



FIVE YEARS AFTER the University launched a major initiative to expand entrepreneurship on campus, innovative student ventures are surging forward

BY TOM RAYNOR

L.C. SMITH COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING and Computer Science graduate student Luis Romo '10, G'12 came to the United States from Colombia as a child. As a high school student on Long Island, he dreamed of forming his own engineering firm. Last year, while working on a master's degree in biomedical engineering, he took What's the Big Idea?, an elective course in entrepreneurship. Today, Romo is chief executive officer of Helios Innovative Technologies, a high-profile start-up in ultraviolet sterilization technology. "The progression from concept to corporation took only 18 months, and now we're on the brink of a product launch," he says. "None of this could've happened without the stimulus of that one elective course and critical support each step of the way."

The success of Helios and other student start-ups reflects the University's effort to give every student access to entrepreneurial training. SU was well prepared to take on this challenge when it accepted the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's \$3 million, five-year grant in 2006. The Whitman School of Management is a national leader in entrepreneurship education, and other SU schools and colleges can also claim an entrepreneurial presence. To oversee vast curricular change and other objectives of the Kauffman grant, the University formed Enitiative, an SU-led partnership of Central New York colleges headed by Bruce Kingma,

associate provost for entrepreneurship and innovation (see "Insights on Entrepreneurial Partnerships," page 41).

Under Kingma's leadership through Enitiative, there was a coordinated effort by faculty members to integrate entrepreneurial components into virtually every discipline. Altogether, 39 new courses were created, and more than 100 others were modified to incorporate entrepreneurial perspectives. Workshops were offered to faculty who wanted to implement entrepreneurial principles and techniques in their courses. "In 2007, some 2,000 students were taking courses in entrepreneurship," Kingma says. "Today the figure is closer to 7,000, and there has been a striking change in at-

titude. Students see entrepreneurship in an entirely new light—as a minor for almost any major, and a source of career flexibility. The entrepreneurial spirit feeds on itself."

Developments at SU have reflected a broad trend on American campuses that Kauffman meticulously tracks. There has been a surge among students in launching their own businesses, and many schools are ramping up support for budding entrepreneurs. On the Hill, entrepreneurship gained critical mass when Enitiative created the Raymond von Dran Innovation and Disruptive Entrepreneurship Accelerator (IDEA), named in honor of the late dean



of the School of Information Studies (iSchool). IDEA includes three components: courses, seed funding, and the IDEA Student Sandbox. The sandbox is an incubator for student start-ups in the Tech Garden, a downtown Syracuse space that hosts technology-driven ventures by upstate New York entrepreneurs. In the student sandbox, each team is assigned up to five mentors—a mix that may include entrepreneurs, academics, technologists, subject matter experts, attorneys, and accountants. “Our method is to surround students with a powerful network,” says John Liddy, a full-time entrepreneur-in-residence. “Our goal is to produce revenue-generating entities, investment-ready firms, or viable nonprofit organizations.”

Forty-two student companies, involving 102 students, have gone through the IDEA Student Sandbox since 2009. Eighteen of the ventures are still in business—a 43 percent success rate. In 2011, students representing nine upstate New York schools and colleges were at work in the sandbox, and BrandYourself, an online reputation management start-up, became the first company to “graduate” and begin paying rent for its space in the Tech Garden.

While the Kauffman grant will formally conclude on June 30, new arrangements and options are emerging for Enitiative. The U.S. Department of Commerce recently designated SU as an Economic Development Administration University Center, with a \$500,000 grant aimed at launching student ventures throughout upstate New York. “This is an acknowledgment of the success of what we’ve been doing,” says Kingma, who estimates that the designation and funding will translate into more than 50 new student businesses a year.

Looking back on its five-year span, one could argue that few grants in SU history have had a more striking impact than the Kauffman Foundation grant. “We’re striving to create a seamless entrepreneurial ecosystem,” says Stacey Keefe ’99, G’06, executive director of Enitiative. “Students are aware of it, and we want them all to feel welcome to tap into it. At the same time, the system is capable of launching and supporting the most ambitious types of projects—ventures that will make a difference in our lives while advancing our economy.”

