

Features

Two locally owned businesses find their biggest customers in the Memphis Medical District

LOUIS GOGGANS | WEDNESDAY, APRIL 12, 2017



Erica Plybeah, Soo-Tsong Lim and Eduardo Perez, winners of a small business competition in the Memphis Medical District.

ANDREW BREIG

The Operation Opportunity Challenge sourced locally-owned businesses to fill needs of Memphis' most significant healthcare institutions, including St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and Regional One Health. The winners of the competition are suddenly playing in the big leagues.

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Before Soo-Tsong Lim obtained his degree in computer science from Mississippi State University, he'd already co-founded an information technology business. A sophomore at the time, Lim, along with his roommate formed Unistar-Sparco Computers, Inc. inside of their college dorm room.

That was 1992.

Fast forward more than two decades and that same small business, which provides IT solutions to government agencies, commercial entities and educational institutions continues to flourish and expand.

Sparco Projectpedia is one of Unistar-Sparco's latest developments. The online platform, created to assist hospitals with burst staffing and vendor relations management, was specifically designed for last year's Operation Opportunity Challenge.

Essentially a database that hospitals can use to store contact information of service providers, suppliers, sponsors, donors and volunteers to make bidding and allocating small projects easier, Sparco Projectpedia was selected as one of the competition's two winning entries.

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The Operation Opportunity Challenge was presented by the Memphis Medical District Collaborative, U3 Advisors and the EPIcenter. The competition kicked off in late October 2016; winners were announced by mid-December.

“The underlying design goal of Sparco Projectpedia is to serve as a tool that allows healthcare institutions to manage projects and store past and present information in one database,” said Lim, president and CEO of Unistar-Sparco.

“The (platform) will help get procurement tasks fulfilled quickly without having to go through all the public meetings and project management. It will help the hospitals have stronger relations with all their suppliers.”



Soo-Tsong Lim and Eduardo Perez with for Unistar-Sparco have secured a contract supporting Memphis' medical institutions.

The Operation Opportunity Challenge provided entrepreneurs and small, local businesses with the chance to propose potential solutions and business plans to one of four “pain points” affecting the large hospitals and universities in the medical district. Those pain points include efficiency in end-to-end transportation management for patients and families; modular/mobile on-site maintenance for fleet and industrial equipment; software solutions for managing contract relationships and an on-demand “burst” staffing platform for quick turnaround projects.

Among the Medical District institutions that sought assistance with operational challenges impacting their establishments were the St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, ALSAC, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare Hospital, Regional One Health, University of Tennessee Health Science Center, Baptist College of Health Sciences, Southern College of Optometry, and Memphis Bioworks Foundation.

The competition enabled these institutions the option to contract with local start-ups and small businesses, primarily those that are owned by women or minorities. These small businesses have tackled supply-chain challenges for some of Memphis’ most economically significant institutions.

MedHaul, a new entrepreneurial venture dedicated to increasing the quality and efficiency of transportation management for patients and families, is the other winning entry of the Operation Opportunity Challenge.

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Erica Plybeah is the brains behind the company. A ride through the Bluff City one day inspired the Greenwood, Mississippi native to create MedHaul.

Collectively, Memphis Medical District anchor institutions are reportedly responsible for more than \$1.2 billion in purchasing and procurement. But, oftentimes, this money is spent with businesses outside of the city.

“I saw a billboard that marketed taxi rides for new moms,” said Plybeah, a clinical informatics project manager at Memphis Bioworks Foundation.

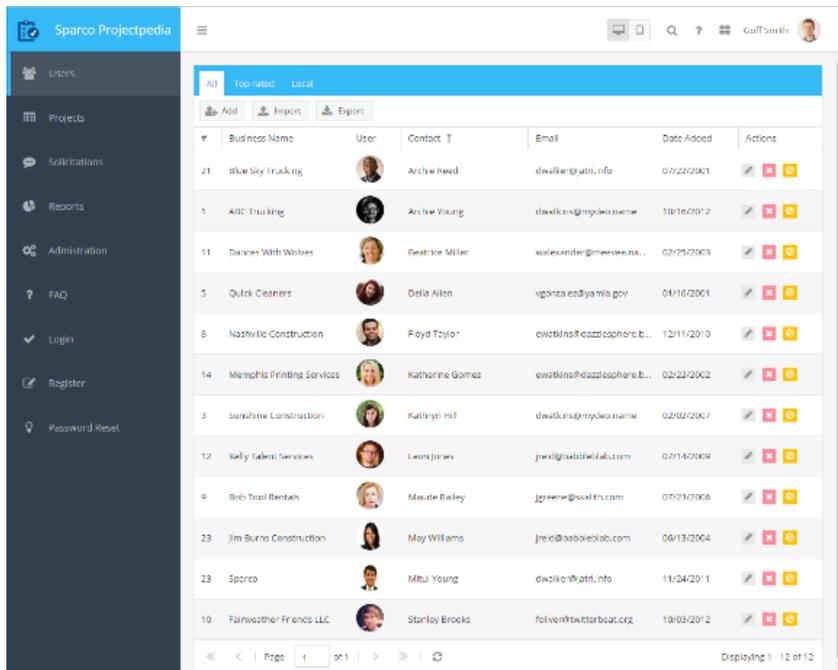
“I envisioned getting into a taxi cab, whether dirty or clean, two or three days after giving birth, and that just really disturbed me. That was when I started thinking about improving the quality of patient transportation.”

