

Economic Development Administration i6 Grant Client Success Story

Morehouse College Graduate's Startup Idea Seeks to Give Communities a Voice



Blake Stoner (left), a 2017 Morehouse College graduate, stands with Brandy Stanfield-Nagel faculty researcher with Georgia Tech's Innovation Ecosystems.

Stoner, an Atlanta native, learned the stories of their experience were different from what the media portrayed.

"I wanted to hear their stories about what happened," said Stoner, who graduated from Morehouse College in 2017 with a degree in economics. "It was the polar opposite of what the media was reporting and I thought that was interesting."

It also sparked what has now become an early-stage media tech startup designed to give communities a platform, and more importantly, a voice for dialogue and discussion on the issues most important to a given community and its residents.

Vngle, as the startup is called, is a community story-sharing platform. "It's designed to help give better representation and attention at to the community level to local affairs," Stoner said. "It's a citizen's journalism platform to let people in the community talk about what's going on in a very hyperlocal way and self-curated categories. We're buried under an avalanche of social information, but people are disconnected from their local realities and that's detrimental to community progress in general."

Having the idea was only the first step. But thanks to a U.S. Department of Commerce i6 Challenge Grant to fund small, but targeted high-impact initiatives that support startup creation, innovation, and commercialization. Stoner worked with Georgia Tech's Innovation Ecosystems, which received the funding to help him develop and refine his idea into a potentially viable startup.

Blake Stoner has always had an interest in hearing the "other side" and from voices in the communities that often aren't heard.

His grandfather was a Freedom Rider in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, and Stoner himself participated in voter registration drives such as one in Ferguson, Mo., in the wake of a police shooting of a black teen.

Speaking with Ferguson residents during the voter registration drive that followed the shooting death,

Using the i6 grant, Tech is collaborating with Georgia State and Clark Atlanta universities, Morehouse, the Morehouse School of Medicine, and Spelman College to develop entrepreneurship programs that support their unique visions.

Stoner met Brandy Stanfield-Nagel, a faculty researcher with Innovation Ecosystems, when she attended Morehouse's Startup at the House event in the fall of 2016. Their initial meeting – which lasted two hours – led to the refinement of his idea and then subsequent once-a-week meetings at the Tech campus for all of 2017.

"These meetings were to take Blake through the Lean Startup Methodology," Stanfield-Nagel said. "The process is the same whether you're a first-time entrepreneur or serial company builder: Who is your customer, what is the problem you're trying to solve, and what's your value proposition to solve it?"

Each week, Stoner updated Stanfield-Nagel on his progress and his efforts at customer discovery by talking to target or potential customers and what he learned from those discussions to further solidify his idea.

"Through those interviews and discussions, we came down to simply defining what it is he wanted to solve and then build the company around that core idea, that the ability to influence change is power," Stanfield-Nagel said.

The customer discovery process gave Stoner insight into the hard work it takes to build a company and the importance of setting measurable goals.

"It helped clarify things for me and keep me on track," he said. "Brandy and her working with me, not only helped me be accountable, it also helped me understand the necessity of Vngle."

Their collaboration via the i6 Challenge Grant also set the foundation for Stoner's acceptance into a graduate program at Columbia University where he is studying strategic communications in a yearlong intensive program.

"In order to take Vngle to the next stage, I needed to do something to build my journalism and communications skills, and there's no better place than at Columbia and in New York, the communications capital of the world."

While at Columbia he will continue to build on his idea while gaining practical communications and media skills.

He plans to return to Atlanta when done and build out the platform for Vngle.

"I want Vngle to be that platform where every person is acting in a way that contributes to community information, similar to how veins circulate blood throughout the body," Stoner said. "That circulation keeps the body alive and with Vngle, we're trying to be the lifeline of communities and keep them active."

A program of Georgia Tech's economic development arm, the Enterprise Innovation Institute (EI²), Innovation Ecosystems helps launch, operate, and sustain successful entrepreneurship and innovation programs in Community Economic Development, Curriculum Development, Lean Startup Methodology, Incubation Program Management, and Economic Impact Analysis, among other offerings and services. The Economic Development Administration (EDA) supports Georgia Tech's Innovation-based Ecosystem initiative at EI².

WIRELESS IRRIGATION STARTUP RESERVOIR CLOSES SEED ROUND

Reservoir, the Athens, Ga.-based a technology startup pioneering wireless irrigation, closed a seed round with Macon, Ga.-based [Central Piedmont Investment Group](#).

Reservoir is a startup company in the Advanced Technology Development Center's [ATDC Accelerate](#) portfolio of companies. A program of the Georgia Institute of Technology, ATDC is the state of Georgia's technology incubator and works with entrepreneurs to help them learn, launch, scale, and succeed in creating successful companies.

Terms were not disclosed, but the angel fund's managing director, Bob Easter, said the investment in Reservoir fits its strategy of funding promising startups in Georgia and the Southeast to foster the region's economy.

"Reservoir is poised to be the first to market with a solution that irrigators have wanted for decades," Easter said.

The funding will allow Reservoir to complete field tests with 10 of its client businesses in metro Atlanta, including Irrigation Consultant Services, MNI Direct, and Moon's Tree Farm.

These early adopters will provide feedback on the newly developed Reservoir Spoke, a product that simplifies irrigation systems by replacing conventional hardware — wires, controllers, output modules, surge arresters, and decoders. This feedback will also help Reservoir improve the Spoke app, which lets users manage irrigation by site and zone from anywhere in the world.

