Internship placement startup takes top prize in Virtual Pitch Friday competition

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Matthew Friedman (BSM ’22), left, and Sofia Viscuso (BSM ’22) won the grand prize of $5,000 at this year’s Virtual Pitch Friday competition for their startup Rize, a service that helps more diverse students gain access to internships.

A new company founded by Freeman students to create space for more diverse students to gain access to internships took home the grand prize of $5,000 in April as the winner of this year’s Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation Virtual Pitch Friday competition.

Rize helps connect small and midsized businesses to students through short-term, paid projects, saving both the company and student time and resources. Founders Sofia Viscuso (BSM ’22) and Matthew Friedman (BSM ’22) started the company to help more diverse students gain year-round professional opportunities and connections, which traditionally tend to favor more privileged candidates, while supporting small businesses’ growth.

“The Virtual Pitch was such a great opportunity for us,” said Viscuso. “We have been working so hard the past eight months, and from our official website launch in August, so it was really nice to take a step back and appreciate the progress we have made. Receiving such great feedback from the judges and other competitors helped to validate our mission and the growth we hope to achieve.”

Formally known as Pizza Pitch Friday, Virtual Pitch Friday is a monthly competition in which Tulane student entrepreneurs pitch their ventures to judges for the chance to win a $500 prize and a spot in the grand prize round. This year’s grand prize of $5,000 was made possible thanks to donations from the Tulane Association of Business Alumni (TABA) and Brian Egwele (BSM ’01), one of the Lepage Center’s Innovators in Residence. Originally, the teams pitched their ventures in Room 320 of the Goldring/Woldenberg Business Complex while enjoying a lunch of pizza provided by the Lepage Center, but to ensure the safety of teams and judges during the pandemic, the competition needed to change.

Pizza Pitch Friday quickly got a new name and format: Virtual Pitch Friday. Since October 2020, teams, judges and organizers have come together in a Zoom room at 11 a.m. on one Friday per month. One by one, competitors share their screens, pitch their ideas, and answer questions from a panel of judges made up of Tulane alumni, who eventually select the day’s winner.

During the 2020-2021 school year, the Lepage Center hosted six Virtual Pitch Friday competitions, with the first five rounds determining which teams would compete in the sixth and final round to determine this year's grand prize winner.

In addition to Rize, four other ventures earned a spot in the final round by winning one of this year's Virtual Pitch Friday competitions.

- **Greedient**, a company founded by Josh Brownstein (BSM '21) and Emmet Farrel (BSM '21), is the developer of a browser extension that helps diners analyze restaurant menus and identify potential allergens. The extension currently has more than 40 restaurants programmed and works with a number of delivery services.
- **Pass Dat Joy**, founded by Shaymaa Abdalal (PHTM '13), uses artistic expression to address the mental health and well-being of children and their parents during COVID-19. The company provides monthly art toolkits inspired by New Orleans culture along with wellness information and community resources.
- **Clementine,** founded by Abbi Larkin (BSM '21) and Catherine McNeel (BSM '21), is an online event planning platform designed to make it easier to plan small- to medium-sized events by acting as the middleman between people planning parties and vendors.
- **DAWn**, a company founded by Diego Pinzon (SSE '21) and Sam Matluck (SSE '21), allows musicians around the globe to work together through technology that enables communication and collaboration among Digital Audio Workstations, the software used in audio production and editing.

"I'm so proud of this year's Virtual Pitch Friday winners, and especially our grand prize winner, Rize," said Rob Lalka, executive director of the Lepage Center. "The student startup scene here at Tulane is becoming more innovative, sophisticated and exciting, which is largely due to the fact that our students are receiving the mentorship and putting in the work that it takes to build great businesses."