



## **Director's Report – Don Ryan Center for Innovation (DRCI)**

**February 2025**

### **Overview:**

The Don Ryan Center for Innovation (DRCI) continues to strengthen Bluffton's entrepreneurial ecosystem through strategic planning, mentorship programs, and community engagement. February has been a highly productive month, with significant progress made in supporting our program companies, expanding our mentorship network, and refining our long-term strategic vision.

### **Entrepreneur Program Update**

#### **STARTUP Companies:**

The Don Ryan Center for Innovation continues to be a fertile ground for burgeoning startups, driving innovation and economic growth in Bluffton. This month, we are proud to list our Program Companies.

- **ChangePoint**
- **OPFOB**
- **Part of the Family**
- **Dig Your Photos - Graduated**
- **Mencias Cleaning (Rebranded and is now Lowcountry Fresh Start Cleaning)**
- **AMA Private Dining**
- **\*New - Trisha Zerhung Fertility Consulting**
- **\*New - Lisa Sulka Consulting**
  
- Conducted a diligence meeting with Cathy Lundsford for potential inclusion in the STARTUP program.
- Met with Lisa Sulka to discuss her business concept and potential program enrollment.
- Engaged with Aqeela Aiken for an update on Bright Beginnings
- Confirmed the expected STARTUP program launch date. Confirmed Matt O'Shaughnessy for the **TRADEUP/HEROES** program. Start date set, and mentor assignments are in progress
- Held a meeting with Valerie Ferrera, who is exploring the development of an assisted living facility. Referred to Beaufort County Economic Development for site opportunities.

### **TRADEUP Companies:**

Within a few weeks of formally announcing our TRADEUP program – where we work with tradespeople who want to start working on their own – we are announcing our first Program Company. *NOTE: The entrepreneur, Matt O’Shaughnessy, is a veteran so he also counts as part of the HEROES program*

- **\*New – Revival Renovations**

### **GROWTH Companies:**

Our support extends beyond STARTUPS to include established companies poised for expansion. These businesses are scaling their operations and contributing significantly to the local economy:

- **Bluffton Electric**
  - **Delta Roofing**
  - **Noble Hearts Human Resources**
  - **Hardee Greens (Graduated STARTUP and is now in Hardeeville GROWTH Program)**
  - **\*New - Simply Stated**
  - **\*New – Nexus Business Technology**
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- Simply Stated achieved a major milestone, featuring its workbook on **QVC** ([Watch Here](#))
  - Conducted a Hardee Greens pop-up meeting to discuss a potential acquisition opportunity
  - Held a meeting with Brent Bowyer of CrossFlight to explore potential collaborations.

### **THRIVE Companies**

Successfully launched the new THRIVE program: Two recent graduates from the GROWTH Program have moved to THRIVE providing opportunity for our graduating GROWTH companies to continue to engage with the Don Ryan Center in a meaningful way to promote long term sustainability and success.

- **Universal Bookkeeper**
- **Beachside Tire**

### **Mentor Program**

#### **Mentorship Network:**

- Received and processed new mentor requests for upcoming program companies
- Onboarded 2 new mentors

## Economic Development Update

- Working with prospective tenants for building A. The goal is to have at least the top floor fully rented out before the space opens in late 2025
- Advanced **strategic planning for staffing positions** to support long-term growth at DRCI
- Initiated assessment of **IT infrastructure needs for Building 100** to ensure operational efficiency

## Events and Meetings:

- **Presented AI innovations** to the **Hampton Lake Armadillo Club** with a strong turnout of **95 attendees**.
- Delivered a **presentation on DRCI programs** to the **Hampton Lake Women's Group** to expand community awareness.
- Participated in the **BCEDC Small Business Roundtable** to discuss regional economic development.
- Held a meeting with **Brent Bowyer of CrossFlight** to explore potential collaborations.
- Represented DRCI at the **Greater Bluffton Chamber of Commerce (GBCC) monthly Member Benefits Meeting** to engage with the business community
- Teaching 3 entrepreneurship classes on February 24<sup>th</sup> to prepare students at HHCA to come to The HUB in April to do Shark Tank
- David Nelems will be speaking at USCB to the Business Club on March 5<sup>th</sup> on the topic of entrepreneurship.

## Partnerships

### Key Collaborations:

- **Hardeeville:** Meeting with Josh Gruber and Neil Parsons. Overview of 2024 and ongoing discussions for 2025 plans
- **BlacQuity:** We continue to be open to opportunities for collaboration
- **Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation:** Ongoing collaboration on multiple impactful projects including collaboration
- **Greater Bluffton Chamber:** Participated in numerous ribbon cuttings, showcasing the growth and expansion of local businesses and attended. Continuing to host lunch and learns for the GBCC and represented DRCI at their monthly Member Benefits Meeting
- **Hilton Head – Bluffton Chamber:** Attended several groundbreakings and ribbon cuttings, and working an AI Education Series with the Chamber. Paul is in the Leadership Program for 2025 and DRCI is hosting their meetings at The HUB. Engaged with the HHI Chamber Military & Business Alliance at The HUB

- **Hispanic Business Association of the Lowcountry:** Multiple meetings with Alex Navarro about various partnership activities like information sessions for their association members, potential clients and how to reach them and made the introduction to BCEDC
- **SBAC:** Paul Arvantes is a member of this board
- **Beaufort County Airport Board:** David Nelems is a member of this Board
- **Beaufort Digital Corridor:** David Nelems is a member of this Board