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Southeast Raleigh Innovation Challenge names winners



The five finalists in the Southeast Raleigh Innovation Challenge competed for \$120,000 in start-up funds. Pictured are Major Best, Lydia Newman, Keschia Martin, Malikia Robertson, and Jana Avery. **Troy Thomas** Thomas Photography

WAKE COUNTY

The challenge: come up with ways to help Southeast Raleigh

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Lydia Newman imagines a Southeast Raleigh ready to provide the local technology industry with a more diverse and robust pipeline of homegrown talent.

As the winner of the inaugural Southeast Raleigh Innovation Challenge, Newman will use her \$40,000 award to jump-start Word of God Christian Academy Tech Career Pathways. The

program aims to help Southeast Raleigh teens land tech jobs and also to promote technology community-wide as a problem-solver.

“We want to raise young people’s awareness to think about the careers they hadn’t thought about before,” Newman, noting a lack of diversity in technology fields. “We have to change people’s thinking about a whole industry.”

The first component of the Pathways program focuses on a community campaign to “move youth past being consumers of technology and experience being creators,” Newman said. Ten Word of God students will be “tech ambassadors” who co-design the entire program to ensure it stays youth-focused, youth-led and culturally relevant.

An after-school training lab will be available for Word of God students next spring, and the goal is to eventually open the lab to the public twice a week.

The Southeast Raleigh Innovation Challenge is a partnership between the United Way of the Greater Triangle, Wake County, the city of Raleigh and other groups. It got started to help fund community-generated business ideas that fill voids, fix problems and fuel economic development.

Participants in the challenge had to live or do business in the Southeast Raleigh area, and ideas were supposed to be innovative, economically feasible and designed to address social and economic issues.

The prize pool was \$120,000. Newman won the top prize among the five finalists chosen by a team of community leaders.

“I can’t think of a time where we’ve invested \$120,000 in cultivating entrepreneurship in Southeast Raleigh,” said Kia Baker, executive director of Southeast Raleigh Promise, which works to reverse inter-generational poverty by improving access to high-quality education, housing and health care.

The organization was a partner in the challenge and also has a mission to create economic opportunities and foster leadership development.

For Newman, the Tech Career Pathways program stems from her professional passion as director of talent acquisition for The Labor Market, a small firm that connects companies with tech talent. Its charitable arm, TheLaborMarket.org, zeroes in on ways to increase the number of qualified candidates for jobs in the field.

Newman is raising money to add to her award funds. She says the program will cost at least \$150,000 a year to operate.

Here are the other finalists:

- Major Best won \$30,000 to open a barber school for at-risk youth and formerly incarcerated adults;
- Jana Avery won \$20,000 – and a \$2,500 People’s Choice Award – for a program that would focus on the artistic and personal development of youth;
- Keschia Martin won \$5,000 for Players2Pros to help high school athletes secure college scholarships;
- Malikia Robertson won \$5,000 for Yoga4Us, which promotes community health.

Five other participants each won \$3,500 for ideas ranging from teaching girls financial management to placing trained intervention workers in schools to reduce court referrals.

“The community now has a say in changing the trajectory of the community because the community knows the best solutions for people who live and work there,” said Britney McCoy, United Way’s community engagement manager. “This is what community empowerment can look like with dedicated support. It’s not just about financial capital, but human and social capital, as well.”

Lori Wiggins writes stories about Southeast Raleigh for The News & Observer. Email her at ldrwig@gmail.com.



A crowd of about 200 family members, friends, and community supporters and leaders gathered at the Raleigh Convention Center October 20, 2017, for the Final Pitch Event of the Southeast Raleigh Innovation Challenge. **Troy Thomas** Thomas Photography