[Jesse Lafian](#), who founded Reservoir in 2016 as a junior horticulture student at the University of Georgia, explained how the Spoke adds value to a main target market.

"Irrigation contractors often bury thousands of feet of wire on a site and later have to make continual repairs," Lafian said. "The Spoke allows them to add new valves without connecting wire from existing ones, saving money on installation and maintenance."

Reservoir's new technology will also benefit plant nurseries and tree farms.

"Many growers can't use wired irrigation systems due to lightning. Their only option is to control valves manually, which is often very labor intensive," Lafian said. "Since the Spoke is wireless, it allows them to automate irrigation with minimal risk of lightning damage."

Central Piedmont Investment Group's seed funding comes after Reservoir's raise of \$66,000 from pitch competitions including UGA Next Top Entrepreneur and FABricate, and grant programs including UGA Innovation Gateway/NSF I-Corps and Georgia Research Alliance.

Reservoir credits its success to support from the University of Georgia and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Advanced Technology Development Center, which is the state's technology incubator. Reservoir is also a member of Four Athens, an incubator for the Athens startup community and an ATDC partner.

ATDC's work in Athens as a partner to help the region expand and further develop its technology startup ecosystem stems from a 2015 U.S. Department of Commerce \$500,000 i6 Challenge grant to the Georgia Institute of Technology to support a sweeping innovation and entrepreneurship initiative in Athens, Augusta, and downtown Atlanta. The award, which Georgia Tech is matching with an additional \$517,787, is being used to provide education, support, and programs to develop the entrepreneurial community in Georgia in those three communities.

"The mentorship and fundraising opportunities provided by these organizations were essential in helping Reservoir close this seed round," Lafian said. "They have been integral to our growth and success."

ATDC @ AUGUSTA'S STARTUP ACADEMY CREATES SUCCESS

The Advanced Technology Development Center's ATDC @ Augusta program's Startup Academy is helping that community build its tech-focused entrepreneurial community.

The Startup Academy is an intensive, 12-week experience for technology entrepreneurs who want to launch or grow their early-stage startups. Classes will be held in downtown Augusta at Enterprise Mill, 1450 Greene St., and the Clubhouse, 540 Telfair St. There is no cost to apply, but those who are accepted into the Academy must commit to the 12-week schedule and have a technology-enabled startup or idea.

A program of the Georgia Institute of Technology, ATDC is Georgia's startup technology incubator and works with entrepreneurs statewide to help them learn, launch, scale, and succeed in the creation of viable companies. ATDC's Augusta initiative is one of several core cities across the state — including Athens, Savannah, and Peachtree Corners — where the incubator offers its ATDC @ startup programming.

ATDC's efforts in Augusta to partner with that community in its efforts to build its technology and innovation ecosystem is being supported by a 2015 U.S. Department of Commerce \$500,000 i6 Challenge grant to the Georgia Institute of Technology. Georgia Tech matched the i6 Challenge grant with an additional \$517,787 to support comprehensive innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives in Athens, Augusta, and downtown Atlanta. The award is being used to provide education, support, and programs to develop the entrepreneurial community in Georgia in those three communities.

"Augusta has a growing community of entrepreneurial talent and we want to tap into that and help it thrive and flourish," said, Scott Hardigree, ATDC's startup catalyst in Augusta.

He said there was great success with the 2017 Startup Academy. One of the graduates from that cohort, Skyraider Aeronautics, joined the ATDC Accelerate portfolio.

"Participating in ATDC's Startup Academy this past spring was a game changer for Skyraider. We were just two guys fresh from the military with an idea, but didn't know how to take our idea and form a business," said Daniel Scheiner, Skyraider Aeronautics' CEO. "The essential skills taught during the Academy has enabled our business to thrive."

Skyraider recently received a total of \$30,000 in seed funding from two angel investors.

ATDC @ ATHENS ACCELERATOR CLASS EXPANDS, YIELDS STRONG RESULTS

The UGA Idea Accelerator program, which is powered by Georgia Tech's Advanced Technology Development Center, chooses a cohort of promising business concepts to be put to the test each semester.

Launched in 2014 with just four teams participating, the Accelerator class now averages about 50 teams per year.

Organized by local economic development nonprofit Four Athens, in partnership with ATDC, and the University of Georgia Entrepreneurship Program, the Accelerator is an eight-week experience and participants meet twice a week for 90-minute sessions on a series of startup viability topics that range from identifying customers and making a pitch to partners and investors, to validating financial assumptions. Teams that survive the process are given an opportunity to pitch to a panel of active investors for a \$5,000 prize, plus membership into Four Athens.

The total number of teams that have participated in the Accelerator is 265. Of that number, 48 have gone beyond the concept stage to become full-fledged startup companies. Some of those have been selected to join the ATDC Accelerate portfolio, including Reservoir, Vestigo, Cosmi, Uzo, and PuppyFax. ATDC Accelerate is for early-stage companies that have developed a minimal viable product (MVP) and have begun refining product-market fit. ATDC's curriculum and services offered at this level are designed to accelerate customer acquisition and product development.

The growth comes as a result of ATDC's efforts in Athens with its partner, Four Athens, to support the expansion of the technology and startup ecosystem. Those support activities are being supported by a 2015 U.S. Department of Commerce \$500,000 i6 Challenge grant to the Georgia Institute of Technology. Georgia Tech matched the i6 Challenge grant with an additional \$517,787 to support comprehensive innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives in Athens, Augusta, and downtown Atlanta. The award is being used to provide education, support, and programs to develop the entrepreneurial community in Georgia in those three communities.