

Business Plan Challenge announces winners

By Nancy Dahlberg

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Business Plan Challenge Chair Winner Cover - Gold, Yellow, Boss, business monday, mbm, mbz

We are pleased to introduce you to the winners of the 15th Annual Miami Herald Business Plan Challenge.

Several of today's winners — and many of the finalists and contestants — were grounded in social entrepreneurship. Two other themes running through many of these entries: helping the self-employed and healthy living.

So today's emerging companies will help us stay healthy, make us money and do well by doing good.

This year, among the 238 entries received, there were also food products, pet products, healthcare concepts, real estate ventures, restaurants, green products, sports-related ideas, crowdfunding sites and plenty of apps. The plans in our Challenge, sponsored by Florida International University's

Eugenio Pino and Family Global Entrepreneurship Center, were judged by experts from our community — successful entrepreneurs, investors, consultants, academics (see bios on MiamiHerald.com/challenge) — as well as by the public via our popular People's Pick video competition (see videos on MiamiHerald.com/challenge).

Make Them BEG, a company offering an online training program in personal branding, won the Community Track, and EyeTalk, a company that developed a pair of glasses that will read for the visually impaired, led the FIU Track in the judges' voting. Rounding out the list of the top judged winners in those two tracks: AdMobilize, U.S. Radiology, spendLO and 5K PARK Fest.

EyeTalk, from a team of FIU students who turned a college project into a social entrepreneurial venture, was also named the overall Challenge Champion, based on both the judges' voting and the People's Pick.

"If you subscribe — as I do — to the thought process that there are two types of entrepreneurs, the innovative and the replicative entrepreneur, Eye Talk is certainly innovative. EyeTalk helps people with blindness to "hear" printed text with a simple pair of glasses — paradigm pioneering for millions in need," said Mike Tomas, chairman of the FIU Pino Center advisory board and an FIU Track judge.

Over on the High School Track — which is co-sponsored by the Network for Teaching

Entrepreneurship — SeniorLink Consulting, How Do I Look? and Do-Re-Mi A-B-C 1-2-3 took home the top honors. For a year and a half, first-place winner Sam Steiner, a 10th grader, has been running SeniorLink, which uses high school age employees to help senior citizens — and he's hiring.

Perhaps it isn't surprising that Lean Culinary Services pulled off a first-place win in the Community Track's People's Pick. After all, the fast-growing meal delivery service already has 70 employees — quite a sizable support base to mobilize to get out the vote. But what may be surprising is that finalist Papa Systems, which offers a shock-absorbing system for boats invented by South Floridian Len Loffler that is not on the market yet, came in a close second. Obviously there are a number of boaters out there yearning for a smoother ride.

Over on the FIU Track, the top three contenders, Bowling & Family Entertainment Center, 5K PARK Fest and EyeTalk were battling it out all week for the people's vote, but Bowling scored the win.

Some of today's winners are first timers and others are serial entrepreneurs with decades of industry experience. But whether they are in the concept stage or are already logging sales, all are in the early stages of their businesses — we'll be watching how they do!

Read about all the winners on MiamiHerald.com/challenge.

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