

Thursday, March 11, 2010

Posted on Thu, Mar. 11, 2010

Innovators also inspire

Entrepreneurial program names 2010 honorees

BY JERRY SIEBENMARK
The Wichita Eagle

Three are in their 20s. The fourth is in his 50s.

One of them was a certified public accountant. Another is a documentary filmmaker.

And yet another has a 30-year career history that includes stops at several Fortune 500 companies.

The one thing that these four Wichitans have in common is they are hungry — hungry to start and build new companies that they say offer breakthrough technologies and products.

Tahir Ahmad, Nate Gregory, Jeremy Jones and Ben Tyson are Wichita entrepreneurs and they are innovators, the name given to members of the 2010 Pipeline Innovators, the state's yearlong entrepreneur support program for owners of promising technology-based ventures.

They also represent the first time that Wichita has been represented by more than one entrepreneur in the program's four-year history.

Joni Cobb, Pipeline president, says the increased Wichita representation is due in part to the program's increasing recognition and promotion by former innovators.

"I really think we reached a tipping point and the quality and number of applicants really increased," Cobb said. "Hopefully having four (Wichita entrepreneurs) this year will pull even more out."

Tahir Ahmad

Ahmad is a 29-year-old electrical engineer working on a master's degree in business at Wichita State.

He's also launched a company that provides Web-based data to oil and gas operators via their smartphones and laptop computers.

The demands of his startup company, PetroPower, have pushed aside his studies for now.

"This is taking too much of my time," he said.

His company operates from a cubicle in the business incubator in the basement of WSU's Devlin Hall and also from a house he purchased.

The data he provides his clients is obtained through sensors the size of a cell phone — which Ahmad and his seven employees manufacture from his home — that transmit the data through cell phone frequencies and satellites to PetroPower's servers.

The data includes such information as the level of storage inside a holding tank, leaks, and broken belts on a well motor.

But the prized data PetroPower provides is financial, Ahmad said. That financial data includes real-time measures such as how much volume an oil or gas well has produced for a company.

"That really distinguishes us from competitors," he said.

Ahmad said the company began adding its first Kansas clients in October and is planning to expand its client list to oil and gas companies in Oklahoma and Texas.

Nate Gregory

Gregory, 29, started his career as a tax accountant at Grant Thornton.

But that was just a step toward becoming an entrepreneur, said the Valley Center native, who paid for college at Fort Hays State through a lawn-mowing business he started when he was 12.

Gregory joined MoJack in 2007 as a partner and CEO. The company produces a lift for the maintenance of riding lawn mowers and small tractors.

But his goal is to make the company a product development company, using the partnerships it has with Chinese manufacturers that make the MoJack lift.

He sees his company becoming something like former Pipeline innovator Todd Gentry's company, Inno-Labs in Winfield, but by making products through raw steel manufacturing.

Pipeline has already demonstrated its value, he said, with the first educational session on market validation.

He said that session taught him a lot of things he wished he'd known when MoJack was bringing its lift to market.

"I don't know the amount of money we would have saved," Gregory said. "It's just invaluable."

Jeremy Jones

Not too long ago Jones, 55, was sitting in the seat of a venture capitalist as a vice president of Koch Genesis, the venture capital arm of Koch Industries.

Then he ran across Jason Schmitt, who as an undergraduate researcher at Kansas State began to develop a process to produce high-volume, low-cost aluminum nitride substrates that are used in solid-state electronics, light-emitting diodes and ultraviolet laser diodes.

He said the company he and Schmitt created is tapping into a \$3 billion market that is already served by a number of large competitors. But Jones thinks that the process that is behind Nitride's production is its strength. He thinks they can do it more cheaply than competitors and with fewer defects in the substrates.

"I came into it (the business) very skeptical," Jones said. "It just seemed to be a very fragmented market."

But after doing more research and learning more about Schmitt's work it is "obvious this really represents a step change," Jones said.

"We think in 2015 this could be a \$315 million business and employ more than 100 people," he said.

A look at Jones' resume suggests he doesn't need what Pipeline offers. He's been a venture capitalist involved in the growth of other startup companies and has an established network of other entrepreneurs and venture capitalists.

But he does benefit from Pipeline, he said. That point hit home at the innovators first three-day education session last month in Wichita.

"Just those three days were worth it," Jones said.

Ben Tyson

Before launching Time Trails a year ago, Tyson wanted to produce documentaries.

So the 23-year-old Wichita native found a videographer in Seattle and self-financed a trip to Africa along the Rwanda-Tanzania border where they shot video and collected stories for four documentary films tied to the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

Upon his return, Tyson's focus turned to the concept of Time Trails, which he said was born more than 10 years ago.

The idea for Time Trails is to create an interactive historical timeline for the history of the world using Google Earth as the platform.

The system Tyson and his father, Karl, are building will allow a user to click on any region or country in the world at any point in time to bring up information about historical events and people. The commerce side of the system will offer products such as books and videos that users can order directly through Time Trails.

Tyson said he hopes that through Pipeline he can take this "game-changing idea and bring it up to its optimum level," he said.

Reach Jerry Siebenmark at 316-268-6576 or jsiebenmark@wichitaeagle.com.