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Launch of high-tech dreams

Mike Tierney - Staff
Saturday, May 20, 2006

Business at the state Capitol had brought Dr. David Hess here from Augusta when he heard a familiar beep. Now, where to go to answer the urgent call?

The neurologist needed a public place with wireless Internet access. He found one --- a Taco Bell.

Between sips of a fountain soda, he fired up his laptop, then accessed video, a CT scan and other medical data of an apparent stroke victim at a rural Georgia hospital several counties away.

Tele-diagnosis complete, Hess prescribed the drug TPA, which breaks up blood clots, thus saving yet another patient he has never met from possible brain damage. As curious chalupa-eaters looked on, he packed up his computer and strolled out.

The Medical College of Georgia chairman was back in town Thursday wearing his second hat --- founder of ReachMDConsult, the little company that he and colleagues birthed in 2002 to evaluate possible stroke sufferers fast from fast-food joints or wherever convenient.

He represented one of the start-ups making sales pitches to a panel of local corporate who's-whos at the Georgia Public Broadcasting studios. From an original field of 54 --- one a pair of 16-year-olds, one who said

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she was selling high-tech happiness --- the Hess-ians had advanced to a final foursome in the inaugural Business Launch Competition. Co-sponsored by the Georgia Research Alliance, a public-private partnership among state universities, business and government, and the Technology Association of Georgia, a nonprofit geared to fostering economic tech development, the contest dangled an enticing prize: \$100,000 in cash, \$150,000 more in professional services.

Half of the surviving hopefuls had Georgia Tech connections, each hatched by faculty or post-graduate students. Diagis creates software-development tools that detect security flaws before products are released. Intrinsic Security offers devices that monitor the flow of information over the Internet, analyzing and flagging problems.

Rounding out the cast of four was Evoca, a Savannah firm with technology that allows for recording and sharing audio files over the Internet.

Borrowing a (Web) page from the NCAA basketball tournament and another from TV reality show formats, contest organizers had held a preliminary round. Heads of the nascent companies, one hand around a PowerPoint clicker, presented their cases to the judges. Then, the last four did it again.

The academic song-and-dance was serious stuff, laced with some high-tech, highbrow humor.

"It was nice to speak to other nerds on your level," Diagis CEO Cristina Might said before the last round.

The talks were peppered with acronyms, and salted with scholarly explanations for how their systems worked. For the simpletons watching in person and live via the Web, the speakers provided real-world analogies or demonstrations.

Diagis, promised Vice President Pelham Norville, goes beyond a home security system for your computer, turning your house into a floating castle inside a moat.

Intrinsic Security, assured President Ellen Zegura, will improve vastly your existing capabilities of unearthing Internet culprits, comparable to sending only one of every 8,000 fliers through airport screening.

Evoca can preserve your grandparents' voices as an audio scrapbook, noted CEO Murem Sharpe, or allow your teenager's garage band to record tunes and sell them to subscribers for a buck.

And ReachMDConsult? Hess' appeal was rooted in the crying need for tele-medicine to treat strokes.

He shared the story of a rural Georgian, paralyzed on his right side, rushed to a hospital where staff could not read his CT scan. By the time Hess' crew was contacted by phone in Augusta, four hours had lapsed --- one hour too many to administer the TPA drug. The paralysis was permanent.

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"It's a tragedy that happens all the time in the United States," Hess told the panel.

Already, the 3-year-old company has equipped nine hospitals within 100 miles of Augusta with a mobile camera and related technology that permits the neurologists to inspect a patient via a computer. And, if appropriate, prescribe the medicine.

"Every minute counts," Hess said in an interview before he took the stage. "This brings the stroke specialist in from anywhere."

Hess advised the panel that Georgia is embedded in the nation's stroke belt, with one of the highest frequencies, but that the operation is applicable elsewhere.

"We want to be the tele-stroke capital of the universe," he said.

The judges, top executives from technology and venture capital companies, were encouraged to let their inner Simon Cowell or Donald Trump come out. So they aimed pointed questions at the contestants, mostly about their business models. A few wondered why Hess and CEO Sandeep Agate were projecting modest growth and revenues.

The arbiters huddled privately for an hour to vote, with some breaking off to lend the finalists advice on their launch efforts. All parties reconvened in the studio for announcement of the winner, which was . . . ReachMDConsult.

The doctor in the house sighed and smiled as he was handed a super-sized \$100,000 check, the type that Tiger Woods accepts after nailing down another Masters title in Hess' hometown.

The panel's foreman, EarthLink CEO Garry Betty, said judges were won over by "the impact this is potentially going to have on Georgia."

"It's hitting a market that's very much underserved," observed Betty, insisting that the evaluations were based strictly on business and not on a what's-best-for-mankind basis. "This has a potentially huge market, much beyond what they presented."

Hess played the surprised champion, admitting he was unsure of the market potential, only that ReachMDConsult made "medical sense."

For 10 years, the New Jersey native has knocked on the doors of small-town hospitals, "learning Southern accents" as he offered the service gratis.

The seed money will help jump-start his venture to as-yet elusive profitability.

As Hess clutched the giant check, he fetched something from his pocket and asked, "Can we get this parking ticket validated?"

THE FINAL FOUR

Top start-ups that competed for the business launch prize:

>DIAGIS, Atlanta:

Researches, develops and markets secure software development tools that detect security flaws before products are activated. Based on research from Georgia Tech.

>EVOCA, Savannah: Aims to voice-enable the Web for mainstream users by bridging the gap between the Internet and telephony industries with voice recording on demand.

>INTRINSIC SECURITY, Atlanta: Developing an intergrated solution for monitoring high-speed networks in real time by employing a set of data collection and analysis systems. Based on research from Georgia Tech.

>REACHMDCONSULT, Augusta: Uses Internet-based technology for remote diagnosis by neurologist of certain stroke victims and perscription of time-critical treatments that can significantly improve recovery. Based at the Medical College of Georgia.

Sources: Georgia Research Alliance, Technology Association of Georgia

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