

These Lehigh Valley Young Entrepreneurs Are Creating Amazing Things

By Paul Muschick

LEHIGH VALLEY - The strong enterprising spirit at Lehigh University was celebrated on April 18 during an innovation competition and awards dinner where a student won the top prize of \$5,000.

The annual Innovate! Celebrate! event by the Baker Institute for Entrepreneurship, Creativity & Innovation was held at Ben Franklin TechVentures on Lehigh's campus.

"The notion of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial thinking is a priority for Lehigh," University President Joseph Helble said. "Helping students develop an entrepreneurial mindset encourages so many of the skills that will be important, no matter what direction one takes after Lehigh."

Freshman Dulra Amolegbe won the Joan F. & John M. Thalheimer '55 Eureka! Grand Prize of \$5,000 for his invention of Dot.

Growing up as an immigrant student in Africa, Amolegbe and his friends struggled to access financial services as they moved to other countries. Immigrant students are forced to use cash because their credit/debit cards do not work outside of the country where they were issued. There is no cross-border transfer of credit history, and the KYC number (equivalent to a Social Security number) systems are localized and not designed to serve immigrants.

That results in immigrant students usually being ostracized from the banking system in their new country. They cannot digitally move their funds or make peer-to-peer transfers.

Dot is building a cash-to-cashless experience for immigrant students in Africa. It will allow them to digitize their cash in seconds. Through a network of cash deposit partners, immigrant students fund their Dot wallet with cash, create a virtual Mastercard and can initiate instant peer-to-peer transfers without needing a bank account or credit/debit card.

Dot wants to eventually expand to also service immigrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers, to provide financial access to typically unserved populations of the African continent.

Last year, Amolegbe ran a pilot program in South Africa that was used by more than 200 students. His work garnered him recognition on the Nasdaq Tower in Times Square.

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Lehigh University student entrepreneurs were honored on April 18, 2023 at the Baker Institute's Innovate! Celebrate! awards dinner.

In accepting the award, Amolegbe thanked the Baker Institute and his friends and mentors at Lehigh for their support. He said Lehigh's entrepreneurial spirit encourages students to experiment, to create, to grow startups "and get things done. Lehigh is where things are actually being executed at."

Amolegbe also won the Joan F. & John M. Thalheimer '55 Student Achievement Award.

The other finalist for the grand prize was senior Tobey Bill. He created Unify Studios, an online game platform and game creation engine that has been used more than 360 million times and generated more than \$170,000 in revenue.

Bill won the Michael W. Levin '87 Advanced Technology Award.

Prior to the award ceremony, several students competed for the People's Choice award by demonstrating their venture projects to guests in "Innovation Alley." Projects included an alternative home equity financing option, a converter to use Keurig cups in traditional coffee makers, and an online school teaching Ukrainian language, culture, and history.

Guests voted junior Emily Randolph and sophomore Tyler Richardson as the winners for their creation of MycroActive, an affordable microscope for middle schools that can view slides displayed on mobile phones.

Other award winners were:

The Donald Flinchbaugh Memorial Scholarship: student Zoe Sherman.

The Helen & R.K. Laros Foundation Endowed Prize for Entrepreneurship, Creativity & Innovation: students Rish Kumar, Kayla Miller, and Mitchell Katz.

The Farrington Award for Outstanding Commitment to Entrepreneurship at Lehigh: alumnus Sue Bevon Baggott.

Entrepreneurism is a key piece of the Lehigh Valley economy. Startups help to fill needs for products and services. They create jobs and opportunities to expand the workforce. Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp. (LVEDC) helps to build coalitions and partners with other organizations to encourage and support entrepreneurship.

Lehigh University Provost Nathan Urban said entrepreneurship is an essential part of the university's mission.

"I want us here at the university to have a greater focus on this kind of work, in particular, in creating startups that will be competitive in the marketplace and allow the ideas of Lehigh faculty and students to have impact in the real world," Urban said.

"I see universities as places that should be helping to make the future and helping to make a better future," he said. "Entrepreneurship and startup companies are important ways to get good ideas out into the world."