Creativity and Innovation

First Entrepreneurs of Erath Competition celebrates entrepreneurial spirit
The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well in Tarleton’s home county, where 28 innovators submitted business plans for their start-ups in the first Entrepreneurs of Erath Competition. Dublin-based WHRL Solutions took the top prize of $25,000 during an awards luncheon held in May at Tarleton. AJT Compliance came in second with $15,000, and Texas Twisters won third and $5,000.

“Winning feels fantastic and really uplifting,” said April Delaney Thomson, co-owner of WHRL Solutions with her husband, Colin Thomson. “We’re thrilled that judges saw our dedication and drive, and understood the need for and importance of our agricultural services product.”

The Thomson’s WHRLflo™ system saves annual fuel costs by recovering heat energy from cows’ milk and transferring it into hot water, which dairy and food processors need to clean and sterilize their equipment.

The competition’s second-place entrepreneur, AJT Compliance, helps companies comply with regulations in transportation and pipeline industries. Texas Twisters, which won third place, offers coaching and training in cheerleading, tumbling, trampoline and gymnastics.

Spurred by an idea from Dr. Barbara Nemecek, Tarleton’s former dean of Business Administration, and administered by Tarleton’s Small Business Development Center (SBDC), the competition sought to find the next Bill Gates or Sam Walton in Erath County through a cooperative community outreach program, designed to help entrepreneurs launch or expand local businesses.

“Our goal for this business plan competition was to foster entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation among the greater Erath County area,” said Randy Burch, director of Tarleton’s Small Business Development Center (SBDC). “With 28 entrants, this first program was tremendous.”

The SBDC trained entrants to prepare business plans and Tarleton’s business students helped them through the planning and presentation process. Besides Tarleton, the program’s sponsors included the Stephenville Economic Development Foundation, Inc., which provided $45,000 in prize money; the Stephenville Chamber of Commerce; the City of Stephenville; and the Dublin Economic Development Corporation.

Three area accounting companies and an attorney’s office—Boucher, Morgan, and Young; Lassiter and Sparkman; Edwards and Stokes; and The Allen Firm—donated $27,000 in services to the winners. Area business leaders served as judges, including Barbara Terrell, Joe Huddleston, John Moore, and Brad Allen.

Winning entrepreneurs committed to remain in Erath County for two years and create at least three new local jobs in the future. Tarleton’s SBDC plans to help all 12 of the competition finalists make their business plans a reality.

“All of the business plans created jobs in our area and one never knows when one of them may hit it out of the ball park,” said John Moore, vice president of Craft Associates in Bluff Dale, and one of the competition’s judges. “The program served as a catalyst, as we intended, to look for opportunities to invest in our community.”

As for the Thomsons and their winning company, WHRL Soutions, they plan to use their cash prize to hire an administrator for their new enterprise.

“Winning the competition and writing a business plan will allow us to hire a local resident to further the goals of WHRL Solutions and take us to the next level,” Thomson said. “We are looking forward to building a strong team here in Erath that will help WHRL Solutions become a leader in sustainability, innovation and energy efficiency.”

Stephenville Mayor Kenny Weldon, who served as a member of the Entrepreneurs of Erath Competition committee, speaks during a luncheon held on campus where the winners of the competition were announced.