

FGCU's Runway Program: its winners and its impact

By Emma Rodriguez, Staff Writer

Innovation and community are constant themes at FGCU. Our university is always looking to make an impact in our region, and in all areas of the game. The Daveler and Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship is a main proponent of these efforts, by way of the Runway Program.

Within the past five years, FGCU's Runway Program has helped ~400 student businesses begin operations. Participants can access resources necessary for growing a business, including media production equipment, professors to network with, and private workspaces. But, at the end of the program, students vie for the most valuable resource of them all: funding.

"At the end of the program, they have the opportunity to pitch in front of our investment committee, which is made up of members of the Tamiami Angel fund in Naples," Program Manager Scott Kelly said. "They can pitch for anywhere between

\$2,000 and \$10,000 to get their business idea going."

Kelly added that money received from the Runway Program is equity-free, meaning that members of the investment committee claim no ownership of the businesses they fund. Runway Program graduates can use their money however they wish.

The funding is collected from community donors.

The most recent Runway Program cycle wrapped up at the beginning of August. There were 13 winners this semester.

Jack Hellmer of UBYou is no stranger to pitching before the Runway Program's investment committee. This cycle was his fourth time receiving funding. His total earnings amount to \$32,800, garnered from the Spring of 2020 to now.

UBYou is an app used to improve the mental health of users. Users can access meditation, exercise, and affirmation videos. There are FGCU-specific elements of the app, which stem from its daily questionnaires. If the questionnaire reveals that a student is struggling with something specific, the app connects them to campus

resources that can help with the problem.

The app can work in conjunction with the user's FGCU CAPS counselor. Through an informed consent form, counselors can view their clients' UBYou app data, and can use it to tailor their services to better meet the client's needs. The partnership between UBYou and CAPS was endorsed by FGCU's President, Mike Martin, and is set to start this semester.

"I don't believe that UBYou would've been created without the Runway Program," Hellmer said. "They're the ones that gave me the first initial funds to start, and as it grew, they still wanted to keep giving it funding!"

Hellmer has used his Runway Program earnings for various things throughout the development of UBYou. He's needed to create the checking version of the app, hire talent to make instructional content for the app, and ensure HIPAA compliance. This cycle's funds are yet another major help to UBYou.

"We received an additional

\$7,800 from the Runway Program the last time we pitched, and that was to pay off our remaining development costs as well as some of our additional costs," Hellmer said. "We've gotten \$32,800 from the Runway Program, but I also invested funds myself on top of that."

Much like UBYou, the team of Fall 2022 Runway Program winner, Strive Hall, is using their funding to expand upon the base they built before receiving funding.

Strive Hall is a three-phase program to

help disadvantaged students, typically from the ages of 18-24, make the transition to adult life. It seeks to help participants develop a growth mindset, gain insight to the college experience, and learn to cope with negative situations and emotions through immersive learning.

"We do student centered learning, which focuses on the student as opposed to the teacher," Davian Fajardo, a member of the Strive Hall team, said. "We get them up doing activities, especially making them speak amongst their peers and to us, because public speaking is the number one phobia. We're trying to get them comfortable with being uncomfortable."

Using money from the Runway Program, Strive Hall is making efforts to share their mission, and grow as a business. Fajardo cites the mentoring and networking opportunities his team received through the program as the greatest benefit of participating. Strive Hall is working to initiate these opportunities with its winnings.

"With that money, we hosted an event to try to bring awareness to Strive Hall, but we also wanted to create a networking hub for other Entrepreneurship students," Fajardo said. "We're also going to make skits on YouTube and a podcast, because we know a lot of our target audience is on social media, and also other foundations we can work with."•



photos courtesy of Jack Hellmer



photo courtesy of Davian Fajardo

