

GRAND ISLAND, N.Y. (WKBW) - Gabby Bergstrom, Luke Hess and Lauren Merletti are sophomores at Grand Island Senior High School. At 16, 15 and 15 years old respectively, none of the students has their driver license. But, the three teenagers are newly minted business owners. Casey's Cabana at 1437 Ferry Road on Grand Island opened Memorial Day weekend.

"As entrepreneurs and startups, this is it. They're doing the real thing," explained Cheryl Chamberlain, a business teacher at Grand Island Senior High School and the DECA advisor. DECA is a business and marketing club at the school. It's a national organization and also where the dream for Casey's Cabana was born. "We wanted to do something fun and, so far, this has been a really fun opportunity for us," Bergstrom said. "It's been fun just kind of starting from the ground up and see where we can go."

The three friends all compete at the state level for DECA and it was on a bus after one of those competitions where they got the idea to start a business of their own. After finding a location on Craigslist and getting some support from their parents and the Grand Island School and Business Alliance, that dream was on its way to reality. "It has that weird feeling of growing up pretty fast, but it's also getting into what you love," Hess said. "[It's] like having a job when you're a teenager, except the experience is so different because you're actually running it and making the decisions," Merletti said.

The three teenagers had to navigate all the obstacles of starting a business. Some of those, like opening a business account at a bank, were made even more difficult due to their age. They also, with some help from family and friends, repainted and remodeled the storefront. The owners expect to hire five new employees once the full summer hours are in effect.

"I couldn't be more proud of them," Chamberlain said. "They really have taken what was a laughable idea on a bus ride to the next level, which is ownership of their own business." Casey's Cabana, like the school store and concession stand, is named after George Casey, a former school board member and strong supporter of the business program in Grand Island schools. While the students finish up the school year, the restaurant is open Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Starting June 23, it will be open the same hours seven days a week. For more information, you can visit Casey's Cabana on Facebook.