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Saint Leo University's Social Enterprise Accelerator Program Helps Nonprofit Organizations Innovate

► *From the Tampa area to Rwanda, participants gained skills to advance projects and generate earned revenues*

ST. LEO, FL – Helping nonprofit organizations not only survive but thrive is one of the goals of Saint Leo University's Social Enterprise Accelerator online program. While some agencies and organizations struggle to find funding, this training provides the tools and expertise for earning revenues through developing new initiatives and services.

"It's using business principles to help nonprofits be financially sustainable," said Dr. Mark Gesner, vice president of Community Engagement & Communications for Saint Leo, and the founding director of the program. "The Social Enterprise Accelerator features lessons in entrepreneurship, leadership development, and impact measurement to help organizational leaders move their organizations from financial dependency to self-sufficiency." Gesner also noted that the program appeals to wide array of funders and partners since it addresses social and economic impact goals.

In the spring, Saint Leo hosted its first cohort of nonprofit organizations for a 14-week program that included leadership coaching, business mentoring, technical support services, and access to subject matter experts.

The first cohort included:

- Coalition for the Homeless of Pasco County Inc.;
- Florida Association of Veteran-Owned Businesses;
- Grown to Help;
- Light & Legacy Foundation;

- Lighthouse for the Visually Impaired & Blind Inc.;
- Sunrise of Pasco County Domestic & Sexual Violence Center; and,
- The Well Incorporated.

On April 25, the cohort gathered via Zoom to “pitch” their ideas for projects that will benefit their nonprofit organizations and the people and communities they serve. Just like the TV show *Shark Tank*, the participants gave an amount of “seed funding” needed to start or complete their project.

Teaming for Success

Two of the nonprofit organizations — the Coalition for the Homeless of Pasco County and Lighthouse for the Visually Impaired & Blind, which serves Pasco, Hernando and Citrus counties — joined forces. Stefanie Pontlitz, executive director of Lighthouse, and Jennifer Watts, chief program officer for the homeless coalition, asked “Can Laundry Change Lives?”

While those who are homeless need access to clean clothes, those who are visually impaired and blind need jobs and accessible work opportunities. Why not combine the two?

With space available at Lighthouse’s 3,000-square-foot warehouse facility in New Port Richey, Watts and Pontlitz came up with the idea of purchasing industrial washers and dryers that could be installed there. Visually impaired clients of Lighthouse could be employed in a safe environment to clean and dry the clothing, which would be provided to clients of the homeless coalition.

“One of the biggest stereotypes is that our seniors are our biggest population of those with vision, loss, or blindness,” Pontlitz said “But in our community, it is actually the working age population that suffers the most from vision, loss, and blindness.”

Watts shared information from the annual point-in-time count of Pasco County’s homeless population in January 2023, which showed that “the bulk of this population is within that same age bracket of a working population,” similar to the visually impaired population numbers.

“We’re looking to work with corporate, local shelters, and our county government,” Watts said.

“In addition to the partnerships that Jennifer just described, we would need to outfit the warehouse with new washer-dryer units, electrical upgrades to ensure that the safety, then installations, the cleaning supplies, the actual cleaning supplies for the laundry, and our annual

increases we know are going to happen with the electricity,” Pontlitz said. “The concept is that my folks at Lighthouse would do the actual cleaning, while her folks with the Homeless Coalition would do the transporting from our customers to the location and back.”

The first-year investment would be \$21,000, the pair said.

“What we're trying to do with the program, and with the funding that we're seeking today is to create that impact of investing in our individuals who we work with,” Watts said. “We're looking to provide positive employment history, training, in order to invest in those clients to become self-sufficient.”

Serving as the mentor for Watts and Pontlitz was Taylor Muller, business development officer at PNC Institutional Asset Management in Tampa. “This presentation just really clearly showcases how you can bring together two distinct organizations, two distinct communities that are helping both vulnerable or challenged individuals really be able to find an opportunity to come together and support the greater community and enhance their own lives and potentially their families as well,” Muller said of the “pitch” to raise funds for the project to benefit clients of Lighthouse and the coalition for the homeless.

Through Saint Leo University’s Social Enterprise Accelerator program, “they’ve dreamed up a program that bridges that gap between challenges as opportunities, and they’re using tools that are already available as well as leveraging the strength of the people that they have involved in trying to identify some other areas where they can continue to assist with the needs, whether that be for these individuals themselves, or for community partners and partnerships,” Muller said.

Food for Thought

Another Tampa-area participant in Saint Leo University’s Social Enterprise Accelerator program was WellFed Community, a part of The Well Inc., which was started as a Christian community in Ybor Heights. In 2015, it was incorporated as a nonprofit organization with a portfolio of programs, services, and social ventures including WellBuilt Bike and WellFed Community.

Representing WellFed Community were Dhalia Bumbaca, co-founder, and Jon Dengler, CEO of WellBuilt Bikes, also part of The Well Inc. Located in University Mall on East Fowler Avenue in Tampa, it is a “nonprofit bike shop that sells refurbished bikes at affordable prices and invests the sales revenue into [its] Earn-A-Bike program so those with little to no money can access and own a bike of their own,” its website states.

"Being WellFed is more than just satisfying your basic needs, but also feeding yourself in such a way that you have the energy and enthusiasm for life," Bumbaca said. "We are working to make food, make sense."

Food-related illness, whether it be diabetes, hypertension, or cancer, is a leading cause of death in the United States. "Currently our relationship with food is broken when it's killing us at these rates," Dengler said. "So what if instead, we worked holistically and in collaboration at every level of the food system, so that our diets become a source of life rather than being a leading cause of death?"

