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Students honored for entrepreneurial innovation

Contact: Samantha Hooker
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KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Two Western Michigan University student entrepreneurs are being recognized for their original business ideas.

Avery Green, a senior from Eau Claire double majoring in fashion design and electronic business marketing, received the $10,000 Brian Patrick Thomas Entrepreneurial Spirit Award for his clothing company House of Pariah; and Desi Taylor, a senior from Portage majoring in Spanish, received the first annual $5,000 Wendell Christoff Award for Cluventure, her travel agency with a twist.

HOUSE OF PARIAH

House of Pariah is a fashion startup that places an emphasis on representation and nonconformity. The brand seeks to reduce its impact on the planet by focusing on sustainability. House of Pariah currently offers stylish, environmentally friendly underwear for men.

"I came into Starting Gate with just a vague idea of what I wanted my business to be," says Green. "The fact that it has grown so much in just one year ... absolutely amazes me. I plan to use this award to produce my first line of basics, to fund my launch event and to cover marketing expenses. It is the key for turning my business idea into a reality."

CLUVENTURE

Cluventure Travel combines mystery and adventure to create an interactive vacation experience. Each trip is 100 percent customized for the client, with the company securing transportation, lodging, activities and support. The only catch is that the clients are not told where they are going. Instead, travelers solve real-time clues that guide them to their destination.
"The whole team has worked so hard to get where we are today and being recognized in this fashion is extremely motivating," says Taylor. "We look forward to providing unique vacations for as many people as possible. Winning this award will help us advance our business by reaching potential customers through advertising and promotion. We are also working to develop a corporate retreat plan, and this money will be crucial to its implementation."

**BRIAN PATRICK THOMAS ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT AWARD**

Now in its fourth year, the Brian Patrick Thomas Entrepreneurial Spirit Award recognizes businesses that aim to promote a higher social purpose. It is awarded annually to a company from Starting Gate, WMU’s student business accelerator.

Thomas is an alumnus of WMU who earned his degree in industrial marketing in 1996. He joined OtterBox in 2003 and was eventually named CEO where he was responsible for leading global expansion efforts. During his tenure, Thomas received the Mid-Market CEO of the Year in 2014 from CEO Connection and was named one of the Top 100 CEOs in the country by Chief Executive Magazine. Thomas' passion for entrepreneurial thinking and social entrepreneurship sparked his desire to establish this award to support student entrepreneurs. Thomas is currently the CEO of his own independent consultant business working with startups and entrepreneurs.

**WENDELL CHRISTOFF AWARD**

The Wendell Christoff Award honors students in Starting Gate who use their talent to create opportunities for others through their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Christoff is an alumnus of WMU who earned his degree in business administration in 1968. After graduation, Christoff joined the U.S. Air Force and served as a pilot. Following his service, Christoff returned to the family business, C.J. Christoff & Sons, beginning in the sales department. In 1997, a merger created Litehouse Inc., where Christoff is the president and CEO. Litehouse produces salad dressing and sauces and was named a Top 100 privately held company by Entrepreneur magazine.

**STARTING GATE**

Starting Gate, Western Michigan University’s student business accelerator, gives students rich and valuable resources to develop their startup companies. It is located in downtown Kalamazoo and operated by the Haworth College of Business Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. The accelerator is open to all WMU students through a competitive application process during which students must demonstrate a promising idea for a product or service that can be launched within a short period. Starting Gate provides a fast track to business launch.