

Syracuse entrepreneur finds business niche and wins an award

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By [Maureen Nolan, The Post-Standard](#)



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Shawan East, founder and owner of East Environmental Group, won an award for his business plan.

It takes nerve to launch a new business during the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Shawan East, 35, chalks up his confidence to his days as an athlete in high school and college. On the field, an athlete takes risks, said East, owner and founder of East Environmental Group.

“You’d develop the skill of being able to take the risk and seeing the reward at the end. And that’s basically what happened. We took the risk, we played out the options and if successful, I stand to put myself in a better position for me and my family,” East said.

He just won first place in a business plan competition sponsored by the South Side Innovation Center’s Entrepreneurial Assistance Program. The center is a business incubator and a project of Syracuse University’s Whitman School of Management.

East’s prize was \$1,000, \$1,000 worth of advertising from Clear Channel Communications and an hour of marketing consulting from Lighthouse Marketing.

Nineteen people competed, a panel of judges narrowed the field to eight and East came out on top, said Margaret Butler, Innovation Center facility manager and manager of the Entrepreneurial Assistance Program.

East Environmental investigates and tests for hazardous chemicals and conditions such as lead, asbestos and radon in air, soil and water. East said he has three full-time and two part-time employees, plus a contract employee. He works around Central New York, has an office in the Innovation Center and opened a second office in Binghamton about four months ago.

East, who lives on Tipperary Hill, grew up on Syracuse's South Side and graduated from West Genesee High School in 1992. He has a bachelor of science degree from the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry, where he studied environmental studies, policies and management.

He had a couple of other careers — owning and running clothing stores, and then working with a local engineering firm on environmental issues — before he started his business in 2008. The economy didn't scare him. He figured he'd have even lower overhead than companies that were downsizing.

"I took the chance because I can offer the same quality of product at a lower cost," East said.

East found a niche related to the downturn and filled it, Butler said. People are using and renovating old buildings rather starting from scratch, and they need to correct the environmental problems that come with old buildings, Butler said.

The business plan that won him the prize spelled out what direction the company is going and detailed its finances.

"We're planning to use our minority business status and certifications to team up with majority companies in effort to lower their costs and create opportunity for ourselves," East said.

Public projects strive to award a certain percentage of the work to women- and minority-owned businesses, and those businesses sometimes partner with other firms to get contracts jointly.

If hard work matters, East appears to have that covered. Butler said she's seen him in the office literally morning, noon and night. Even in the classes he's taken at the center, he's making contacts.

"He's just constantly out there networking," Butler said.

East said he takes time off, but he works a lot. It's all part of the game.

“You go back to sports. Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Wayne Gretzky. They all put 10,000 hours into their craft, so I think if I take the same principles and apply it to my business, I’ll be successful,” he said.

Here are the other winners in the Entrepreneurial Assistance Program competition:
Second place: Bennie McDonald, of BMD Snow Removal and Grass Cutting

Third place: Tina Lesley-Fox, of Barefoot Photography

Honorable mention: Lara Bezich, owner of Muvo, a company that produces moving boxes for college students

Learn more about the South Side Innovation Center and the [Entrepreneurial Assistance Program](#).

Contact Maureen Nolan at 470-2185 or mnolan@syracuse.com.