MedHaul will help ensure non-emergency medical transportation vehicles are clean, wheelchair accessible and drivers provide superb customer service to patients and their families. The company will also assist hospitals with tracking and optimization of routes as well as modern scheduling interfaces.

Plybeah said transportation management is something that’s not being done presently by healthcare institutions in Memphis.

“The majority of the hospitals have a list of about 20 to 40 transportation providers that they can call,” Plybeah said. “If one doesn’t answer, they’ll go on to the next. They aren’t really aware of what’s going on with the patient during that transportation ride. If the patient arrived safely or at all, (and) what time the patient was picked up and dropped off.”

The competition winners have been meeting with representatives from purchasing institutions to determine how they can best address the establishments’ particular areas of need.



A screenshot of the Unistar-Sparco landing page.

Both winners received \$20,000 in funding provided by the Hyde Foundation to create their proposed businesses. Additionally, they are receiving \$5,000 worth of customized business support and training from EPIcenter.

“We are providing them with technical assistance and advisory support to help them move through the expectations of those contracts so that neither the buyer nor the seller ends up terminating their relationship (due to) failure to perform,” said Leslie Lynn Smith, president of the EPIcenter.

“We’re trying to make sure that the small businesses have all of the resources necessary at their fingertips to be successful.”

Revitalizing the Medical District While Strengthening the Local Economy

Bordered by Poplar Avenue, I-40, Vance Avenue, and Danny Thomas Boulevard, the Medical District employs more than 16,000 people. Another 8,000-plus students attend higher education institutions in the area.

Collectively, those anchor institutions are reportedly responsible for more than \$1.2 billion in purchasing and procurement. But, oftentimes, this money is spent with businesses outside of the city. Many anchors are unaware of local vendors that can assist them with operational issues.



Leslie Lynn Smith, president of EPIcenter, said her organization gives small businesses "all of the resources necessary at their fingertips to be successful."

businesses in the city.

U3 Advisors is a consulting firm that has been working with anchor institutions in the Medical District on economic development and urban revitalization strategies since 2014. An analysis conducted by the company revealed that only \$50 million of the area’s institutional procurement spend went to Memphis area businesses.

The agency also determined through its analysis that there is approximately \$350 million worth of untapped demand that could be captured with

“What we’re trying to do is really strengthen the core of the city—Downtown, the Medical District, and the areas around it,” said Alex Feldman, vice president of U3 Advisors.

“We want to create a place that is a regional amenity that attracts and retains talent and provides (employment) opportunities for Memphians of all backgrounds and education levels. When you start to bring together the opportunities for education, jobs and health care, and really strengthen the neighborhood around those ideas, I think you can create a place that ultimately will be a benefit to the city.”

The aforementioned goal expressed by Feldman is likely to be achieved if more collectives like the MMDC are established. Comprised of representatives from the area’s nine anchor institutions, along with other major healthcare and educational entities, the collective is dedicated to implementing programs that bolster the

Medical District's economy, vibrancy, property development and overall environment.

"If the Medical District's anchor institutions tried to find a solution on their own without working in collaboration (with the MMDC), we probably would not have stood a chance."

Programs like the Operation Opportunity Challenge and entities such as the MMDC boast the potential to strengthen the city's overall economy as well as revitalize the medical district.

As efforts to grow local spending are implemented, employment opportunities will increase and small, minority-owned businesses throughout the Memphis area will have the opportunity to grow.

Eduardo Perez, director of operations for Unistar-Sparco, is thankful a competition was presented that helped shed light on the city's innovators, entrepreneurs and small businesses—many of which go unnoticed by major establishments.

It's a testament that hard work does pay off.

"If the Medical District's anchor institutions tried to find a solution on their own, without working in collaboration (with the MMDC), we probably would not have stood a chance," Perez said. "But due to the competition, we were able to present, and now they see there is a strong, small, local business that can actually deliver."

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