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Business contest at ‘a whole other level’ this year

Two local firms face more competition but place in state finals.

By Melissa Westphal

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Two Rock River Valley businesses are bringing home cash prizes after placing in a state competition that rewards entrepreneurs and innovators.

Balanced IT Solutions of South Beloit and Universal Die Cast Inc. of Machesney Park were both winners in the Innovate Illinois finals tonight in Chicago. The second-place wins also come with \$10,000 cash prizes.

Kerry Frank, president of Balanced IT Solutions, was the first person to pitch her seven-minute presentation in the competition for projects in the early stages of development. More than 130 companies started off in the event earlier this year, and that group was narrowed to 12 finalists that participated tonight.

J&J Solutions of Palatine and Tula Foods of Evanston won the first-place awards in the early and later stages of development, respectively.

Frank represented a product called Comply 365, a compliance software product that helps industries maintain their regulated compliance standards through an automated process. Balanced IT is a software development company that builds customized products for various industries, including the airline industry.

“It’s a lot of work, but it helps with the business and just keeps everything concise and looking at your bottom lines,” Frank said of the competition and her presentations. “This year, it was a whole other level of competition, I think because the venture capitalist money just isn’t out there.

“This year brought in a lot of companies seeking money, and people were really competing at a higher level.”

Frank came in third at last year’s Innovate Illinois program and placed at the local Stateline Area

FastPitch Competition, which is headed up by the Rock River Valley Entrepreneurship Center at the EIGERlab.

Harold Winebaugh, owner of Universal Die Cast, credited his wife, Sherry, for inspiring and encouraging him to pursue his love of innovation and invention. He invented the Univ-Lok, a lock that secures standard 30- and 55-gallon plastic and metal drums.

The product is billed as a cost-effective way to secure the contents of standard drums, and his company manufactures small to medium zinc die-cast parts for all types of industries. Winebaugh also participated in past FastPitch events locally.

“As I told my wife, whether I won or not, I felt like a winner because I got this far,” said Winebaugh, who placed second in the event’s later stage.

“I didn’t quite get goose bumps, but it was close ... I really love what I do, and I’ve always been an inventor at heart. This has got my blood flowing more with a lot of things. This is going to change my life now because it has inspired me to know that I did something good, that I really accomplished something.”

Frank said the networking opportunities tonight were great, including a follow-up conversation she plans to have with a Microsoft executive she met.

“It’s a hard time for any business right now, and entrepreneurs are the key to turning this economy around,” Frank said. “There were a lot of successful people who came up and encouraged us tonight, and the atmosphere was really positive ... There are a lot of people from Rockford who have mentored me and helped me along the way. I feel like I’m representing them tonight.”

The Rockford area has had finalists in the Illinois competition each of the last three years. The state event focuses on the innovativeness of the presentations and high-growth potential and sustainability.

Both Frank and Winebaugh also thanked Sherry Pritz and Dan Cataldi of the entrepreneurship center, as well as other Rockford-area officials, for their help in going this far. Pritz and Cataldi both attended today’s competition.

“It’s nice to be able to help innovators and entrepreneurs get closer to their dreams,” said Cataldi, director of the Rock River Valley Entrepreneurship Center.

Reach staff writer Melissa Westphal at mwestpha@rrstar.com or 815-987-1341.