



SIUE alum's Saving Grace Beauty wins first round of InnovateHER Contest

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Metro East resident and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville graduate Erica Harriss has captured first prize in the local InnovateHER Business Challenge and hopes to vie for a spot in the national competition in early 2016.

InnovateHER is a business plan contest organized by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). The national competition is open to entrepreneurs and small business owners with products and services that help impact and empower the lives of women and families.

In early September, the SBA chose the Illinois Metro East Small Business Development Center at SIUE to host a local business plan competition in the first stage of the Challenge. More than 200 entities across the U.S. were selected as host organizations with a total of four in the St. Louis metro area.

Harriss, founder of [Saving Grace Beauty LLC](#), submitted her online application in October. She pitched her business concept to a panel of five judges in mid-November. On Friday, Dec. 4, the judges presented a \$2,500 prize provided by Centru Bank to Harriss as the unanimous winner. In addition, Harriss will receive an array of in-kind legal services from Mathis, Marifian and Richter Ltd. of Belleville.

The winning pitch by Harriss centered on a product that she developed and created in her basement in Glen Carbon. Saving Grace Hair Powder is an all-natural, daily-use hair care product that easily covers growing roots and extends the time between hair coloring treatments. Saving Grace Hair Powder comes in four basic colors that address the needs of most female and male customers.

Local InnovateHER winners are automatically nominated as semi-finalists and will compete for 10 finalist spots in the national competition on March 17 in Washington, D. C. InnovateHER's national sponsor, Microsoft, will award a total of \$70,000 to the top three winners.

Robert Steiner, SBA's Illinois district director, called InnovateHER a tremendous opportunity for Illinois entrepreneurs. "We're thrilled to have SIU Edwardsville as a local host and the opportunity to showcase our state's most talented innovators," said Steiner.

Harriss, who officially began selling her products in November 2014, says the Illinois Metro East SBDC was instrumental in assisting her. "Small Business Specialist Jo Ann DiMaggio May and Director Patrick McKeehan have been extremely helpful, providing expertise on business plan development, marketing and more," Harriss said. "I realized this was a real opportunity when a local hair salon called and asked about carrying my products. My next step was to attend a workshop at SIUE for starting a new business and get the help I needed to launch my startup."

Patrick McKeehan, director of the Illinois Metro East SBDC, considers the InnovateHER Business Challenge, much like SIUE's Metro East Start-Up Challenge, a highly effective means to foster entrepreneurial activities in the region. "Erica Harriss' Saving Grace Beauty is a great example of how the SBDC is able to elevate a hardworking startup to a national stage," said McKeehan.

The Metro East SBDC assists entrepreneurs like Erica Harriss as well as existing business owners operating in the nine-county Metro East region of Calhoun, Jersey, Madison, Bond, Clinton, St. Clair, Washington, Monroe and Randolph. It enhances the region's economic interests by providing one-stop assistance to individuals by means of counseling, training, research and advocacy for new ventures and existing small businesses.

SBDCs in Illinois are funded, in part, through a cooperative agreement between the U.S. Small Business Administration, Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity and [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#) as a service to the community. To learn how these no-cost services may help your business venture, contact the [Metro East SBDC](#) at (618) 650-2929 or sbdcedw@gmail.com.