recent MBA Grad Launches Playground Venture

Five years ago when Andrea Wenner '05 moved to New York City as a recent college graduate, she lived near an Upper East Side elementary school that had no access to a playground. "They would block off the street, and the kids would basically just hang out in the street for recess," Wenner recalls. "That struck me as sad and unusual, but I didn't really give it a whole lot of thought beyond that."

Then, while interning at a consulting firm last summer Wenner interviewed members of Take the Field, a nonprofit organization that had rebuilt more than 40 high school baseball fields through a combination of corporate sponsorships, private donations and matching grants from New York City. "I thought, why not do the same thing for playgrounds?" Wenner says. She did some research and discovered that the school in her old neighborhood was far from unique: more than 350 public elementary schools in the city lack playground space or have playgrounds in need of significant repair.

Last fall, as a student in Professor Cliff Schorer's Launching New Ventures class, Wenner wrote a business plan for Out2Play, a nonprofit playground venture. She further developed the idea in the spring semester while participating in the Entrepreneurial Greenhouse Program, a hands-on course that prepares students to start their own businesses. She received funding from the Greenhouse Program to attend a trade show in Phoenix, where she learned about playground construction.

For many of the schools that lack adequate playground facilities, financial constraints are a bigger obstacle than space constraints. Where possible, Out2Play will refurbish existing playgrounds or

transform unused asphalt parking lots into playgrounds. For schools that do not have access to land, Out2Play will build playgrounds on rooftops. Wenner plans to solicit community participation in each step of the process. To minimize design costs, stakeholders will choose among several basic models that can be quickly replicated.

Taking advantage of the Eugene M. Lang Center for Entrepreneurship's many resources for student entrepreneurs, Wenner obtained low-cost legal advice through the Sounding Board, a program that arranges one-on-one counseling sessions with faculty members and experienced business practitioners. She also got valuable feedback on her business plan from Amy Edwards '00, associate investment officer at the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone and a member of the Lang Center's Mentor Network.

Wenner won first prize in this year's Sheldon Seevak Real Estate Business Plan Competition, sponsored by the Paul Milstein Center for Real Estate. During the final round of the competition, she met last year's winner, Brian Steinwurtzel '04, who arranged to provide her with free office space through his employer, Newmark & Co., a real estate management firm.

Wenner also applied for financing from the Lang Fund, which makes investments of up to \$250,000 in promising student ventures. As a non-profit, Out2Play didn't fit the fund's traditional investment criteria, but Schorer was so excited about Wenner's business plan that he presented her idea to the Lang Fund board. As a result, board member Russell Carson '67, general partner in the private equity firm of Welsh, Carson, Anderson & Stowe and cochair of the School's board of overseers, pledged to fund Out2Play's first playground.

"I've found that people are happy to give me advice and happy to make introductions," Wenner says. She is currently looking for people with expertise in finance, marketing, fund-raising and community development to serve on Out2Play's board of directors. If you are interested in contributing to Out2Play in any capacity, please contact Wenner at AWenner05@gsb.columbia.edu.

Wenner encourages alumni who are thinking about starting a nonprofit to reach out to as many people as possible. "If people respond to your concept, they're very willing to help you and to

meet with you," she says. "I've yet to contact someone who said, 'No, I won't meet with you,' or 'I won't look at your executive summary.' I think that, for the most part, you find that people are happy to help and interested in seeing you succeed."

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