

MassChallenge down to final 26 start-ups

Hub of innovation universe



By Jessica Van Sack

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The Hub lived up to its recent billing as the world's most innovative city yesterday as 26 start-up companies advanced to the finals of a Fan Pier-based competition for \$1 million in cash.

Aimed at luring top innovators into the Hub's talent market for three months, MassChallenge is already seeing results, with one finalist brainiac vowing to move his New Hampshire-based company to the Bay State.

That inventor is mechanical engineer David Perry. He's only 23, but officials at MassChallenge believe he's on the fast track to helping solve an international crisis: a shortage of clean drinking water. Perry's prototype of a screw-cap water purifier costs only \$1 and attaches to most plastic bottles.

"Along the way there's been constant encouragement," Perry said. "The flooding in Pakistan, the earthquake in Haiti, and the flooding in Tennessee."

Perry said he hopes retail sales will help subsidize a nonprofit arm of his company that will distribute the filter to developing countries.

MassChallenge CEO John Harthorne said he was particularly impressed with Perry's invention. "Think of the crisis in Haiti - instead of delivering clean water you can deliver water filters," he said.

Contest winners will be announced Oct. 21. Other finalists hail from all over the world and have inventions including a video game to teach children to play instruments, a lawn seed mixture that almost never needs watering, and a \$75,000 supercomputer that does the work of a machine worth \$1 million.

"This development is going to help scientists and artists - or anyone who has a need for large data sets - to solve problems," said Linda Mello, of Hub-based Symmetric Computing Inc.

In September, Australia's 2thinknow again ranked Boston the top city of global innovation - in part due to efforts like MassChallenge.

"The start-up sector in Boston was among the very best," said 2thinknow director Christopher Hire. "It also has lower costs than New York."

But whether the contest winners stay remains to be seen. Said Harthorne, “We believed it’s better to keep it open, and by keeping it open we will attract better start-ups.”



Photo by Christopher Evans

START-UP SHOWDOWN: Marc MacLeod, left, Danielle Ain and Mike Stone work on their MassChallenge entrant start-up, Abroad101.