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—John Liddy, entrepreneur-in-residence

INSIGHTS ON ENTREPRENEURIAL PARTNERSHIPS

In the beginning, Enitiative was driven by two goals: the revitalization of the entrepreneurship curriculum and the creation of entrepreneurial campus-community partnerships to advance Syracuse University’s strategy of Scholarship in Action. These ventures led to what has been called the “Syracuse Miracle”— an economic, cultural, and environmental transformation in the Central New York community. They have also provided scholars with innovative teaching platforms, and grist for a growing number of research monographs. Bruce Kingma, associate provost for entrepreneurship

and innovation, collected nine of these papers in a volume that offers varied perspectives on community engagement: *Academic Entrepreneurship and Community Engagement: Scholarship in Action and the Syracuse Miracle* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011). The collection’s first section features studies of corporate-university partnerships, student technology-company programs, and new models for supporting technology transfer. The second section includes writings on transforming a law clinic to aid community entrepreneurs, supporting successful entrepreneurs in distressed communities, and publishing a community newspaper in partnership with residents. The final section focuses on services for entrepreneurs with disabilities, programs for veterans, sources of innovation and entrepreneurship among adults, and an entrepreneurial program that provides teacher education.

Following is a look at four student start-ups >>

TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR REPUTATION

Patrick Ambron '09, President and CEO, BrandYourself Inc.

“They gave us invaluable guidance at a critical time in our development.”

—Patrick Ambron '09

Patrick Ambron '09 (left) and Evan McGowan-Watson '12 look on as Pete Kistler '10 discusses a feature on the *BrandYourself.com* web site.

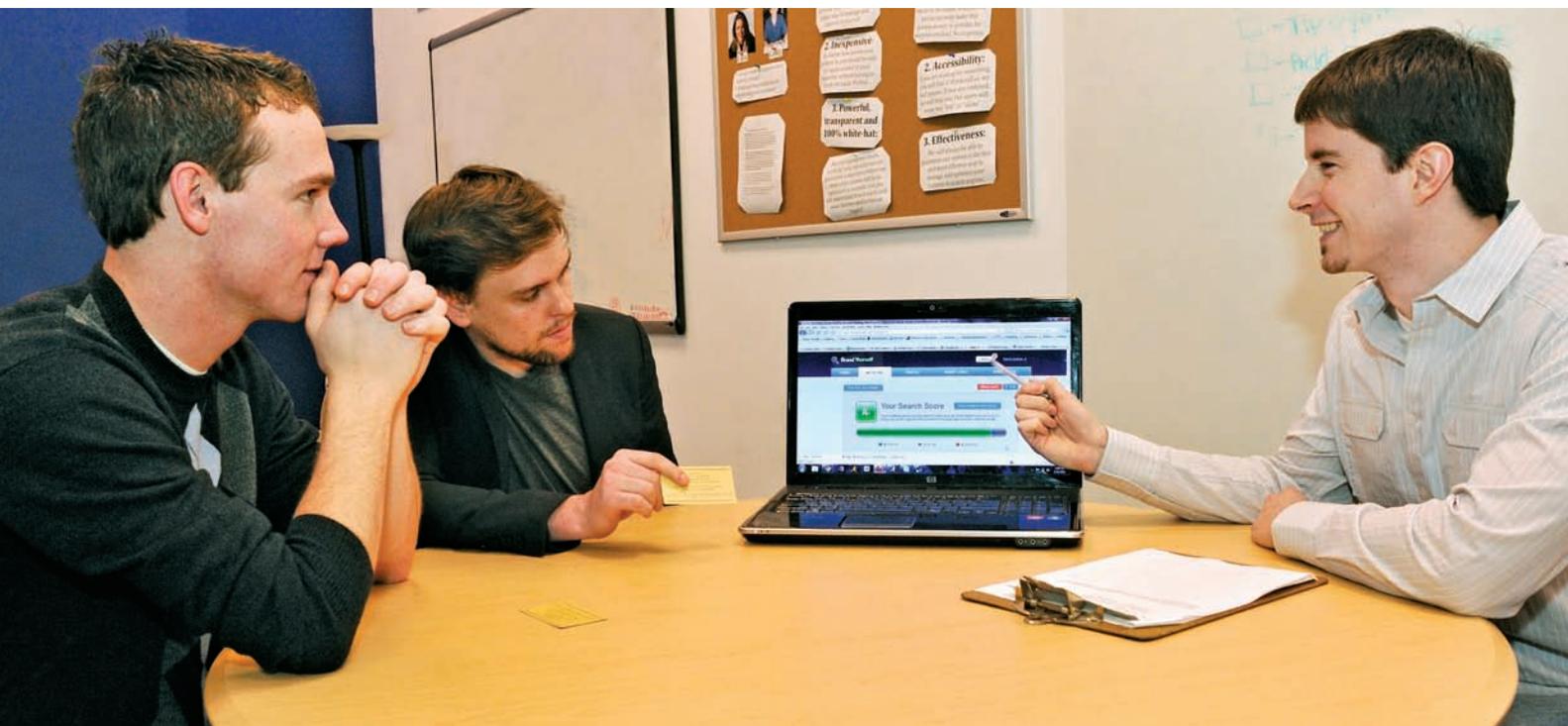
IT STARTED SIMPLY ENOUGH. IN FALL 2008, Newhouse School student Patrick Ambron '09 was commiserating with his friend Pete Kistler '10, an iSchool student who had been turned down for an internship. It was not the first such experience for Kistler. Prospective employers and others who googled him invariably received results on a convicted felon with the same name. He was an innocent victim of digital circumstance.

