

Young Professional Program of the Year: MYPN Start-Up Challenge



From left: Kelley Muir, founder of Float Left Labs, a 2009 Start-Up Challenge winner; Phil Ryan, CEO of Merchants Automotive Group in Hooksett and a Start-Up Challenge judge; E. J. Powers and David Allen, co-chairs of MYPN's Start-Up Challenge committee; and Allison Grappone of Nearby Registry, the 2011 Start-Up Challenge winner.

While NH's young professional groups exist to help people connect, the Manchester Young Professional Network has taken it to another level by helping entrepreneurs connect with the capital and resources they need to bring their dreams to fruition. Each year, the MYPN NH Start-Up Challenge provides one startup with \$25,000 in seed money and in-kind professional services through a competitive application process. Since its inception in 2008, the Start-Up Challenge has provided \$100,000 to four NH businesses. "This really allows people to take that leap," says E.J. Powers, co-chair of the Start-Up Challenge committee, immediate past chair of MYPN and vice president for strategic communications at Montagne Communications in Manchester. "This is really the first opportunity we've been able to provide a course in starting your own business and charting your own future. It helped put MYPN on the map."

From the 50 to 60 annual applicants, the list is winnowed to a select group of semifinalists. This year five people were chosen for the

semi-final round. They attended the Stonyfield Farm Entrepreneurial Institute, where they were paired with SCORE mentors to create business plans. The budding entrepreneurs then pitched their ideas to a panel of business and community leaders on why they should receive \$25,000.

The challenge is open to entrepreneurs statewide and semifinalists have included both young and mid-career professionals. "It's a good walking off point for going into entrepreneurship," adds David Allen, an attorney at Sheehan, Phinney Bass + Green in Manchester and co-chair with Powers of the Start-Up Challenge. Allen says the competition is especially helpful as bank and angel financing are harder to come by for new businesses.

Of the four previous winners, one is going strong, one is in development and a third fell victim to the economy and personal circumstances. A fourth venture, Alternative Fuels and Technologies in Rollinsford, did not take off. Below is an overview of the winners:

• 2009: Float Left Labs (www.floatleftlabs.org) in Manchester is a student-staffed, nonprofit marketing and media solutions agency started by Kelley Muir. The agency provides cost-effective print

media design, social media consulting, website design and video production to local nonprofits while providing students with valuable learning experiences. The company has worked with eight paid student interns since its founding and has helped more than 50 nonprofits.

"It's helped us spread the concept and message. It's also helped us make connections and partnerships in the community," Muir says of winning the challenge. Among its partners is Microsoft, which provides in-kind licensing for the company's technology products.

• 2010: Play@Work was developed by Melissa Gardner and Katie McQuaid Cote, to offer supervised daycare and quiet spaces for parents to work under one roof.

After about a year of planning and market research, the pair decided not to open Play@Work due to the current economic climate and demographics. They also found the state's rigid child care statutes do not allow for the flexibility they needed to provide options for families with varied child care needs.

2011: Nearby Registry (www.nearbyregistry.com) will provide online gift registry services for independent retailers and service providers. The brainchild of Allison Grappone, it is set to launch this winter.

Given the challenge posed by starting a new business—and doing so in a tight economy—Powers and Allen are pleased with the track record of the competition. Plus, says Allen, the "quality of the applications have gone up."

The Start-Up Challenge provides not only funding, notes Allen, but also in-kind services that are critical during a company's first six to 12 months. Sponsors donate those services including marketing, legal and accounting, and also support the cash prize. The NH Start-Up Challenge has attracted heavy hitters in the business community as sponsors, including Public Service of NH, FairPoint Communications, Dyn, Anagnost Companies, abi Innovation Hub, and Sheehan, Phinney Bass + Green, all based in Manchester.

Judges have included Phil Ryan, CEO of Merchants Automotive Group in Hooksett; Kathleen Cook, grant manager of the Bean Foundation in Manchester; James Coughlin, vice president of strategic initiatives for abi Innovation Hub; Jeremy Hitchcock, CEO of Dyn; Richard Kimball, senior director of The Bigelow Company in Portsmouth; Kenneth Buttermore, vice president of Liberty Lane Partners in Hampton; Steve Webb, market president for NH for TD Bank in Manchester; and Matt Benson, attorney and member of Cook, Little, Rosenblatt & Manson in Manchester.

"It's exciting to see new businesses come out of the state," Powers says. "We are both personally invested in seeing young professionals in this state succeed," he says of himself and Allen. ●

Stay Work Play NH Leadership Award: Fidelity Investments Investing in NH's Future Workforce

Fidelity Investments is a leader in promoting workforce development initiatives in the Granite State, including developing the young professional workforce. When Stephen Reno, then chancellor of the University System of NH and now executive director of Leadership NH, proposed the 55% Initiative—a concerted effort to keep 55 percent of graduates from NH's colleges and universities in the state—Fidelity stepped up as the first corporate sponsor.

From those efforts sprang Stay Work Play NH, a nonprofit established in 2009

which recognizes efforts to attract and retain young professionals in NH. "Generally speaking, it's important for Fidelity as a company and the state of New Hampshire to have a strong pipeline of future employees," Murray says. "Focusing on New Hampshire students is one way to keep that pipeline solid. As a long-time employer in this state, it's important to support these programs that strengthen the entire workforce."

Starting from the inception of the 55% Initiative, Fidelity provided financial support for a survey of NH college and university juniors and seniors regarding their needs, expectations and plans after graduation, and also publicized the project at business events. Fidelity was then chosen by the Business and Industry Association of NH to represent business interests on the Governor's Task Force on the Retention of Younger Workers.

As an integral member of that committee, Murray was part of the group that established Leadership College, a program aimed at high school juniors and seniors to acquaint them with the challenges, issues and principal players in NH so they might see the possibilities for career development in the Granite State. Beyond

the taskforce, Fidelity has worked with Leadership NH to develop the Leadership College program and also provides financial support. Within Fidelity, an apprenticeship program provides younger employees with exposure to different departments, and a mentor program pairs workers with middle school students to help with homework and the transition to high school and college. "Learning and development must happen at all levels within a company," Murray says. "Certainly young professionals play a critical role at Fidelity. But it's important to note our younger professionals learn with exposure to more experienced staff and frankly the same is true vice versa." ●

to further the 55% Initiative, support and advance recommendations made by the Governor's Task Force on Young Worker Retention, and serve as an independent organization to run a website and associated marketing effort regarding what New Hampshire can offer to the 20- to 30-year-old demographic. Fidelity is one of five charter partners of Stay Work Play NH.

Fidelity is focused on helping people achieve their financial goals, and workforce development for people of all ages is an integral part of that process, says Joe Murray, senior director of public affairs in NH for Fidelity.

Its leadership in workforce development issues has earned Fidelity the Stay Work Play NH Leadership Award,



From left: Kate Luczko, executive director of Stay Work Play NH; Joe Murray, senior director of public affairs in NH for Fidelity; and Stephen Reno, executive director of Leadership NH.