UC SANTA BARBARA
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Onward

The news hit UC Santa Barbara student Harvey Hunerberg as it did everyone else — like a sledgehammer. Thanks to COVID-19, life as he knew it was on hold, at least for the foreseeable future.

“When I first heard about the lockdown, I knew things were going to become very different and stay that way for a while,” said the fourth-year mechanical engineering student. For Hunerberg and his fellow would-be tech entrepreneur teammates participating in this year’s New Venture Competition (NVC), the interruption would be particularly acute — right in the middle of the runup to the finals, after months of preparation, mentorship and practice for the competition’s signature events.

“We lost access to the labs and testing resources for the prototypes we had on campus,” he said. Plus, avoiding SARS-CoV-2 meant that the social gathering, pitching, competing and networking that are the excitement and appeal of the New Venture Fair and the finals were now out of the question.

Fortunately, Technology Management — the department that hosts the NVC — is full of innovators.

“We never considered cancelling; the students worked too hard for us not to provide them a platform to showcase their progress,” said Dave Adornetto, Technology Management’s entrepreneurship director. In addition, he said, embedded in a successful tech entrepreneur’s psyche is the ability to respond quickly to any situation.

“When obstacles arise, you figure out a way to pivot around them,” he said.

And pivot they did, into online events that not only showcase the students’ rapid adaptation to the circumstances but also embrace the format in a way that improved their reach. The second of these, the virtual New Venture Competition Finals, takes place this Thursday, May 21 at 3 p.m. PDT. The event is free and open to the public,though registration is required to view it.

Thinking on Their Feet

In the fast-paced world of tech entrepreneurship, the ability to see ahead of the curve is essential. So the lockdown, while brutal, did not come as a surprise.

“We anticipated the outcome, so had already begun thinking about ways to virtualize the program before any edicts were issued,” Adornetto said. For the event organizers, who had three weeks to identify technology solutions, build a website and deliver a logistically complex event, it meant finding ways to bring the feel of the live fair into the online space.

“The objective was to emulate the live experience of our attendees, primarily the ability to engage with our students and each other,” Adornetto said. What would normally be display booths in the real-life NVC Fair became virtual rooms for each team, allowing for the same kind of live interaction.

“The live Q&A element is an extremely important part of the learning process for our students — it reinforces the value of multiple perspectives and the need for them to think on their feet,” he said. In addition, Adornetto had his own virtual meeting room, which allowed him to meet with the fair’s attendees the way he normally would during the event. To facilitate the online format, certain material was made available in advance. The virtual format also required an advanced level of preparation from the students, and everyone brought their best game, he said.

The online nature of the event also made it possible for more people to attend. “The virtual format enabled participation from a much wider geography than we normally see,” he said. People from as far as Nepal participated in the live event.

The switch to the online space was no doubt a challenge for the NVC student teams, who had trained for in-person pitches and presentations for months. But there was a silver lining in this new situation.

“Our group saw as an opportunity to meet with more mentors than we could have in person,” Hunerberg said. “Everyone we’ve met with to get input on the development of our startup has been flexible and easy to work with, given the unique circumstances, which we are extremely grateful for.”

On Thursday, Hunerberg’s team (Thermaform Technologies) and the four other winners of the virtual NVC Fair will go at it again for the virtual NVC Finals to present in front of a very real panel of judges and an audience from around the country. At stake? Cash prizes, bragging rights and network connections. What they’ve already won? The grit and the confidence to adapt to change and uncertainty.

“With COVID-19 and the strange state of the world we live in at the moment, I think now is a better time than ever to practice having an agile approach to problems,” Hunerberg said.

The teams for this final round are:

Deadstock — An application that allows any user to verify whether or not their luxury goods are authentic, with a primary focus on high-end sneaker resale.

Genesis — A cutting edge AI-based startup that solves the problem of bad data in machine learning through a unique approach that provides high-quality data annotation.

Legtrek — Provides a medical device to patients with limited lower limb mobility that is the combination of a powered wheelchair and powered gait trainer.

Spinjet 3D — Aims to improve the affordability and accessibility of 3D sand casting with an innovative spin to existing 3D printing technologies on the market.

Thermaform Technologies — Utilizes a novel shape memory actuation to create an effortlessly simple compression device that benefits the large aging demographic and those with circulation deficiencies.

“I could not have been more pleased with how the fair was received given the circumstances,” Adornetto said. “We had more than 600 visitors to the event, three hours of technologically flawless Q&A with the teams, and were able to deliver an experience to our students that returned some much-needed normalcy to their lives. We are striving for the same for the NVC Finals. We intend for that day to be all about the students and they will be ready!”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.