THE UNION-RECORDER

Youth Entrepreneur Program builds on first-year success, welcomes new student entrepreneurs

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YEP committee members, student business owners, mentors and representatives from Century Bank & Trust and Exchange Bank at the Youth Entrepreneur Program kickoff event. (Contributed photo)

The Milledgeville-Baldwin County Youth Entrepreneur Program (YEP) kicked off its second year Wednesday, Oct. 28, with a mentor/student kickoff event, bringing together local high school students, business leaders, and community mentors to help turn student business ideas into reality.

Led by the Milledgeville-Baldwin County Chamber of Commerce and a committee of community partners, YEP gives local high school students the opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills, receive one-on-one mentorship, and gain hands-on experience through a three-round business pitch competition.

The committee includes representatives from Milledgeville Main Street/Downtown Development Authority, Georgia Power, Georgia College & State University, the Baldwin County Board of Education, local businesses, and other community partners.

During the kickoff, students met their mentors, received an overview of the program, and took professional headshots. Each student business also received $500 in seed money to help get its venture started, made possible by a grant from the Knight Foundation through Georgia College and State University.

Representatives from Century Bank & Trust and Exchange Bank also participated in the kickoff. Brian Robinson of Century Bank & Trust and Jonathan Pope of Exchange Bank explained the loan process and assisted with the student seed funding, helping participants better understand the financial side of starting a business.

"We're excited to see YEP return for a second year and build on the success of our inaugural year. One of the most rewarding things is that all three of last year's top businesses are still operating today. That's exactly what we hoped to see when we started this program. With the support of our mentors, local businesses and community partners, we're excited to give another group of students the opportunity to learn, grow, and take the first steps toward building something of their own," said Kara Lassiter, President and CEO of the Milledgeville-Baldwin County Chamber of Commerce.

Throughout the program, students will work with their mentors to develop their business concepts, learn about business formation, finance, and marketing, and prepare to present their ideas to a panel of judges. The competition will culminate in a final pitch event on March 11, 2027, where the top three businesses will compete for additional cash prizes.

Special thanks to Fouts Bros Inc., Title Sponsor of YEP, for its continued support; the Knight Foundation through Georgia College and State University for funding the student seed money; and Lifescapes Photography for capturing participants' professional headshots.

This year's student business concepts and mentor pairings include:

—Crafts – Ale Zabala | Mentor: Coni Barnes

—Fall Line Pressure Washing – Bryce Miller & Jonah Smith | Mentor: Kyle Cullars

—Haipule Army – La Darion Horne | Mentor: Rod Roberson

—Kat & Mack Designs. – Kathleen Augustine & Mackenzie Sloan | Mentor: Crystal Law

—LittleLink – Sadie Matthews & Victoria Byrd | Mentor: Angela Criscoe

—Main Street Digital – Dustin Aragon-Perez | Mentor: Kristin Grebel

—Milly Media – Jesse Epps | Mentors: Hannah Tyson & Rachel Bradley

—Peak Performance Landscaping – Brnadon Burney | Mentor: Wes Cummings

—Piphanie's Sweet Treats– Epiphanie Wood | Mentor: Bridgette Smith

—Profound Flights – Johntavious Mosley | Mentor: Bruce Hood