Youth design agency earns top prize at PitchNOLA

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If you've ever seen the reality show "Shark Tank," you know the format: Budding entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to a panel of investors with thousands of dollars in funding resting in the balance.



Alberta Wright, above, a teacher at New Orleans Charter Math and Science High School, won PitchNOLA's top prize of $5,000 with her pitch for Young Creative Agency. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

But for participants in PitchNOLA 2016: Community Solutions, which took place Thursday night (Jan. 28) in the Woldenberg Art Center's Freeman Auditorium, the motivation wasn't a desire for profits. It was the desire to make a difference.

PitchNOLA is Propeller: A Force for Social Innovation's annual elevator pitch competition for ventures aimed at solving some of the city's most pressing challenges. Co-hosted by two Tulane University centers — the Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation and the Phyllis M. Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking — the competition gave 10 social entrepreneurs the opportunity to pitch their ideas for a chance at more than $10,000 in funding. The ideas presented ran the gamut, from micro-shelters for the homeless to workforce training for recently incarcerated youths.

Young Creative Agency, which trains and employs youths from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in graphic design and the creative economy, won first place and this year's top prize of $5,000. Agency founder Alberta Wright, a teacher at New Orleans Charter Math and Science High School, said the funds will help the agency scale up its operations.

"Our plans are to bring on another part time mentor who can then help us expand to four more client jobs and 25 more youths," said Wright. "In the big picture, we plan to standardize our curriculum so we can start to look at a school-site model and adult ed."

"The thing that jumped out at me [about Young Creative Agency] is that this is the direction the city is going," said Peter Ricchiuti, professor of practice at the A. B. Freeman School of Business and one of this year's judges. "We're not necessarily oilmen anymore. We've become a city of creatives, so I think they're really barking up the right tree."

Fund 17, a nonprofit started by Tulane alumna Haley Burns that supports underserved entrepreneurs, earned second-place honors and a $3,000 prize, and the Food Justice Collective, a farmers co-op organized by youth of color, won the third place prize of $2,000 as well as the $500 Audience Favorite award.

In addition to Ricchiuti, this year's judges also included Carmen Jones, vice president of programs with the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and Leslie Jacobs, CEO of the New Orleans Startup Fund.