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2025 “BUILD IT GROW IT” ENTREPRENEURIAL PROGRAM GRADUATES 27

HANOVER, ILLINOIS - Northwest Illinois Economic Development (NWILED) is proud to announce the 2025 graduates of the BUILD IT GROW IT (BIGI) program, an entrepreneurial bootcamp that targeted attendance from small business owners and entrepreneurs from across northwest Illinois. The goal of the program was to offer seminars that equip aspiring entrepreneurs with knowledge and skills to kickstart their businesses, while also offering something new and substantive to more established business owners. A total of 61 individuals registered for the program, with 26 graduating with certificates of achievement.

The program offered participants the opportunity to attend three monthly sessions from January through March. Featured presenters were Patrick Powaser of Gradient Coaching & Consulting on succession planning and “the long game;” Evan Talbert and Jennifer Alderman from Highland Community College on entrepreneurialism and financial management, respectively; and Christine Melaas of Basket Case on digital marketing and branding. Each session encouraged active participation, networking and the development of practical real-world skills among the attendees.

BIGI concluded April 25 with a graduation night, featuring raffles from the presenters for continuing education, a professional personal on-site photo shoot from John Hudetz of getVRtours.com, and a special “Shark Tank” competition where the 31 eligible graduates competed for their share of \$10,000 with their business pitch to a panel of judges from NWILED’s Board of Directions and organization membership.

Winning pitches who each received a \$2,000 award were:

Kristin Angel of Angelic Paws Training and Boarding, which offers dog obedience lessons, day care, and boarding in Galena, Illinois.

Kristina Larkin-McClain and Monika Larkin of Hudson’s Tack & More, a horse saddle, tack and gear equine business in Stockton, Illinois.

Nate Grawlik, an entrepreneur in Galena looking to bring retail storage lockers to Main Street.

Ryan McClain of Galena Mill & Steel, a custom design and fabrication business in Galena, Illinois.

Kelly Foster of All Good Things, a lavender agritourism farm and product producer in Amboy, Illinois

“For me, the networking was amazing, and friendships were made. I’m looking forward to next year!” said Jane Shaw of the University of Illinois Extension.

“Build It Grow It, was the perfect mentor for someone like me that is just starting out.” Said Kelly Foster of All Good Things. “Gathering and networking with likeminded entrepreneurs was interesting, fun and relevant to everyday in the world of small business. Thanks, NWILED for sharing your knowledge and organizing such a great program, see you next year!”

“How useful this series has been for us at Galena United Methodist Church.” said Rev. Patricia Allen-Stewart. “We are in the process of creating a social enterprise which generates income and supports our mission and values as a church.”

“This is our second year of attending Build It Grow It.” said Kristina Larkin-McClain & Monika Larkin of Hudson’s Tack & More. “The information shared every class focuses on what small businesses and entrepreneurs REALLY need to know. The guest speakers are phenomenal and take the time to answer questions, share their experience and knowledge, and help you to build your business better. This class gives you unique networking opportunities with so many diverse local businesses to broaden your business’ horizons with possible partnerships and connections. We enjoyed every minute of every class. Thank you to NWILED and David Schmit for caring about our community and small local businesses, like Hudson’s Tack & More, and offering this class! The knowledge we have gained here has had a very positive impact on our business and benefited our clients. Can’t wait to attend the next class!”

Build It Grow It 2025 was funded through a generous grant from The Foundation for Northwest Illinois with funding from Compeer Financial. Session locations alternated between the Davis Community Center in Mount Carroll, with catering services provided by Molly’s Kitchen & Bar and Mud Run Beer Co. in downtown Stockton.

Build It Grow It 2025 Program Graduates included:

Dr. Clayton Ruter, Nate Grawlik, Dawn Heckman, Jarren Heckman, Melissa Coverdill, B’Ann Dittmar, Jack Kromer, Kelly Foster, Melitta Heggen, Jeremy Heggen, Kristin Angel, Kristina Larkin, Monika Larkin, Tom Serio, Rev. Patricia Allen Stewart, Rev. Jin HeeKang, Ryan McClain, Sabrina McClain, James Perron, Danika Perron, Mark Plath, Chris Steege, Shani Ritch, Jennifer Robinson, Rob Robinson, and Anastasia Doherty.

“Build It Grow It 2025 was a tremendous success. Working off the momentum of the 2024 program, NWILED was able to increase overall program participation by 30%, said David Schmit, Regional Director of NWILED. “With the grant dollars from The Foundation for Northwest Illinois we were able to take everything up a notch this year including offering the amazing Shark Tank experience, which was a lot of fun, and served as a great way to close out the 2025 program.”

ABOUT NWILED:

Northwest Illinois Economic Development was formed in 2008 by the Jo-Carroll Energy Board of Directors whose main goals were to spearhead economic development structures, funding and progress in Jo Daviess, Carroll, and Whiteside counties in Northwest Illinois. The Board’s main focus was to form a regional development entity concentrating on growing the economy and public/private partnerships. NWILED promotes economic development by fostering business growth and assisting expanding and relocating businesses in determining their needs for growth with cooperation of government and business partners. NWILED encourages entrepreneurs by assisting with access to resources to begin and grow their businesses and employ all available resources to create a welcoming business environment, aligning the skills of the available workforce with the needs of businesses, and building political and economic capital.