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Minute to Win It

Columbia entrepreneurs took center stage at the Engineering School’s annual Fast Pitch competition, as competitors delivered rapid-fire elevator pitches for a chance to win funding for their companies and initiatives.

NOV 24 2015 | BY JESSE ADAMS | PHOTO BY ISHAN GURU

The \$2500 top prize went to Blue Moon Box, a monthly service offering fun at-home science experiments for kids, written and curated by Sara Sakowitz '18CC. Her fast-growing startup has been featured in national and international media. Two SEAS student teams took second and third place. Bites, an app developed by Robert Netzorg '19CC, Hamed Nilforoshan '19SEAS, and Eshan Agarwal '19SEAS, connects collegiate consumers with local cooks, and Parole Partners, developed by Chaun Medeiros '16SEAS and collaborators, is an app helping busy parole officers keep track of parolees to reduce recidivism. The two teams received \$1500 and \$1000, respectively.

The 31 solo and team contenders assembled at Davis Auditorium November 17 had just one minute to sum up their products and strategic plans for the crowd and a panel of judges before answering tough questions on the spot. The competition was open to Columbia undergraduates, graduates, alumni, and faculty from all Schools and institutes across campus.

“60 seconds is an impossible time frame,” said Max Ritz, an entrepreneur who helped judge the competition. “But it’s also an incredibly useful microcosm of what you face with investors.”

Contenders ranged from an energy services platform incentivizing efficiency to makers of a powder that eliminates odor-causing bacteria in clothing. Several projects took on biomedical challenges, from a novel monitor measuring fluid



Sara Sakowitz's '18CC Blue Moon Box, a monthly service offering fun at-home science experiments for kids, took home the \$2500 top prize.

levels in congestive heart failure patients to a new type of multi-jointed endoscope to enable more precise surgery. Others sought to harness the potential of big data to better connect groups of people beyond clients and service providers, taking on social challenges from improving STEM education to helping small community businesses in Mexico compete against larger companies.

The judges were Gwen Effgen MS'11SEAS, '10BC, a fellow for Columbia Technology Ventures who has worked extensively with Harlem Biospace; Max Ritz, an InSITE fellow and startup veteran pursuing an MBA at Columbia Business School; Hiro Watanabe, a post-doctoral research scientist who has advanced and helped commercialize the emerging field of electrochemical endoscopy; and Kevin Zhang '14CC, a leader at Fundera and former president of the Columbia Organization of Rising Entrepreneurs.

"I'm always blown away by how the teams get better and better each year," said Zhang, "and wish I had been so mature and effective at their age!"

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Organization

500 W. 120th Street #510
New York, NY 10027
Tel (212) 854-2993

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