Ambron, who has a background in search engine optimization, helped his friend resolve the issue once and for all. “It’s easy enough if you have the skills,” he says. “But then we started thinking about all those people out there with a similar problem and no recourse. And we decided to create the first do-it-yourself platform for those who want some degree of control over searches done on their name.” The result was BrandYourself, the first online reputation-management company (*brandyourself.com*). Other students involved in its founding and development include iSchool graduate R.J. Sherman '09, and Trace Cohen '11 and Evan McGowan-Watson '12 of the Whitman School.

In spring 2009, they got down to serious business. Their business plan captured second place and a cash prize of \$10,000 in the Panasci Business Plan Competition, spon-

sored by the Whitman School. They began building the first version of their software product, and they were among the first five start-ups selected to participate in the IDEA Student Sandbox. “Our 12 weeks in the sandbox that summer were decisive,” Ambron says. “They gave us invaluable guidance at a critical time in our development.”

With the release of the first version of its software in early 2010, BrandYourself gained traction, attracting more than 20,000 customers and reaching a positive cash flow. “We had proved there was a need,” Ambron says, “and we proved we could get the product out.” In April 2011, BrandYourself received widespread attention by winning the \$200,000 grand prize in New York’s Creative Core Emerging Business Competition, sponsored by M&T Bank and New York State Business Development Corporation. In the ensuing weeks, the company raised \$1.5 million more in venture capital. “At last, we could step back, make the team stronger by hiring top-notch engineers, and focus on building the next version of our product,” Ambron says. They launched the latest version of the product this spring. “We’re confident it will blow our previous success out of the water,” Ambron says.



Tags Niepa G'13 (left), Nick Garritano '12, and Luis Romo '10, G'12 pose next to their automated door-handle sterilizing system. Through the use of ultraviolet light technology, they aim to help prevent the spread of deadly hospital-acquired infections.



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Would you like to have your story told on the entrepreneurship web site (www.cnyentrepreneurship.com)? Contact Bruce Kingma at brkingma@syr.edu.

GERM FREE

Luis Romo '10, G'12, Founder and CEO, Helios Innovative Technologies Inc.

IN SPRING 2011, LUIS ROMO '10, G'12 WAS working on a master's degree in bioengineering when he met Nick Garritano '12, an industrial design major, in the introductory entrepreneurship course, What's the Big Idea? The pair decided to collaborate on an idea of mutual interest. Romo's friend, Tags Niepa G'13, a doctoral student in chemical engineering, joined them to form a team. "We discovered we all share the same passion for improving the quality of life through technology," Romo says. "It's what drives us; it resonates through everything we do."

Their "idea" became their project. They developed a unique ultraviolet engineering technology to be used for the sterilization of medical tools and equipment. In May 2011, their prototype won the grand prize in the New York State Business Plan Competition, securing \$50,000 in seed funding. Last summer, Helios entered the IDEA Student Sandbox, gaining access to its network of advisors in professional and technical fields. During this time, discussions among partners and advisors resulted in what is called a "pivot" in start-up parlance—a basic change in a plan or product. "In order to minimize our development costs, we had to set aside our device for medical tools and focus on a

new product," Romo says.

The new product is an automated system that sterilizes door handles with ultraviolet light. The prototype was built by the team in its 10-by-10-foot cubicle. "We're continuing to partner with manufacturers and hospitals, including Syracuse VA and Upstate, to prepare a market-ready product," Romo says. "All of our efforts are geared to this goal."

