



Junior Code Academy is 2016 Metro East Startup Challenge winner

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EDWARDSVILLE - Junior Code Academy (JCA) grabbed this year's top cash prize of \$10,000 in the **Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Metro East Startup Challenge (MESC)**. The regional business plan competition for entrepreneurs and startups announced its three cash prize winners today.

Junior Code Academy has been in operation for one year, and is the brainchild of founder **Michael Pedersen**.

It teaches kids life-changing computer skills.

“By 2020, there will be 1.4 million unfilled computer science jobs,” said Pedersen, whose idea for the business came from teaching his 13-year-old daughter. The cash award will enable JCA to intensify its targeted marketing efforts and expand into additional markets including the Metro East and Greater St. Louis.

The top three teams presented their winning business concepts at the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois Board of Directors meeting Friday morning before a live audience of Leadership Council members and invited guests. The member-based organization includes more than 200 leaders in business, industry, education, government and labor.

Jam Innovations, founded by SIUE mechanical engineering students Cameron Tanzyus and John Fulton, was runner-up with one of two \$5,000 cash prizes. The duo is in the process of patenting its interlocking wheelchair ramp made of rigid polyurethane resin. The ADA-compliant invention is an alternative to expensive wooden ramps or aluminum ramps, the latter of which is susceptible to being stolen. The freshmen plan to use the prize award to complete their prototype.

Grassroots Grocery, an existing Alton-based local grocery, grabbed third place and another \$5,000 prize to expand and rent its commercial kitchen to food-based entrepreneurs.

JoAnn DiMaggio May, SBDC interim director and MESC co-organizer along with SBDC graduate student Kaitlin Beasely is thrilled with this year’s level of participation and the quality of ideas presented.

“I am humbly impressed by the large number of superior quality concepts that were introduced,” said May. “It made our evaluation process and final decision on awarding the prize money extremely difficult.”

Semi-finalists in the 2016 Metro East Startup Challenge included:

Drone Zone, James Lawrence and Warren Benning, co-founders

EatKidFriendly, Brandon Lance, founder

Farmhouse Harvest & Green Market, founders Robyn and Emma Starkey

P.G. Shimmer, Jac’qualene Greene and Harold Greene, co-founders

Saving Grace Beauty, Erica Harriss, founder

For the third straight year, the Illinois Metro East Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at SIUE, along with strong support from various business and economic development partners, has spearheaded the Metro East Startup Challenge.

The SBDC organized a group of business mentors and startup advisors to assist the 20 MESC contestants with their business plans. For the third consecutive year, PNC Bank and University Park at SIUE were the Startup Challenge's premier sponsors, and continue to support entrepreneurial activities in Southwestern Illinois.

Other sponsors included SIUE's School of Business, St. Louis Regional Chamber, the City of Edwardsville, the City of Columbia, the Riverbend Growth Association and Artigem. The Illinois Metro East Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at SIUE and East St. Louis organized and managed the competition with the support of the SIUE School of Business.

"Our goal is to continue to increase awareness and reach of this Challenge's vast opportunities," DiMaggio May said. "The Startup Challenge is becoming a recognized fixture in the region's entrepreneurial community, and the Illinois Metro East SBDC at SIUE looks forward to its continued growth and success."

The [Illinois Metro East SBDC](#) at SIUE works directly with entrepreneurs and small business owners located in the nine-county Metro East region of Calhoun, Jersey, Madison, Bond, Clinton, St. Clair, Washington, Monroe and Randolph. It is funded through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Small Business Administration, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#) as a service to the region's entrepreneurial and business community.

The Illinois SBDC Network provides one-stop assistance to individuals by means of counseling, training, research and advocacy for new ventures and existing small businesses. As a key member of this Network, the Illinois Metro East SBDC delivers these important services to its clients while supporting the goals and objectives of both the [SIUE School of Business](#) and the University at large. To learn how these no-cost services may help your small business, contact the Illinois Metro East SBDC at [\(618\) 650-2929](tel:6186502929) or sbdcedw@gmail.com.