



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 18, 2018

Contact:

Britton Masback
+1 503-724-3332
bmasback@gmail.com

Seth Talyansky
+1 971-400-4016
seth.talyansky@gmail.com

TBILISI, GEO - On Friday, June 15, thirty-seven students representing nine Tbilisi schools converged on School XXI Century for the inaugural Startup Weekend Youth Tbilisi (SWYT). The three-day program was co-organized by Dr. Natalia Edisherashvili, Head of English Department at XXI Century, and five co-founding student members of the US-based Global Youth Entrepreneurs (GYE), who traveled to Tbilisi to stage SWYT: Seth Talyansky, Britton Masback, and Solomon Olshin of Portland, OR, and sisters Hari and Divija Bhimaraju of San Jose, CA. The organizing sponsor, Techstars, provided Kiev-based community leader Kateryna Dehtyar as event facilitator.

Georgia had always fascinated program originator Seth Talyansky not only for its ancient culture, but also for its unique current political and economic circumstances. Talyansky saw Georgia, as a NATO-and-EU-aspiring nation host to the first generation that has come of age free from Soviet restrictiveness, as opportune for sparking youth entrepreneurship. With the consult of the Georgian Embassy to the United States, Talyansky was promptly placed in communication with School XXI Century, which warmly accepted the event proposal. The United States Embassy in Georgia then connected Talyansky to local entrepreneurial leaders who would help begin outreach for SWYT to the Tbilisi business community.

The startup program is part of a broader network of such experiences held across the globe. These weekend-long innovation sessions have three key goals that the SWYT organizers aimed to replicate in Tbilisi. First, to reduce the stigma around and inspire greater trust in entrepreneurship and small business as a viable model for self-sustainability by demonstrating the steps needed for success in this realm. Second, to elucidate the principles of “creative ideation” and “pivoting” to help students feel more comfortable creating and advocating for their own ideas, and then help them discover the underlying principles of a business canvas or model to formalize their ideas. Third, to connect students with business mentors who provide critical feedback for company ideas, but who can also help them connect their passions with jobs as they grow older.

What differentiated the SWYT entrepreneurship program was that it was organized by youth, for youth. In Georgia, education numbers among the priorities of the national government, but there is limited access to extracurricular activities outside of class (most schools don't even have organized team sports). SWYT 2018, from the ideation process to the final investor showcases, served as an opportunity to provide the students who were present with meaningful business skills and connections, but also to serve as a model for schools in Tbilisi and across Georgia.

Structure of Work:

On Friday, students were introduced to the program organizers and given an overview of the weekend's work. Then, they heard from four esteemed local business mentors who talked about the importance of entrepreneurship in a growing Georgian marketplace, and noted strategies to employ when starting a new company. Following these inspirational remarks, it was time for the students to learn how to pitch their business ideas. The students were coached through the fundamentals of an effective pitch, from the importance of a clearly-communicated problem and solution, to a memorable company name. Following this lecture and practice session, participants were given the stage to pitch their original business and product ideas to their peers. Participants voted for their favorite ideas, with companies coalescing around six of these ideas.

On Saturday, teams worked to deliver a minimum viable product for their idea, essentially the simplest form of a website, app, or module that could be presented Saturday night for feedback. During the day, they validated this in-progress model with potential customers, both virtually and in person at a nearby shopping mall, developing their ideas according to the feedback received and adhering to the principles of "pivoting." Local professionals came to the school to advise the student startups in a personalized manner. Other mentors with more distinct areas of focus provided workshops on three critical areas for all groups to hear. They presented and led Q+A sessions on pitching, branding, and on the idea of a business model canvas. These sessions were intended to help teams actively plan their work and better envision their company presentation for Sunday night. Students even had the opportunity to hear from and speak with the 2018 Forbes' 30-Under-30 designee in Education, Mark Pavlyukovskyy, who called in from Silicon Valley to speak to students about rapid prototyping and idea implementation. At the day's end, students were confident about their initial ideas and solutions, and were prepared for Sunday's work on business structure and the investor showcase presentations.

Winning Teams and Prizes:

On Sunday, teams prepared one-pagers and five-minute presentations to display their weekend's work and make their case as a viable investment. Judges of the final pitches were chosen to embody many different traits of a business professional, and this diverse panel was instructed to provide constructive feedback for each team presenting. Team Chopp, which created an app that lets consumers buy nearly-expired food for a 50% discount, claimed the top prize and an all-expenses-paid-trip to Armenia sponsored by ggGeorgia, along with one month of mentorship from GEN Georgia and a one-thousand-Georgian-lari scholarship to Caucasus

University for each of its team members. Team Appollon, which proposed a phone application for the organization of testing material, finished second and won one month of free working space and mentorship at Future Laboratory. Team S-lock, which designed a bicycle lock equipped with novel features including GPS-tracking, placed third and won a two-week free IT course from IT Step Academy for each of its members. Team Concycle, which sought to develop a chair with pedals to boost concentration, won the award for best presentation, as chosen by the audience. Each member of Concycle took home a voucher for one hundred lari to the ALTAOKAY technology store sponsored by DIO. Descriptions of all the weekend's startups can be found on the event [F6S](#) page.

SWYT Impact and Sustainability:

At the end of the weekend, the organizers commended teams for their stellar communication and interplay between team members, mentors, and organizers, highlighting the extent to which Startup Weekend Youth Tbilisi captured the essence of youth creativity and innovation. The program yielded great pride and achievement for the students involved and provided a positive story to share in the community. The event was featured widely across Georgia and Armenia, both on television and in the written and online press, and with this support and the students' ongoing quest for business knowledge, the legacy will continue. Tbilisi high school students are now planning to organize future editions of SWYT. In addition, a first-of-its-kind channel of cultural exchange between American and Georgian youth has been opened, and the ongoing program will allow for a sustainable network to be put in place such that all youth in Tbilisi will have an outlet to pursue entrepreneurship.

At the same time that the impact of SWYT on Georgia and its education system is unquestionable, the possibilities that the success of this program opens up for American schools are also worth exploring. Despite widespread recognition of the Startup Weekend model as a staple of entrepreneurship and self-branding, no such experiences in the U.S. are currently student-led. School administrators now have a precedent for encouraging and supporting students to host entrepreneurial events at their own schools and in the folds of their own communities.

Sponsors:

The principal sponsors of SWYT were Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency, DIO, Tika Tours, ggGeorgia, and Youth Educating Police. Catering company METISAVSE supplied all SWYT meals at a significant discount, and its managing partner, Nikoloz Shubladze, was present as a mentor for most of the weekend. Other sponsors, including prize contributors, as well as volunteers and a full list of endorsements can be found on the [SWYT website](#).

Photos and Video:

A selection of photos that highlight the process and success of SWYT can be found on our website: <https://www.globalyouthentrepreneurs.net/>

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