In the meantime, Helios has garnered attention and praise in many quarters. Last November, the company was included in Global Entrepreneurship Week's roster of 50 most promising start-ups, chosen from ventures representing more than 60 countries. In January, Romo was invited to the White House to participate in the Northeast Business Leaders Forum on Jobs and the Economy. Todd Park, the chief technology officer of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has high expectations for the venture. Referring to the door-handle sanitizer at a press conference, Park said, "It captures in a nutshell why I'm so optimistic about health care right now. Entrepreneurs like Luis Romo, companies like Helios, apply ingenuity and solve problems that will improve health care and create jobs at the same time."

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A FAMILY AFFAIR

John Herb '15, Co-Founder and President, PictoNet LLC

TWO SAD FAMILY OCCASIONS LED JOHN HERB '15—a high school student in Rochester, New York, at the time—to devise a service, invent a product, and form PictoNet LLC, a company that scans photographs and provides users with a wide array of capabilities. In 2009, Herb's great uncle Pete died, leaving a collection of more than 6,000 photos documenting six decades of family history. Herb took on the task of scanning and organizing the collection, using facial recognition software. When his grandfather died later that year, Herb was able to quickly identify him in hundreds of photos, which he used to create a memorial for the wake. "When family members began asking me to scan their pictures, I realized this could be the genesis of a great business," he says.

Herb's brother, Larry, then majoring in interactive new media development at Rochester Institute of Technology, suggested they build a private family social media site that would provide a place to process and store images and perform related services for family members, near and far. "This insight was the catalyst for PictoNet," Herb says. "My idea morphed into the family social media business model, with the photo-scanning busi-

ness becoming the hook for acquiring a user-base."

When he entered the iSchool last fall, Herb was assigned to the Creativity, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship Learning Community. "Living with others who share my drive to build a business has been inspiring," says Herb, an information management and technology major. "It's given me added motivation to forge ahead and confront obstacles." For his fall semester project in What's the Big Idea?, he refined his business model. This spring, he enrolled in the demanding Idea2StartUp course in the IDEA Student Sandbox, where the goal was a ready-to-start venture by semester's end.

At the same time, Herb has been setting up and refining the operations side of his business with help from his sister, Kristina '13, who is majoring in finance, entrepreneurship, and information technology. They have begun taking orders from friends, family, and members of the learning community. This spring, they will launch their family social media site. "I've come a long way in a short time," Herb says. "Thanks to SU, I feel more confident than ever that PictoNet can become a meaningful business."

John Herb '15 and his sister, Kristina '13, are developing a family social media business designed to assist users with scanning and organizing photographs.





SHAPING FUTURES

DeBorah Little '15, Founder and President, Touchdown Presentations LLC

DEBORAH LITTLE '15 MAY NOT HAVE REALIZED it, but she's been assembling the pieces of an entrepreneurial career for years. "Now it seems to have been my destiny all along," she says. After graduating from Henninger High School in Syracuse in 1981, Little followed her desire to discover the world. She entered the airline industry and came to know it from the perspectives of customer service representative, flight attendant, and human resources specialist. "Everything in the industry is done by the book—as it has to be," Little says. "But as much as I loved my work, I needed more room for creativity."

After more than a decade with the airlines, she became a partner in a fledgling real estate and appraisal firm in Syracuse. "Instead of following standard operating procedure, we invented the rules as we grew the company," she says. "And it was a liberating experience." In a field where success depends on communication and networking, Little thrived. She served on corporate and community boards, including the board of directors of the Syracuse Chamber of Commerce. In 1997, she won a seat on the Syracuse Common

Council. But she lost her bid for re-election two years later. "I was bitterly disappointed," she says, "and I did some serious soul-searching."

Reviewing her varied work experience, Little saw herself as a self-starter and skilled manager with a gift for inspiring confidence in others—traits that are valued in every organization. She came up with the idea for a company that would provide professional training and development services to corporate and nonprofit groups. Her friends were strongly supportive of the notion. They included Floyd Little '67, the SU football legend and member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, whom she married in 2003. Two years later, in Seattle, she formed Touchdown Presentations. She won long-term contracts for programs ranging from team-building to career-awareness with clients that included the City of Seattle and the Federal Way (Washington) School District.

When the Littles returned to Syracuse last fall, she enrolled in the undergraduate information management and technology program at the iSchool. "With the degree, I'll gain the structure, the hard skills, and the solid foundation I need to advance Touchdown Presentations in this community and around the country," she says. "We're encouraged to think big here, and I'm doing just that."

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—DeBorah Little '15