

EagleTribune.com, North Andover, MA

October 14, 2012

Local entrepreneurs have their eyes on a bigger prize

Sandbox initiative helps give a boost to business startup ideas

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The Eagle-Tribune

--- — Harlyene D. Goss was on the phone with her elderly father who lives in Florida one day recently when he made a remark that got her thinking.

“ ‘You know mom is the keeper of all the information,’ he said, and I said, ‘Yeah, that’s not new,’ ” Goss said. “And he said, ‘But if I call 911, I don’t know where to find anything.’ ”

The medical technologist from Methuen wondered how to organize critical medical and insurance information for her parents so it could be handy in case of emergencies. A search of available products did not satisfy her, so she came up with her own idea for a kit to hold paper and electronic copies of those documents.

But then she ran into the big problem: Where does the money for materials and conferences and distribution come from?

Last month, Goss was one of three local women with entrepreneurial ideas who got a boost with grants to help them move their projects from idea to reality, and this week they have a shot at a much bigger prize.

The Merrimack Valley Sandbox Entrepreneur Program, based at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, awarded them grants ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 as part of what they called a “pitch program,” where dozens of people entered their ideas for a chance at a little start-up cash.

This Thursday, the three award winners will be among a group pitching their ideas to a panel of “celebrity” judges, who will decide which plan will receive a \$10,000 grant.

“I’m going to be exhibiting at a conference that targets home-care professionals. I wouldn’t be able to afford it otherwise,” Goss said. Her idea, which she pitched with seven other finalists in Lawrence on Sept. 13, earned her the “wild card” grant of \$500.

Jessica K. Wilson, a Lawrence resident who works in Lowell, took first place and a \$1,000 grant for an idea to create a training and entrepreneur program for people interested in using video, the Internet and social media in a for-profit business idea.

Wilson, executive director of Lowell Telecommunications Corp., a non-profit local public access channel, said LTC lends video equipment to people and organizations, but has a strict rule against lending for uses

that generate a profit for the borrower. So she tried to think of a way to help people looking for video equipment for their own business ideas.

”We don’t want to totally alienate them from the station because they contribute in a variety of ways,” Wilson said. “But what if instead of looking at it as a problem, we look at it as an opportunity and help people who are entrepreneurial get on their feet and start own business? We could do the technical training and business end of it.”

”The Videographer Startup Boost would have remained an idea without the Sandbox pitch contest,” said Wilson. “If we win the \$10K on October 18th, the possibilities for expanding this program are huge.”

This winter, the station will begin its first program, which will last three to four months, with about a dozen interested people. The grant, done through LTC, helped with building a curriculum, beginning marketing and lining up area organizations to commission video pieces the students can work on. Staff at the station will help with training.

The big pitch this week would help them make it into a sustainable, tuition-based program that could be expanded to other Merrimack Valley communities with local access television stations such as Lawrence, Methuen and Haverhill, Wilson said.

Goss’ emergency medical kit idea includes a vinyl pouch to store copies of important medical documents such as lists of medications and allergies, medical history, living wills, health care proxies and copies of insurance cards. One of the kits, designed for family information, includes a USB memory stick, so electronic copies of the documents can be kept with the paper copies.

”I knew what I wanted (rescuers) to have available if, God forbid, something happened,” said Goss, owner of HD Merrimack in Lawrence. “And I couldn’t find it on the marketplace.”

Goss assembles the kits in her work space in Lawrence and said the bigger prize could help her reach more home health care companies and personalize kits to the companies’ needs and their clients’ needs.

Nicolette Nordin Heavey of Andover, the owner of Stories in the Streets who received a \$750 grant for placing second and an additional \$500 grant for being judged “fan favorite,” has been a professional storyteller for more than 10 years. In Lawrence and other communities in the area, she takes a quilt out puts on an active presentation of a story either on the street or in preschools. The key is the connection between oral storytelling and literacy in young children, she said.

One example she cited was a story she told in one of the preschools that included a snowy fir tree at night, when the stars looked like they rested on the branches and needles. “And a 4-year-old who had been building pictures in head, she popped up and said, ‘Like a string of lights,’” Nordin Heavey said. “And that’s a metaphor any fifth grade teacher would love to hear from a student. That’s how performance storytelling engages the mind.”

Nordin Heavey’s idea is to start a team storyteller program in one of the city’s middle schools with Project FOCUS. The program will train middle school students how to tell a joke, a rhyme, a folk tale and a fable, and eventually have them tell a story with her in front of younger children.

If her idea is awarded the \$10,000 grant next week, she said she would like to expand the idea to include high school students and possibly to become a summer job program.

Anita Worton, chairwoman of Solectria Renewables in Lawrence and one of the pitch contest judges last month, said the judges looked not just at which ideas had the most promise, but also the ones that were at the right stage of development where the \$1,000 or \$500 would give the most bang for the buck.

”In all the cases, we felt they could make the most use of the award and have the most meaningful change in their ideas in terms of bringing them to the next level,” Worton said. “There were a lot of ideas that were well thought out and more professional, but we felt they were further along in the process. For someone who’s farther along in the process, \$1,000 doesn’t have as much of an impact.”

The Merrimack Valley Sandbox is a project that aims to connect and encourage entrepreneurs in the Lowell and Lawrence area. It is part of the Deshpande Foundation and housed at the Merrimack Valley Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at UMass Lowell.

Thursday's "celebrity" judges will include, Jack Clancy, CEO of Enterprise Bank; entrepreneur Desh Deshpande, Co-Chairman of President Obama's National Advisory Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship; Tom First, Co-Founder, Nantucket Nectars; Ira Jackson, former executive vice president of BankBoston; Bill O'Donnell, chief architect behind Kayak, and Julia Silverio, founder of Julia's Travel and Silverio Insurance.

"I know Lowell and Lawrence are full of creative and clever people, so I'm really looking forward to hearing the region's top entrepreneurial ideas," said Deshpande, founder of Cascade Communications and Sycamore Networks.

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