

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**NORTHWEST ILLINOIS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
GRADUATES 14 FROM BUILD IT GROW IT 2026**

HANOVER, ILLINOIS – Northwest Illinois Economic Development (NWILED) has announced their 14 graduates of the 2026 Build It Grow It Program, a small business entrepreneurial boot camp that NWILED sponsors annually. In addition, five of those graduates were each awarded \$1,000 in NWILED Kick Starter Awards following graduation and participation in a “shark tank” type competition. The event was held on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2026, at the clubhouse at Apple Canyon Resort in Apple River, Illinois.

Having completed all four workshops, the 2026 Build It Grow It graduates are Abby Ehrler, Allison Johnston, B'Ann Dittmar, Blake Karberg, Jennifer Montgomery, Karl Prowant, Kristin Angel, Kristina Larkin, Laurie Mostad, Megan Boomgarden, Melissa Coverdill, Monika Larkin, Shannon Lawrence, and Jack Kromer. Graduates received certificates of achievement, and adding to their celebration were raffles with prizes from Galena Roasters and WPPO Pizza, along with one-on-one sessions with program session presenters Aaron Abt of Apt Enterprises and Patrick Powaswer of Gradient Coaching and Consulting.

The highlight of the evening was a shark tank-type pitch competition where five \$1,000 NWILED Kick Starter awards were given out. Those winners were Kristin Angel with her dog Jupiter of Angelic Paws Training and Boarding, B'Ann Dittmar of Dry Creek Beekeeping, Jennifer Montgomery of Galena Goat Yoga, Kristina and Monika Larkin of Hudson's Tack & More, along with Megan Boomgarden of Two Tabby Treasures Studio. Judging the pitches this year were Danielle Cline and Ginger Zambrano from Rise Real Estate, Dan Johnson from WPPO Pizza, Pat Powaswer from Gradient Coaching and Consulting, Barb Hocker from Galena Area Chamber of Commerce, as well tabulator Chelsea Beyer from Dupaco Community Credit Union – all NWILED Members!

A special thanks goes to Riverport Railroad and Jail Hill Inn for their contributions to the shark tank money bucket, in addition to NWILED Members JCE Co-op, Jo Daviess County, Adkins Energy, Baranski Hammer Moretta & Sheehy, Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa, First Community Bank of Galena, and Louie's Trenching Services for helping make Build It Grow It possible.

The program's objective is to provide aspiring entrepreneurs and existing businesses with some of the essential knowledge and tools needed to turn their business ideas into successful ventures or to improve existing operations. Weekly workshops began January 14 and ran through February 5. Session #1 was Entrepreneurialism with Aaron Apt of Abt Enterprises and Succession Planning with Patrick Powaser of Gradient Coaching and Consulting and was held at Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa in the Galena Territory. Session #2 was Financial Literacy for Small Businesses with Citizens State Bank, Schoenhaar Accounting and the Small Business Development and was held at DeSoto House Hotel in Galena. Session #3 was Small Business Marketing and Branding with WINPRO Pet/Whole Heart Creative, Visit Galena and Visit NW Illinois, and was held at Timber Lake Playhouse in rural Mount Carroll. Session #4 was Artificial Intelligence for Small Business with the University of Illinois/First Pro, SoundSafe.ai and Dry Creek Beekeeping, and was held at the Davis Community Center in Mount Carroll.

ABOUT BUILD IT GROW IT:

Each year NWILED offers the Build It Grow It program, an entrepreneurial boot camp designed to empower aspiring business owners and entrepreneurs throughout Jo Daviess and Carroll counties and beyond. Now in its third year, the annual program offers a series of concentrated and accelerated seminars that help equip entrepreneurs with knowledge and skills to kick start their businesses, while also offering something new and substantial to more established business owners. The program is open to small business owners, managers, entrepreneurs and even high school and college aged students.

ABOUT NWILED:

Northwest Illinois Economic Development was created by the Jo-Carroll Energy Board of Directors to spearhead economic development structures, funding and progress in Jo Daviess, Carroll, and Whiteside counties in Northwest Illinois. Founded in 2008 and now in its 17th year of successful service, NWILED continues to be 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. The organization aids in determining these needs for growth with cooperation from government and business partners. NWILED encourages entrepreneurs by assisting with access to resources to begin and grow their businesses and employs 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. NWILED's commitment to success also produces programs, ventures and events that nurture educational business growth and overall business community involvement.