PitchNOLA winner comes full circle

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When entrepreneur Larry Irvin Jr. took the Freeman Auditorium stage at last year's PitchNOLA startup competition, it did not go well.

PitchNOLA, an annual social entrepreneurship elevator pitch compeition, took place Jan. 28 on Tulane's uptown campus. (Photo by Guillermo Cabrera-Rojo)

He froze up a minute into his pitch, rushing out of the auditorium as a stunned audience watched his business partner Kristyna Jones dash up to finish the presentation.

Unbowed, the two came back for a second shot last week for PitchNOLA 2015: Community Solutions and more than redeemed themselves. Their venture, Brothers Empowered to Teach (BE2T), won the top $5,000 prize in the annual elevator pitch contest for social entrepreneurs seeking to solve community challenges in New Orleans.

BE2T recruits African-American college students to work as teaching assistants and mentors in area public schools. The goal is to close the achievement gap for at-risk students by inspiring and incentivizing men of color to become teachers.

“We’ve hit another milestone,” Jones said. “Winning means that stipends will be covered this fall for two of our 15 (classroom) participants.”

Held annually at Tulane University since 2009, PitchNOLA allows 10 semi-finalists to go before a panel of judges and a live audience to pitch their ideas to take on pressing, local issues in workforce development, children and families, social justice and the environment. The contest is co-hosted by the A. B. Freeman School of Business, Tulane Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching and Propeller: A Force for Social Innovation.

“I’ve judged this event since it’s started, and these entrepreneurs had the best pitches I’ve seen, across the board,” said judge Leslie Jacobs.

UnCommon Construction won $3,000 as the second place winner and $640 as the audience favorite. The nonprofit builds houses with high school apprentices and uses the proceeds to provide them with expanded college and career opportunities.

Gator & Crane placed third, winning $2,000. The company seeks to build an environmentally sustainable grocery store that offers healthy foods while reducing packaging waste.