

SBDC clients win top awards at East St. Louis Initiative's First Pitch Contest

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EDWARDSVILLE - Two Illinois Metro East Small Business Development Center clients were among three winners in the first regional business plan pitch competition hosted by the [East St. Louis Initiative](#).

Formed in 2016, the Initiative engages local entrepreneurs from East St. Louis with Washington University St. Louis student teams to make micro-enterprises sustainable. On Friday, Aug. 26, entrepreneurs competed before a panel of judges in the Skandalaris Center for Interdisciplinary Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Washington University. Within a two-minute time limit, each entrepreneur shared his or her idea as well as the financial plan for funding the business.

SBDC client David Southerland, owner of Dave's Auto Repair in Cahokia, took second place for his plan to add fuel cell installation to his business. Fuel cell vehicles use hydrogen gas to power an electric motor. Unlike conventional vehicles that run on gasoline or diesel, fuel cell cars and trucks combine hydrogen and oxygen to produce electricity, which runs the motor. Southerland said the pitch contest's \$100 cash prize and three months of office space at The Biz Spot – a small business incubator in downtown St. Louis – will propel his new company's initiative forward.

“I recently participated in the pitch competition at Washington University in St Louis,” Southerland said. “It was a wonderful opportunity for not only me, but also anyone with an idea for a business venture, to have a sounding board and make contacts to further their ideas. I am grateful for the invitation and look forward to continued collaboration at future events.”

SBDC client Brandon Walker, founder of Positive & Productive Innovations, a Belleville-based energy efficiency consulting firm, took third place. Walker also received a \$100 cash prize.

“Getting a chance to pitch my venture and ideas was like none other,” said Walker. “It was my first time being involved in such an event. It was an awesome experience to receive positive feedback that will prepare me for future ventures”

[Desserts Out The Jar and More](#) founder and SIUE alum Yashica McKinney earned first place. The East St. Louis native earned a bachelor's in kinesiology and health education in 2012 from the SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior. She appreciated the collaboration and support of her alma mater in the experience.

Wyatt Gutierrez is a Washington University graduate student earning an advanced law degree and an MBA. Gutierrez is one of several graduate students who are mentoring East St. Louis entrepreneurs as they learn how to pitch their business concepts and prepare to launch their companies. Together they founded the nonprofit East St. Louis Initiative nearly one year ago.

“I attended both of the information sessions - one in St. Louis and one in East St. Louis - that were offered to help prepare these contestants for the pitch contest,” said Gutierrez. “As Washington University graduate students, Gulcan Yayla, Kirtika Singh, Biva Rajbhandari, and myself, together with the Balsa Foundation, The Mission Center and the Illinois Metro East SBDC have been coaching entrepreneurs in developing marketing surveys, navigating regulatory requirements, preparing financial reports, pitching and funding their business startups.”

Five regional business counseling and support organizations collectively funded the Initiative's first business pitch contest: IL Metro East SBDC, PNC Foundation, The Biz Spot, The Mission Center and Balsa Foundation.

Jo Ann DiMaggio May, interim director of the IL Metro East SBDC, said the organizations also hosted two informational sessions in August to assist competitors in preparing their pitches.

"I am truly impressed with the innovation and entrepreneurial spirit of the participants who engaged in our first East St. Louis Initiative pitch competition," said DiMaggio May. "The Illinois Metro East SBDC is proud to be part of this valuable initiative. Partnering with these bright Washington University MBA students has been a wonderful experience. It truly demonstrates how our area is becoming more regional in bringing resources to Illinois and Missouri."

A panel of four judges provided feedback to competitors at the event. Washington University Faculty Adviser Chris Miller, founder and CEO of The Mission Center L3C, served as one of the judges. A lifelong Metro East resident and former community organizer in and around East St. Louis, Miller said it was exciting to see impressive entrepreneurs emerge from Southwestern Illinois.

"The work of the East St. Louis Initiative and the support of Wash U is invaluable for the incredibly deserving East St. Louis entrepreneurs," Miller said. "I was honored to be a part of their collective impact."

[The Metro East SBDC](#) assists entrepreneurs and existing businesses located in the nine-county Metro East region of Calhoun, Jersey, Madison, Bond, Clinton, St. Clair, Washington, Monroe and Randolph. It is a service to the community supported, in part, by the U.S. Small Business Administration, Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity, and [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#).

By aiding entrepreneurs and companies in defining their path to success, the SBDC Network positively impacts Southwestern Illinois by strengthening the business community, creating and retaining jobs and encouraging capital investment. 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. When appropriate, the Metro East SBDC strives to affiliate its ties to the region to support the goals and objectives of both the [SIUE School of Business](#) and the University at large. To learn more, contact the Metro East SBDC at [\(618\) 650-2929](tel:6186502929) or sbdcedw@gmail.com.