



PHOTO BY STEVE HENNING FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Annie O'Rourke of Essex Fells engages in an animated conversation with pedestrians in New York while DiMassimo Brand Advertising records her performance. The recent Cornell grad was chosen from among hundreds of applicants to compete for one open position.

How a graduate's job hunt became a matter of survival

Essex Fells woman wins contest for position with N.Y. ad agency

BY CARMEN JURI
STAR-L LEDGER STAFF

Annie O'Rourke would do anything to get a full-time job, so she packed her sleeping bag and toothbrush and headed to DiMassimo Brand Advertising in New York to live there for five days.

The Essex Fells resident, who shared the office quarters with seven other contestants, competed in the firm's version of TV's "Survivor" reality series and landed herself a \$37,500 job as an entry-level account executive.

She didn't have to grab for food or do senseless things in the African savanna. Contestants were given a stipend and it all took place in Manhattan.

There were no bags to eat, no extraordinary physical tests to overcome. She wasn't outclassed by her competitors. In fact, participants got a week-pass at Crunch Gym where they could work out and shower even during.

Still, the task was grueling. "The floor is not comfortable at all. It's mostly wooden and ce-

ment," said O'Rourke, 22, about her sleeping arrangements.

But one night, she won the right to sleep on an air mattress.

"I was honored and flattered that my peers chose me as the one to get it," she said, though her nod was short-lived. "It was broken and deflated an hour into my sleeping."

The contestants arrived cozy last Monday morning ready for the challenge.

Here's how it worked: The contestants worked together as a team (eight contestants were divided into two teams of four) and separately for one week on advertising challenges such as "The Buzz Challenge for Church Fitness," where they were given a budget of \$500 and were expected to develop and implement a campaign that gets "buzz" throughout New York City. They also had to answer a phone call dealing with a "mock client issue."

"They weren't getting a lot of sleep, which stimulates the life of a real ad person. It's round (See SURVIVOR, Page 23)



Taking advantage of every moment, Annie O'Rourke and other job seekers work on ideas while riding the subway in New York City.

SURVIVOR

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Woman wins job with ad agency

the clock and you never work on one thing at a time," said creative director and founder Mark DiMassimo. He said the survival theme is reflective of the firm's own survival as an independent ad agency at a time when others in the field have merged in order to survive or have gone out of business.

But he makes distinctions between the TV show and his competition.

"First of all, it's not a reality TV show, it's a contest leading to a job. The goal of TV is to create drama. Our goal is to find the best candidate," he said. "They don't vote off people. It's a selection committee that includes my partner Lee Goldstein, two account people and myself."

DiMassimo led an "advertising aerobics" class at Crunch Fitness, where players changed directions quite a bit, where their spines need to be very supple and strong, but not rigid, where they could bend over backward for clients.

The other contestants were Farah-France Marcel, 25, of Laurelton, N.Y.; Seth Kaplan Gaffney, 21, of Dix Hills, N.Y.; Michelle Lynne Mandara, 22, of Darien, Conn.; Bjorn Farrugia, 26, of Melbourne, Australia; Karine Ng, 23, of Palo Alto, Calif.; Louie S. Cordova, 24, of Santa Fe, N.M.; and Hansen Yan, 22, of Flushing, N.Y.

"They were all terrific. Not a dud in the pack," DiMassimo said.



Karine Ng, left, Annie O'Rourke and other competitors take a lunch break.

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The company received hundreds of applicants and it was hard to narrow it down to the 10 who were invited, he added. The range of talent was impressive.

Contestants had to send an ad of themselves in a videotape.

"When I saw these videos, I thought, 'I wouldn't want that person as a competitor,'" he said.

As part of her video, O'Rourke served herself a bowl of "cereal" that really consisted of marbles.

"I continued speaking and made no reference or reaction to them. I was making something or-

inary into something extraordinary," she said.

"I made everything in my video out of the ordinary and subtle. I knew I was presenting this to an ad agency that has an eye. I dressed up in tribal garb and showed them I have no shame, even though I have pride," she said.

O'Rourke graduated in May from Cornell University with a degree in English with a concentration in visual studies.

"I always wanted to be in advertising. It seemed the industry allowed me to be creative, write and

think of ideas," she said.

Each night two applicants were voted out of the office until O'Rourke, the person left standing at the end of the week, was hired. Oct. 1 will be her first day.

"Friday turned into an introspective day, how did I feel about the whole experience, what did I learn. It was an emotional day for me, realizing how much I learned about myself, what I really wanted," she said. "It ended in the best possible way."