Social entrepreneurs seek the perfect pitch at PitchNOLA

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Ten teams of social entrepreneurs visited Tulane's uptown campus last week to pitch ideas to solve a host of environmental and social problems, but in the end, it was a program to help the formerly incarcerated transition back into society that came out on top at the fourth annual PitchNOLA.



Latona Giwa delivers her pitch for Birthmark Doula Collective, which earned second place honors and the Audience Favorite Prize at this year's PitchNOLA competition. (Photos by Cheryl Gerber)

The competition, an "elevator pitch" contest for local social entrepreneurs, is an annual presentation of the A. B. Freeman School of Business, Tulane Social Entrepreneurship Initiatives and Propeller, a local nonprofit that supports social innovation ventures. More than 200 people packed Freeman Auditorium last Wednesday (Nov. 14) to watch the socially minded entrepreneurs deliver three-minute pitches for their ventures to a panel of judges, with a $5,000 cash prize on the line.

The Justice & Accountability Center of Louisiana, this year's grand prize winner, provides legal assistance to help the state's large population of nonviolent ex-

offenders expunge their criminal records, which can be a major obstacle for them to gain employment and break the cycle of incarceration.

“The potential scale of impact in proportion to the social issue was huge,” said Leslie Jacobs, who served as one of this year’s judges. “It’s innovative, there’s tremendous need, and we felt the speakers had a high level of credibility with their experience. Our one question was the potential to really go to scale, but it was worth the gamble.”

Ameca Reali, executive director of the Justice & Accountability Center, said the prize money will enable the organization to greatly expand its outreach efforts.

“With these extra funds, we can go into more communities and take in more clients, and everywhere we go, we take in clients every single time,” said Reali “We can double the number of clients we serve.”



Of the 10 ventures chosen as finalists for this year's PitchNOLA competition, seven were started by Tulane students or alumni.

This year’s competition also had some drama. While the grand prize was the only cash award announced, a last-minute gift from an anonymous donor enabled organizers to award a $4,000 prize to second-place winner Birthmark Doula Collective, which seeks to improve birth outcomes in New Orleans, and a $3,000 prize to third-place finisher the New Orleans Fruit Tree Project, which harvests fruit from the trees of private owners to fight hunger in New Orleans. An anonymous donor also provided a $5,000 gift to Smiles2Geaux, an initiative to establish mobile dental clinics low-income schoolchildren and seniors.

This year’s PitchNOLA attracted 60 applications, the most in the four-year history of the event, and seven of the 10 finalists had Tulane connections, including Birthmark Doula Collective, which was co-founded by Freeman School Professional MBA student Dana Keren, and the New Orleans Fruit Tree Project, which was founded by School of Public Health alumna Megan Nuismer.

“I’m really proud of all the Tulane participants and finalists,” said Lina Alfieri Stern, director of the Freeman School’s Levy-Rosenblum Institute for Entrepreneurship. “We’re committed to fostering and supporting social entrepreneurship across the university, so it’s really exciting to see more and more students using the knowledge and skills they’re learning in the classroom to make an impact in the local community.”