

3 business plans recognized by RIBX competition

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PROVIDENCE — Their entrepreneurship professor told the three Brown University undergraduates to think big, and he urged them to get out and talk to the people who would eventually use the product they dreamed of developing in his class.

“Danny preaches bottom-up research,” said senior Robert D. [Dan] Aziz about Prof. Danny Warshay, who has taught the class each of his five years at Brown.

As his students began crafting an idea for a prenatal beverage supplement to give pregnant women the vitamins they need without the nasty side effects of large prenatal pills, junior William Do went to the Whole Foods Market on North Main Street and started chatting with a pregnant woman. She told him women have what they call “horse pills,” but no drink supplement.

Warshay said his students then spoke with 150 pregnant women before developing what they call PriWater. The supplement is designed to reduce birth defects, the reason for prenatal pills.

As Aziz presented the group’s product idea Tuesday in the Rhode Island Business Plan Competition at RIBX 2011, he told a crowd of more than 100 what their research revealed. Only 45 percent of pregnant women take prenatal pills because they’re hard to digest and cause constipation and nausea.

“Overall, women hate them, and if you’re a man, you should just try it for your wife,” Aziz said, drawing laughter as he spoke with ease. “We talk about destroying the horse pill forever.”

The judges of the annual competition agreed that Aziz, Do and Gordon Hood have a good idea. PriWater took the top prize in the student track — \$25,000 in cash and \$28,000 in services.

It’s the third year in a row Warshay’s students have walked off with the top student prize at the competition, which attracted 103 applications this year, up from 61 last year.

Their project drew praise from one of the competition’s judges, Stephen Lane, president of Ximedica and a member of the state Economic Development Corporation board.

“We need to mint him,” Lane said of Warshay.

Last year, Warshay’s students won with Speramus, an online fundraising platform that matches donors with individual support opportunities. The year before, they won with Runa, a company that produces energy drinks made from the leaves of an Amazonian tree.

Winning the biggest prize in this year’s competition was AmbiLabs, a Warren company that makes systems to monitor air pollution. Named the “green” winner, AmbiLabs won \$50,000 in cash and \$26,000 in services.

“I’m astounded that we won,” General Manager Andy Tolley said, noting the “fantastic” field of finalists.

At a reception for winners and finalists, Tolley said the reason AmbiLabs entered the competition was to see if others believed in their idea.

Tolley said his company's work is gaining traction. The Army recently contacted AmbiLabs about its devices, and the company just took an order to provide a pollution-monitoring device in Saudi Arabia, its first international order.

The third winner — this one in the entrepreneur track — was Lucidux, a Providence venture led by East Providence resident Jason Harry. Lucidux, which also won \$25,000 in cash and \$28,000 in services, is developing software to provide three-dimensional images to help surgeons perform minimally invasive procedures.

Harry told how Lucidux is working to revolutionize what surgeons see with cameras inserted into patients, essentially eliminating what he calls “one-eyed surgery.”