Innovative approach to health care wins top prize at PitchNOLA

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The ideas presented spanned everything from urban farms to educational wetlands trips to an online crowdsourcing program to support underprivileged students, but in the end, it was an innovative approach to health care that captured the top prize at PitchNOLA 2011.



Sarah Mason, left, and Arwen Podesta, right, won first place at this year's PitchNOLA competition with their pitch for an integrative medical practice. Also pictures are Andrea Chen, second from left, executive director of SENO, and Stephanie Barksdale, manager of Tulane's Social Entrepreneurship Initiatives. (Photos by Guillermo Cabrera-Rojo.)

The Well, a multi-modal clinic combining primary, holistic and mental health care services, won first place at this year's PitchNOLA competition, an "elevator pitch" contest for local social entrepreneurship ventures.

The competition, a presentation of Tulane Social Entrepreneurship Initiatives and Social Entrepreneurs of New Orleans (SENO) with support from the Freeman School and the Tulane Entrepreneurs Association, took place on Thursday (Oct. 6) in the Woldenberg Art Center's Freeman Auditorium.

In earning this year's top honors, the Well edged out nine other ventures to win a prize package worth more than $6,000, including a $3,500 cash award, $2,000 in pro bono marketing and PR services from Trumpet Group, $500 in billable legal hours from the law firm of Baker Donelson, and a mentorship and pro bono technical assistance from SENO.

Serving as judges for the competition were Leslie Jacobs, founder of Educate Now! and chair of GNO Inc.; Eric Shaw, vice president of policy and programs at Foundation for Louisiana; and Nishith Acharya, executive director of the Deshpande Foundation, who delivered a keynote address to attendees.

The Well's Dr. Arwen Podesta, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Tulane Medical School, and Sarah Mason, a registered nurse, won the competition with their pitch for a new outpatient clinic, one that would serve both the primary care and mental and behavioral health needs of patients. Podesta noted that the lack of a comprehensive approach to care at the clinic level results in many patients failing to receive the treatment they need.

"There are examples of integrative, holistic centers, but none that I know of that include mental health, psychiatry, behavioral health and addiction," said Podesta.

That unique approach to meeting a significant social need impressed the judges.

"One of the things we were asked to judge was the level of innovation," Jacobs said. "In our mind, they were clearly very innovative. This problem exists, it is the first we've heard of this type of solution, and we felt it was worth an investment to see if this could be viable."



This year’s PitchNOLA attracted more than 200 people, making it the biggest competition in the three-year history of the event.

“The Well really had the passion,” added Shaw. “I think they could create a model that could be replicated throughout New Orleans and throughout the state.”

AMPS, a producer self-sustaining urban farms, won this year’s “audience favorite” award and a prize package worth $1,000. Audience members were able to vote on which pitch they liked best via text message during the competition.

Prior to PitchNOLA, LifeCity in conjunction with SENO and Tulane presented Green the Gras, a competition for ideas to make Mardi Gras more environmentally sustainable. Beadcycle, an initiative to reward individuals who recycle their Mardi Gras beads with tokens good for discounts at local restaurants, won the top prize of $1,000 plus consulting services from SENO.

This year’s PitchNOLA attracted more than 200 attendees, making it the biggest in the three-year history of the competition. According to Shaw, that attendance reflects the remarkable growth of social entrepreneurship in New Orleans.

“It really is a groundswell,” Shaw said. “SENO has been amazing bringing attention to it, Tulane has been amazing bringing attention to it, and a lot of foundations are supporting it. It really is a new type of entrepreneurship, to help people and address a need in the community.”