

Northern Michigan Startup Week Inspires Young Entrepreneurs and Startup Veterans Alike

Manny McMillan has always enjoyed working with his hands to build innovative products that solve everyday problems. He never seriously considered this as a career path until recently, though.

A student at Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City, Mich., Manny was planning to move out of the state to get a job operating drones after completing his degree in Unmanned Aerial System Training this summer. Now he's re-evaluating that plan and considering staying in Traverse City to start his own business, something that feels achievable after participating in the 2022 Northern Michigan Startup Week where he received entrepreneurship education and mentorship.

"I have always been interested in building things," said Manny. "So far, I've built products. Now, I'm learning how to build a business."



During one week in May, entrepreneurs and startup enthusiasts gathered in Traverse City for the inaugural Northern Michigan Startup Week. It was a celebration of the region's growing startup community and featured daily events including panel discussions featuring experts in space innovation and access to capital, several pitch competitions showcasing local and regional entrepreneurs, a social event recognizing innovation leaders, and an entrepreneurship bootcamp called Startup Weekend. Events were open to the public and entrepreneurs at all stages were invited to attend. It was all organized through a collaborative initiative of local startup and tech ecosystem leaders: 20Fathoms, TCNewTech, Northern Michigan Angels, and Newton's Road.

Learning How to Build a Business

Everyday around the world, people like Manny come up with ideas for building something new that solves a problem they've encountered. Many of them even start tinkering and building the new product they have in mind. But then they don't know what to do with it next.

Northern Michigan Startup Week provided aspiring entrepreneurs with opportunities to learn how to turn their great idea into a business. Manny participated in two of these events – Northwestern Michigan College Pitch Competition and Startup Weekend Traverse City – and

credits the experience and mentorship he gained for being able to take the next step with his new business idea.

Northwestern Michigan College Pitch Competition was the culmination of a special topics class on startups at Northwestern Michigan College where students spent the semester learning how to turn an idea into a business. Manny and his teammate, Shelby Satkowiak, were awarded first place by the pitch competition judges for their invention and business plan for a product that helps surveyors safely and accurately obtain measurements inside manholes. Each student team was paired with a mentor from the local business community, which Manny said improved their learning experience.



"We won because Shelby and I were a great team and we had a great mentor, Russell Schindler," said Manny. "When we first met Russell, we presented him with our idea and he was very knowledgeable, helped us improve the product, and worked with us to create a good presentation."

Manny was able to build on this experience through Startup Weekend Traverse City, the next Northern Michigan Startup Week event he attended. Hosted in partnership with Techstars, Startup Weekend is an entrepreneurship bootcamp held in cities around the world where participants learn how to build a business over the course of a weekend. At the Traverse City event, all teams received mentorship from SCORE Traverse City volunteers who routinely provide coaching support for new business owners in the region.



Manny joined a Startup Weekend team that worked to develop an app to help people save time completing everyday errands. Now, he is applying the experience from Northern Michigan Startup Week to building out his own business idea: a product for homeowners and landscaping companies that would make bagging leaves less of a hassle. He has developed a prototype testing plan with the help of his mentors.

“The first thing I did after Startup Weekend was reach out to some of the mentors I’d met,” said Manny. “I’m using what I learned from class and from the mentors to go step-by-step from ideation to product. I’m doing research on my new product, and based on what I learn, I might stay in Traverse City and start a business.”

Entrepreneurship With a Collaborative Spirit

Bayle Golden is another young entrepreneur in Northern Michigan. An engineering graduate student at Michigan Tech University, Bayle is founder of a tech startup called SafeRow that offers a wearable child safety device. She has completed the initial steps in research, development, and business planning, and is currently working on a fully validated minimum viable product. During Northern Michigan Startup Week, Bayle traveled to Traverse City to participate in several events where she increased exposure of SafeRow, learned more about building a business, and shared her own expertise along the way.



The first event she participated in was the University Idea Showcase, a pitch competition for student entrepreneurs from universities throughout Michigan. Bayle pitched SafeRow and was voted audience favorite and also awarded second place overall by the judges.

“The University Idea Showcase was a great experience and definitely valuable,” Bayle said.

Bayle also participated in Startup Weekend where she joined a team developing an affordable alternative to the traditional higher education model. She enjoyed sharing her experience conducting research with her teammates.

“My favorite memory of the week was working with my teammates during Startup Weekend,” Bayle said. “They had never done customer discovery, but we went to downtown Traverse City and began interviewing people and everyone was so friendly. We had a great time.”



Sharing knowledge and giving back are common themes with Bayle, characteristics that are often key parts of Midwest startup communities like Traverse City that tend to have a highly collaborative culture. A busy student and business owner, Bayle is also active in Graduate Student Government at Michigan Tech University and mentors to high school students in STEM.

This mentorship experience led to her role in another Northern Michigan Startup Week Event: the Northwest Michigan High School Student Pitch Competition. In this event, students from local high schools competed in a pitch competition after learning about entrepreneurship over the course of the semester. Each student team was assigned a mentor with Bayle serving as mentor for the Tech Girls Club team from Traverse City Central High School.

“I met with the team weekly leading up to the competition,” said Bayle. “It was an awesome experience. I’m now thinking about possibly becoming a professor because I really enjoyed mentoring.”

Along with new career inspiration, a pitch competition prize, and increased knowledge about building a startup, Bayle left Northern Michigan Startup Week with a new appreciation for Traverse City.

“I really, really loved Traverse City,” she said. “Everyone was so friendly and helpful.”

The Startup Energy in Traverse City

While Manny and Bayle are early in their entrepreneurship careers and attended Northern Michigan Startup Week to expand their knowledge and connections, Zack Urlocker is a Traverse City-based startup veteran who brought a different perspective.

“What Northern Michigan Startup Week does is show entrepreneurs that it is possible to build a thriving company starting from scratch and that it can be done right here in Northern Michigan,” he said.

A highly accomplished operations leader for tech startups, Zack has helped lead four software companies to billion dollar exits: Zendesk, MySQL, Active Software, and Duo Security. During Northern Michigan Startup Week, he served as a panelist for Funding Innovation: Barrelside Chat and attended several additional events throughout the week including the student pitch competitions where he was impressed by the young entrepreneurs.



“I was blown away by the entrepreneurial spirit from the students,” he said. “These are kids with great ideas and the gumption to make it happen. It will be interesting to see where they are in 5 or 10 years. My best guess is we will see a few of them creating companies and jobs in Traverse City and beyond.”

After a career spent in Silicon Valley and Ann Arbor, Mich., Zack is well-versed in what it takes to build a thriving startup community, something that he believes is well underway in Traverse City.

“Traverse City is startup-friendly,” he said. Nothing shows this more than having an event like this that pulls together so many different groups in the community.”

He added, “There’s a lot of energy in Traverse City toward new businesses and people are friendly and willing to help. What more could an entrepreneur ask for?”