WellFed is building healthier communities through food education and sustainable practices and is working with food banks, community gardens, community centers, health care facilities, universities, and other nonprofit organizations.

"Furthermore, we work at the system level as researchers and consultants investigating things like food sovereignty, think agency and autonomy and local food systems," Bumbaca said.

"Think of city- and countywide initiatives.

"Ultimately, our dream is a local economy around food, and we want to emphasize that this is not a hippie movement," she continued. "Food is a \$1.5 trillion industry of which we hope to capture for the benefit of our community."

And WellFed has been successful. Since January 2021, "we have doubled the number of neighbors we're able to serve," Bumbaca said, "and quadrupled the number of organizations we work with, and have a projected revenue of over \$200,000 for 2023."

However, the community — and the world — experienced what can happen when supermarkets are empty, soil is depleted, and money is spent on nutritional-related chronic diseases, Dengler noted.

Now, WellFed hopes to raise \$55,000 not covered in current funding sources and budgets to provide training for food educators and publish our curriculum "so that we can really scale this model," Dengler said.

Value of the Program

Participants in Saint Leo University's Social Enterprise Accelerator received a micro-credential for completing the program. But more importantly, they prepared to "pitch" ideas for outside-of-the-box investment in their nonprofit organizations.

“The most valuable part of the program was the time it made me take to think about our social enterprise opportunities,” said Pontlitz of Lighthouse for the Blind. “As a CEO, being pulled in so many directions, it’s easy to push social enterprise opportunities to the bottom of the list; the class made me bring it back to the top and make it happen.”

Watts, of the Coalition for the Homeless, noted that the program helped her understand the process of planning, establishing, and ensuring the success of a social enterprise project. “By breaking all the steps down and getting input from several professionals in the field, this large undertaking began feeling more attainable,” she said.

The WellFed Community representatives agreed, saying “the Saint Leo Social Enterprise Accelerator allowed us to invest in the development of our team and expand our professional network.”

Bringing the Social Enterprise Accelerator to Life

Serving as mentors for the cohort were: **David Baldwin**, vice president and controller for San Antonio Citizens Federal Credit Union in Tampa; **Jamie D. Elder**, manager of the Small Business Development Center for the Industrial Council of Nearwest Chicago; **Lynne Dixon-Speller**, dean of academics and co-founder of the Edessa School of Fashion; **Dr. Gene Manzanet**, senior director for business development for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp.; **Taylor Muller**, business development officer at PNC in Tampa; Russ Robertson, managing member of Cap Ex Advisory Group; **Dr. Melanie Storms**, a clinical psychologist and higher education leader; and **Dr. Krystal White**, CEO of Free Leadership Inc.

In addition to Gesner, the Social Enterprise Accelerator team included **Mehak Arora**, program coordinator, who just earned her MBA in data analytics from Saint Leo; **Dr. Nancy Stanford Blair**, instructor, who is professor *emerita* of doctoral leadership studies at Cardinal Stritch University; **Sandy Brown**, master leadership coach, who is the founder of Wide Awake, a personal and leadership development firm; **Tammy Charles**, instructor, who is the founder and chief strategist at Inovo Strategic Consulting; **Jeffrey Montanez-Jones**, instructor and impact measurement specialist, who is the founder of Basil Data; and **Dr. Matt Wagner**, instructor and technical support specialist, who is the chief program officer for Main Street America.

Sponsorship of the program was key to its success, Gesner noted. Lead sponsors for the program were the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation, San Antonio Federal Citizens Credit Union, Shumaker Advisors, and Vistra Communications. Program partners were the Tampa Bay

Business Journal and Today's Business and its co-founder and Chief Digital Officer, Billy Ash, who is a 2011 graduate of Saint Leo University.

Saint Leo University President Ed Dadez shared how the vision of the Social Enterprise Accelerator ties in to the university's core values. "We inspire diversity of thought in our next generation of leaders and the courage to boldly confront the world's challenges through service to others," Dadez said.

"You are the future, and your work is important," he told the participants. "Thank you for focusing your efforts on good and for making a difference in the world."

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Photos:

Lighthouse for the Visually Impaired & Blind in Pasco County

At work at Lighthouse for the Visually Impaired & Blind

WellFed logo

Rwanda: At the end of Saint Leo Social Impact Accelerator Program - Cohort One, the program's committee members together with other program participants decided to invest \$1,000 in Grown to Help's work.

During the pitching session, Grown to Help team presented their new project aimed at sustaining the organization's programs while impacting the lives of women in their community. GTH has decided to use the \$1,000 to establish and pilot test its Women Creative Center Project. To test the effectiveness of the project in collaboration with the local government, GTH identified four young women aged between 18 to 24, Clementine, Diane, Mutesi, and Consolée. Shown is Diane, 23, mom to twins, who had thought about enrolling in professional courses such as dressmaking, but her limited financial capacities couldn't allow her to access them. Now, she is taking sewing courses, through Grown to Help.

About Saint Leo University

Saint Leo University is one of the largest Catholic universities in the nation, offering more than 60 undergraduate and graduate-level degree programs and specializations to more than 15,300 students each year. Founded in 1889 in the Benedictine tradition, the private, nonprofit

university is known for providing an education to learners of all backgrounds and ages. Saint Leo is regionally accredited and offers a residential campus in the Tampa Bay region of Florida, at education centers, and through an online program for students anywhere. The university is home to more than 103,000 alumni. Learn more at saintleo.edu.

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