

LaunchVT announces finalists for cash, prizes



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(Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

LaunchVT, the statewide business pitch competition, announced this year's contestants on Tuesday at the Vermont Center for Emerging Technology on Main Street in Burlington.

"This is our third year and every year our applications get stronger, which makes it more difficult for us to select our finalists," said Lee Bouyea of FreshTracks Capital in Shelburne.

Bouyea is chair of the LaunchVT Advisory Board. He said there were 70 applicants for this year's competition, from which six finalists were chosen. The finalists are: Alice & the Magician, LaunchPad, Medsinc, Navali Bags, PunchPass and Renoun.

The winner of the competition will receive \$30,000 in cash and more than \$45,000 of in-kind support. The competition also includes a second place prize for the first time — \$15,000 in cash and \$25,000 worth of in-kind support.

The second place prize is the result of a partnership with Vermont EPSCoR, and is called the VT EPSCoR Innovate Cash Prize. EPSCoR stands for the Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research and is designed in conjunction with Vermont's universities to fulfill the National Science Foundation's mandate to promote scientific progress nationwide.



LaunchVT makes its biggest prize announcement since the business pitch competition's inception three years ago. LaunchVT also announced which contestants have been selected for this year's competition.

Patrick Clemens, cyber specialist for Vermont EPSCoR, said the organization saw LaunchVT as an opportunity to "invest in these new quick-moving entrepreneurs."

"We thought of creating our own program, but it was much easier to partner with LaunchVT because of the great proposals they attract every year," Clemens said.

Alice & the Magician, launched by brothers Sam and Aaron Wisniewski, offers so-called "edible fragrances" to enhance the experiences of eating and drinking.

"Scent is the only one of your senses directly linked to memory and the emotion part of your brain," Aaron Wisniewski said. "It can really bring you back, or create and imprint a memory immediately. It's an experience rather than a condiment, not to knock salt and pepper."

Aaron Wisniewski compared the effect to that "beautiful stellar moment" when you slice into a grapefruit, or take a chocolate cake out of the oven. The edible fragrances are misted over a drink or food before eating or drinking.

LaunchPad is a web app for teachers that streamlines curriculum planning in a new educational environment of personalized learning, said Brian Boyes, who launched the company with partner Peter Stratman.

Both Boyes and Stratman are on leave from their positions as teachers at Cabot Middle School, thanks to a grant from the Rowland Foundation in Manchester to allow them to develop LaunchPad.

Boyes said the mission of LaunchPad is to help teachers become more proficient and help students have an engaging experience in school.

"We're crowdsourcing innovation in education," Boyes said.

Medsinc is a "medical intelligence platform" that can be used on a smartphone to input clinical data, analyze that data and generate a severity of illness assessment, then provide location-specific recommendations for management of the most common causes of death in children, said Dr. Barry Heath, a professor of pediatrics at The University of Vermont College of Medicine.

Heath was representing the pediatrician who developed Medsinc, Dr. Barry Finette, at Tuesday's press conference. The software is intended for those parts of the world with little medical infrastructure.

"We're trialing our algorithms here and have trialed them in Bangladesh," Heath said. "I was in Ecuador three weeks ago and got buy-in from them."

Navali Bags, founded by Jessica Miro and Nick Lockwood, offers a line of washed canvas bags and accessories with leather trim, and antique brass findings reminiscent of a vintage sailing vessel. Lockwood said the company launched in 2011 and has a "dedicated cult following on Reddit."

PunchPass, developed by Chris Patton, is web software fitness studios and independent instructors use to run their businesses. PunchPass tracks the passes they sell to customers, their class attendance and enables online booking and pass purchases.

"We got a lot of work left to do but we're on parity with other products out there," Patton said.

The final contestant, Renoun skis, use a new material that allows its skis to instantly change in dampness depending on conditions.

"This means a ski with an ability to act stiff when needed, and soft when desired," the company explained in a statement.

The final pitch competition will take place on May 7 at Main Street Landing on the Burlington waterfront. The Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce hosts LaunchVT, and FreePressMedia is a sponsor. For more information, visit LaunchVT.com

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