

Entrepreneurial spirit leads alumna, UWO students to win community-building contest

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Winning a contest that helps make Oshkosh a better place – a stronger community – is something that hits close to home for alumna Dani Stolley '97.

Stolley, founder of Growing Oshkosh, was one of four recent winners of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's American Democracy Project-sponsored Creating a Stronger Community Contest.

In its second year, the contest is designed to “generate excitement and action around community-building projects.”

"It feels absolutely amazing to have won the Creating a Stronger Community Contest – not just because we won, and not just because it means I've come full circle as a kid growing up in Oshkosh, going to school in Oshkosh, graduating from UW Oshkosh and now Growing Oshkosh – but also because this is a win/win/win for the entire community," Stolley said.

Growing Oshkosh is a start-up soon-to-be nonprofit organization (paperwork pending) that was developed in Oshkosh after Stolley chased a dream to lead and do good things for her community. Her entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to take a risk paved the way for Growing Oshkosh's early success.

Growing Oshkosh “aims to raise awareness and educate citizens about the numerous benefits of fresh, local, all-natural and native food and food production by growing delicious, nutritious and sustainable fish, food, flowers, jobs and hope.”

To do this, an urban farm is under construction in downtown Oshkosh near the Hooper Community Center. The structures, called hoop houses, create an “indoor” environment ideal for growing produce, fish and flowers throughout the year.

The mission and goals of Growing Oshkosh also extends to other parts of the community like UW Oshkosh's Head Start, where raised beds recently were put in for children to be able to grow their own fresh and healthy vegetables and flowers. As the organization grows, Stolley hopes for more gardens and eventually hoop houses to go up throughout Oshkosh.

The \$1,500 won from the Creating a Stronger Community Contest will fund a Hope & Healing Garden and a Kid's Living & Learning House next spring at the main urban farm headquarters, Stolley said.

“In the meantime, we're still building our "Hooperhouses" at the Hooper Community Center, so we can start growing fish, food and flowers this fall and winter,” she said.

This year, a total of 13 teams applied for the Creating a Stronger Community Contest grant money. The applicants were narrowed by a four-person screening committee of representatives from the American Democracy Project and the Earth Charter team at UW Oshkosh, said Paul Van Auken, the UW Oshkosh sociology and environmental studies professor who leads the annual contest.

“It really is building community, while seeding social innovation in a grassroots fashion,” Van Auken said.

The projects were judged based on creativity, relevance and impact, feasibility, engagement and congruence. The judges identified six teams to move forward to the finals; all of the finalists presented to a group of community members and students at Becket’s Restaurant Oct. 11. After the six teams presented, the voting was opened to the general public; in all, four teams were selected as winners and nearly \$3,000 was awarded.

“The second Creating a Stronger Community Contest was a great success first and foremost because it brought a good number of people – UWO and non-UWO alike – together around something really positive: learning about and then choosing to support a variety of projects put forth by local people to make Oshkosh an even better place to be,” Van Auken said.

Taking home \$750 and the second-place title this year was a group with another innovative idea. UW Oshkosh students and entrepreneurs Jake White and Steven Vanevenhoven created Party.0, which is an alcohol-free house party business. White and Vanevenhoven have been using the house-party model to encourage safe partying to UW Oshkosh students; they have garnered support from community businesses and sponsors to make the business a reality this semester.

“This is very important to us because we feel that students were missing out on a huge part of their college experience primarily because they didn’t what to party with alcohol,” said Vanevehnoven, a senior studying marketing and financial services. “Party.0 offers a party atmosphere without including any of the negative consequences associated with drinking alcohol.”

White and Vanevenhoven said the \$750 will be used to compensate homeowners after an event is held at their house to help with expenses as well as to buy party supplies like games and food.

For White, a UW Oshkosh senior studying journalism and public relations, applying for the Creating a Stronger Community Contest grant also was a lesson in writing a business proposal and being entrepreneurial.

“It was great to put together the materials that effectively communicate what we do,” White said. “I believe that our pitch got stronger through this event, and we learned how to sell our idea in less than five minutes. We are excited to be associated with all of the top-level organizations that were represented.”

Finally, two teams tied for third place in this year’s Creating a Stronger Community Contest. The Oshkosh Arts Collective, an art and music space collective, and Oshkosh Blues in Schools, a blues history curriculum initiative, both received \$350 toward their community-building ideas.

Van Auken said he was pleased with the turnout this year and is anxious for the contest to grow, both in

participation and in interest, in the future.

“We’ve had some strong representation from UWO students both years, which is just outstanding and supports what most of us already know: UWO students are highly creative and motivated people and capable of doing great things,” Van Auken said.

Learn more:

- [UW Oshkosh American Democracy Project](#)
- [Growing Oshkosh on Facebook](#)
- [Party.O on Facebook](#)