UNH Celebrates Students and Alumni at Annual Social Venture Innovation Challenge

Paige Balcom '16 named 2023 Social Innovator of the Year

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

Team A-Peezy Filter, which took home the Most Well-Articulated Problem Award, presents at this year’s NH Social Innovator Challenge. Team members include Ava Gardner ’25, Cole Capobianco ’25 and Gibby Villa ’24.

Student and alumni innovators alike were celebrated last week at the culminating events of the NH Social Venture Innovation Challenge (SVIC), UNH’s annual idea competition. Paige Balcom ’16 (CEPS, mechanical engineering) was named the 2023 UNH Social Innovator of the Year during the festivities. The award is among the university’s most prestigious, recognizing leaders with a demonstrated commitment to combining the purpose of a social and/or environmental mission with the rigor and accountability of a financially sustainable, scalable model for change. Over the years, awardees have served as inspiration for students competing in the SVIC, Fiona Wilson, deputy chief sustainability officer at UNH and director of the Sustainability Institute, says.

The award given to Balcom (https://www.unh.edu/sustainability/blog/2023/11/unh-alumna-dr-paige-balcom-16-named-unh-social-innovator-year) was especially meaningful, as the Londonderry, New Hampshire native was a 2015 SVIC winner for her work with a group of other UNH students on Project Oasis, an idea to provide families with fresh vegetables and fish-based protein by developing a low cost, easily maintainable aquaponics system that runs on renewable energy. A Hamel Scholar as an undergraduate, Balcom traveled to Uganda with Engineers without Borders, which began the journey (https://lemelson.mit.edu/award-winners/paige-balcom) to her current role as co-founder, co-CEO, and CTO of Takataka Plastics, a Ugandan social enterprise locally recycling plastic waste and creating jobs for vulnerable youth. Balcom gave a keynote on the importance of innovation and entrepreneurship in solving today’s sustainability problems at the virtual announcement of the 2023 SVIC student awards webinar Dec. 6.

Evidence that there is a vibrant generation of current UNH students hoping to follow in Balcom’s footsteps as social entrepreneurs was on full display during the SVIC live final round Dec. 5. Ten finalist student teams (https://www.unh.edu/sustainability/blog/2023/11/finalists-announced-2023-social-venture-innovation-challenge) presented their ideas to address a wide range of sustainability challenges at the local, regional and global level – topics tackled included the climate crisis and related impacts, widespread lead contamination of drinking water, plastic waste, social isolation and a pandemic of loneliness among college students, challenges of equity and inclusion of those living with deafness, loss of species habitat, and the rise in humanitarian crises due to war and political instability.

Student teams presented to a panel of judges, prominent social venture founders, leaders and investors from New Hampshire and beyond.

“The SVIC meets the world’s most pressing social and environmental problems with inspired, creative solutions that showcase the power of interdisciplinary collaboration and thinking. Watching the SVIC springboard social entrepreneurs and businesses that evolve and endure over the years has been incredible. It’s impossible to finish the day of presentations and judging without feeling renewed hope and excitement for the future,” says final round judge Kate Dumas, CFA, SVIC judging chair and an impact investor, who recently joined UNH’s sustainability advisory board.

Organized by UNH’s Changemaker Collaborative, the SVIC is a platform to help grow a community of skilled problem-solvers capable of addressing society’s most pressing sustainability issues. Designed to be an idea “accelerator,” participants develop original early-stage concepts for creative, financially sustainable solutions toward the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

“As a judge and a representative of an SVIC lead sponsor, this is always one of my favorite days of the year. Engaging with these forward-thinking students who work to solve complex problems is energizing and inspiring,” says Liz Torrance, VP and social responsibility manager at Kennebunk Savings. “I’m optimistic that these current and future changemakers will continue to drive innovation and instill hope for a more sustainable future.”

More than $15,000 in cash and in-kind prizes was awarded to the winning UNH student teams. The public was also invited to participate in the awarding of an additional prize by voting for their favorite idea for the Audience Choice Award – and more than 1,000 individuals voted.

Final round judge and UNH sustainability advisory board member and alumnus Ed Farrington ’93, head of distribution for North America at Impax Asset Management, remarked that “spending a day with creative, passionate students and faculty who are applying their skill to problem solving brings me great hope for our future.”

