Louisiana startups get boost from Freeman alumni

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Peggy Babin, a 1992 graduate of the A.B. Freeman School of Business, is CEO of Valmiki 504. She is also a former associate dean of the business school. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Several alumni of the A. B. Freeman School of Business have leading roles in a new collaborative effort to make Louisiana's burgeoning startup market more competitive.

In July, the New Orleans-based venture capital firm Valmiki 504 LLC announced a joint project with Topxight Labs, a New York-based business incubator. The new venture, called Topxight LA, will be a virtual incubator offering online data and expert advice to area entrepreneurs, with an emphasis on developing products and services in deep machine learning, cybersecurity and data analytics. Along with its involvement in that partnership, Valmiki 504 announced in August that it is funding

a new food business incubator and accelerator in New Orleans called CERES 504.

There’s a Tulane graduate tied to every thread in this expanding web of entrepreneurial support. Peggy Babin (B ’92) is CEO of Valmiki 504, which is a subsidiary of the New York-based Valmiki Capital Management, co-founded by Ravi Suria (B ’95). Another alumnus, Kirthi Ramakrishnan (B ’96), co-founded Topxight Labs. The board of directors at Valmiki 504 includes two more Tulane grads: Eric Handler, (B ’95), Motez Bishara, (B ’95), as well as former Freeman dean James McFarland. Several Tulane alumni are investors in the firm.

Valmiki 504 was launched in April to fill a void in the state’s growing “entrepreneurial ecosystem,” Babin said.

“The piece that has been missing in a large way from the ecosystem here are established, professional money-management venture capital firms,” said Babin, who is also a former associate dean of Tulane’s business school.

Valmiki 504 has pledged to be the lead investor in the venture funding round for Cythereal, a cybersecurity startup based in Lafayette. Arun Lakhotia, the computer science professor at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette who founded the company, will serve as managing director of Topxight LA.

Topxight Labs co-founder Ramakrishnan said he wants to set a modest pace for the development of projects from these joint efforts—about five new deals every 18 months.

“We will be very closely involved with these firms,” Ramakrishnan says. “Because of this, we tend to be extremely selective in terms of the projects we want to pursue.”

— Sonya Stinson