

NIIC outlines new strategic plan

Technology

Doug LeDuc



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Jillian Lee and Amber Harper were honored as two of the top entrepreneurs participating in programs at the Northeast Indiana Innovation Center during an event that provided an update on its new strategic plan.

Lee is the founder of UniqueLee Creations LLC, which helps people stand out and feel unique with custom bling items. She received the 2019 Mirro Business Builder Award during the annual Ideas@Work signature event that NIIC held April 16 at the Parkview Mirro Center for Research & Innovation.

Harper is the founder of Burned-In Teacher, a teacher coaching and education technology consulting business. She was among the first startup founders to participate in a diverse entrepreneur accelerator program offered by the Women's Economic Opportunity Center at the NIIC. She received the 2019 WEOC Founders Cup Award.

In addition to the award presentations and NIIC strategic plan update, the fundraising event acquainted supporters with the employee engagement work of Santiago Jaramillo, co-founder and CEO of Indianapolis-based Emplify, who delivered this year's Ideas@Work keynote address.

Karl LaPan, president and CEO of the Innovation Center at 3201 Stellhorn Road in

Fort Wayne, outlined four initiatives in his description of NIIC's new strategic plan.

"Our first initiative is really focused on enterprising communities, looking at access and onramps for entrepreneurs, creating more destinations for entrepreneurs to get the stuff that they need to be successful," he said.

"What we're recognizing is they really need four things to be successful. They need management, they need money, they need markets and they need mentors," LaPan said.

The Innovation Center is working with new organizations engaged in business startup activity in the region "to create new access points for entrepreneurs to be able to start and grow faster, cheaper and stronger than they would if left to their own," he said.

The second initiative, funded by a Foellinger Foundation planning grant, looks at equality and economic prosperity.

"One of the things in an Urban Institute report that really struck a chord with us is that Fort Wayne has seen substantial increases in its economic prosperity but ... historically excluded populations have not had that same access to economic prosperity," LaPan said.

"And so our second initiative really focuses on new trusted connectors going to the immigrant population, going to the hardest to employ, going to ex-offenders, working with the library in rural parts of Allen County and other places, going to the disabled and creating a more level playing field for ... groups that have economic interest in wanting to start things but don't have access to the resources to do it."

For his explanation of the third initiative on new centers of excellence, he referred to a presentation delivered earlier in the event by Mike Fritsch, NIIC's entrepreneur in residence and director of revenue development.

Fritsch had talked about the impact Internet of Things technologies would have on health-related markets — including medical devices, insurance, health care, pharma — and how important those markets

are to Indiana's economy.

The Fort Wayne-based technology business incubator was among 40 organizations from 28 states and two territories awarded federal Economic Development Administration funding to establish and expand an expertise cluster-focused commercialization program.

The three-year, \$750,000 grant NIIC received for this came from the EDA's 2018 Regional Innovation Strategies Program and will support creation of an Indiana Connected Health IoT Lab/Network

The technology connects systems and devices, so they can communicate with each other and be used remotely in an intelligent way as they act on constantly updated shared information.

A dollar-for-dollar funds match required for the grant is being provided by founding partners with impressive leadership and strong interests in the health care technology sector, such as corporations, foundations and economic development groups, NIIC said. They include:

Indiana Economic Development Corp., Clear Object, Indiana Tech, Purdue University Fort Wayne, Parkview Mirro Center for Research and Innovation, Elevate Ventures Northeast Indiana, Indiana University Research and Technology Corp., Vision Tech Partners Northeast Indiana, Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, and Greater Fort Wayne Inc.

Local funds raised for the project came to \$762,210, bringing the match to just over 1:1.

"We have a proof of concept center that will pilot and experiment with innovative ideas, a connected lab that will partner with the Indiana economic development organizations to reach even global markets. And the NIIC will provide ongoing intensive business coaching and connection to capital for promising projects," Fritsch said.

"This project is a big deal for Indiana. It's going to create real and purposeful

collaboration between organizations that will create real value, real products, real new startups, real corporate spinoffs and real jobs, and market sectors that are really important to Indiana — really," he said.

The fourth initiative is focused on the Innovation Center's traditional place-based program.

"We were designated by the governor as an opportunity zone. We're excited about the leadership and direction of Purdue Fort Wayne and our ability to be integrated into that planning and other things that really leverage place-based," LaPan said.

"One of the things we know, and this has been true for at least the last 20 years, is that successful centers like ours need to be closely aligned with higher educational resources, and so we're really pleased about the opportunity to take our place-making services to the next level."

LaPan ended his presentation by congratulating Allied Payment Network and its founder and CEO, Ralph Marcuccilli, for attracting a \$4 million investment by Michigan-based Plymouth Growth Partners.

Allied Payment Network established itself as a leading innovator in the financial services industry by being the first to market with a photo bill pay product it calls PicturePay. It employs more than 20 workers at the NIIC.

"Allied was one of our graduates of our incubator and then our emergent growth center, and so to Ralph and his team at table 24, we're all very, very proud of the \$4 million infusion from Plymouth Ventures," he said.

"I think that really speaks to the quality of the technology and the business model of what's happening here in northeast Indiana."

In a part of his presentation referring to metrics NIIC collects to measure its performance, LaPan said companies started at the center pay an average wage of about \$54,000, which he said was 30 percent higher than the average wage for the region and the county.