

## TruCycle partners want to turn garbage to green

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PETER ANDREW BOSCH / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Irina Matyukhina, front center, Erwin Tejos Jr., back center, Fabianne Pompee, right, and Keyla Castillo, left, won first place in the FIU Track for TruCycle, a compost recycling company and education center. They are shown on the FIU campus.

Where others see garbage, this team sees green.

As part of a class project, Irina Matyukhina, Erwin Tejos Jr., Fabianne Pompee and Keyla Castillo created a business plan for organic waste composting.

They earned an A -- and they also went on to win The Miami Herald Business Plan Challenge FIU Track for TruCycle, an organic-waste collection, composting and consulting firm that would also include an education center.

"We really wanted to do something environmentally friendly," Matyukhina said.

"When Erwin presented the idea, we all agreed right away because we are all very passionate about the environment, especially after we started looking up the statistics about the trash that is recycled in Miami-Dade -- very little."

For instance, in 2008, Miami-Dade County produced more than half a million tons of organic waste, but only 24 percent was recycled, demonstrating the need for TruCycle and the potential for growth, said Castillo, who is graduating in December with a management degree.

For the project, the team members assessed their interests and skill sets and divided up the departments this way: Matyukhina was in charge of industry analysis; Tejos was all about the science, technology and logistics; Pompee was the accountant; and Castillo took on marketing strategy.

If there was a visionary on this project, it was probably Tejos, although he doesn't take credit. "I was more the talker and the idea guy but . . . if it hadn't been for [my partners], it wouldn't have happened."

Judges liked the business idea because it was riding a hot market trend and its target market was well-researched. The business plan also was clear and well-organized.

"TruCycle represents a long tradition amongst FIU students to develop green businesses," said Robert Hacker, who manages GH Capital, is an adjunct professor at FIU and a Challenge judge. "Some former student business plan winners in the space, such as Veterans Energy Solutions, are now getting traction in the market and showing promising growth."

No plan is perfect though, and TruCycle's needs further work in identifying a clear competitive advantage in the marketplace, the judges said.

Even before the Business Plan Development class At FIU brought the four together, Tejos had already begun thinking about composting as a business idea. His research took him to the FIU Department of Earth & Environment and Waste Management's Reuter Recycling Center in Pembroke Pines. After peppering Morgan Levy and William Townshend of the nonprofit South Dade Soil & Water Conservation District with questions about the science and products, he was convinced in-vessel composting was the way to go.

TruCycle sees revenue coming mainly from sales of the compost as well as fees for waste collection.

For waste collection, TruCycle would first target large institutions -- universities and businesses, particularly restaurants, Tejos said, keeping in mind the costs of gas and logistics of pickups. TruCycle trucks could be converted to run on used vegetable oil to save money and help the environment too, Tejos said.

What might be an incentive for businesses, particularly restaurants, to sign on? Tejos thinks businesses that compost could receive stickers they could proudly display to their patrons. Perhaps they could receive ratings for their level of environmental stewardship.

Once the waste is collected and the compost process complete -- four days inside the in-vessel composter and 10 days for curing -- TruCycle would sell compost in bulk to organic farmers and landscapers. The team estimates that's nearly 5,000 potential customers in Miami-Dade County alone. TruCycle would also prepackage smaller amounts for the home gardener, Matyukhina said.

As for startup costs, TruCycle estimates it needs about \$350,000 if it leases to own in-vessel composting equipment rather than buying it outright. The team identified the Florida Recycling Loan Program as a potential source of funding.

Will the team start this business?

``The start-up costs are a little high, but if we get interested investors who want to help us develop the business, we would definitely be interested," said Matyukhina, who is graduating in December with a degree in management.

Tejos, who graduated in April with bachelors degrees in international relations and geography and certificates in environmental studies and entrepreneurship among others, is definitely interested in trying to make a go of TruCycle. He said friends and family in Chile and Venezuela are tapping some potential contacts there for him.

``I am pretty sure I will go the entrepreneurial path. I always liked the idea of being my own boss," said Tejos, who is also considering starting a wine tourism business in Chile (hospitality was another one of his certificates).

Whatever happens with TruCycle, the process of writing the business plan and entering the contest was educational, said Pompee, who graduated in April with a finance degree and hopes to one day open her own insurance business. She said she learned a lot about writing a business plan, the importance of an elevator pitch and financing a business. ``It was a real eye opener," she said.

Martin Luytjes, their professor, couldn't be prouder of the team.

``They not only learned the material, but applied it in a commercially viable manner. Not only was their full business plan of exceptional quality, but their concept involved some socially progressive thinking," he said. ``They can really do this."

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