The awards were distributed as follows.

- **An interdisciplinary team of four UNH sustainability dual majors, ChargeOn, took home two awards – Most Innovative Solution and the Audience Choice Award. Team members include Daisy Burns ’24, economics; Natalie Young ’25, equine science; Windsor Golembeske ’26, communication; and Edyn Winter ’24, marketing, whose idea is to develop an electric car rental company that stores wholesale renewable energy in EV batteries, when cars are not in use, to supply energy to the grid during peak demand. The team was advised by Joshua Cyr, interim director, UNH Entrepreneurship Center.**

- **Team GLOFWatch was awarded Most Impact Potential for the idea to combine satellite imagery and weather updates shared on social media platforms to provide early warnings regarding glacial lake outburst floods. It was developed by UNH Ph.D. candidate, Imran Khan ’25G, civil and environmental engineering, who was advised by Jennifer Jacobs, UNH professor of civil and environmental engineering.**

- **Most Well-Articulated Problem was awarded to A-peely Filter, an affordable lead filter for communities with low socioeconomic status using food waste materials to create it from restaurants. Team members include Ava Gardner ’25, justice studies and sociology, Cole Capobianco ’25, environmental**
First-year UNH student Timothy Yon ’27, mechanical engineering, was awarded the Best First-year Student Submission for Electric Velomobile, an ultra-efficient EV that puts freedom of movement back in the hands of the average person.

Most Financially Sustainable Solution was awarded to College Connector, a community-centered platform designed to alleviate the social, emotional and financial issues associated with collegiate life. The idea was developed by Brett Schultz ’26, business administration and sustainability dual major. Schultz was advised by Joshua Cyr, interim director, UNH Entrepreneurship Center.

Three sophomores comprising Team HELPLink were awarded the Most Impressive Presentation for their idea for a cutting-edge digital platform that fosters connections between victims and NGO workers, elevating the effectiveness and speed of humanitarian aid response. Team members include Daryna Serediuk ’26, biochemistry, molecular, and cellular Biology, Viktorie Vagnerova ’26, mechanical engineering, and Naranjana Thangam Archunaraj Indhumathy ’26, neuroscience and behavior.

The SVIC is a collaborative, interdisciplinary event, organized at UNH Changemaker Collaborative (https://www.unh.edu/sustainability/changemakers), a partnership of UNH’s Sustainability Institute, the Peter T. Paul College of Business & Economics and the Carsey School of Public Policy. Additional collaborators include UNH faculty who embedded the SVIC into their fall courses, and the UNH ECenter, (https://unh.edu/ecenter/) which had several of its staff members serve as advisors to many teams in the final round.

The competition is entirely funded through the contributions of sponsors. Major supporters of the 2023 SVIC include Alnoba, Impax Asset Management and Kennebunk Savings. Additional supporters include Cirtronics, Prime Buchholz, Unitil Corporation, CCA Global Partners, New Hampshire Businesses for Social Responsibility, The Recycled Planet Company and the UNH ECenter Maurice Prize.

COMPLETE LIST OF 2023 SVIC WINNERS

**Most Innovative Solution and the Audience Choice Award: Team ChargeOn**

An electric car rental company that stores wholesale renewable energy in EV batteries, when cars are not in use, to supply energy to the grid during peak demand.

Daisy Burns ’24, economics and sustainability dual major
Natalie Young ’25, equine science and sustainability dual major
Windsor Golembeske ’26, communication and sustainability dual major
Edyn Winter ’24, marketing and sustainability dual major
Advised by Joshua Cyr, interim director, UNH Entrepreneurship Center

**Most Impact Potential: Team GLOFWatch**

Combining satellite imagery and weather updates shared on social media platforms to provide early warnings regarding glacial lake outburst floods.

Ph.D. candidate Imran Khan ’25G, civil and environmental engineering
Advised by Jennifer Jacobs, UNH professor of civil and environmental engineering.

**Most Well-Articulated Problem: Team A-Peeley Filter**

An affordable lead filter for communities with low socioeconomic status using food waste materials to create it from restaurants.

Ava Gardner ’25, justice studies and sociology
Cole Capobianco ’25, environmental engineering
Gibby Villa ’24, civil engineering.
Advised by Jason Plant ’23, co-founder, HydroPhos Solutions

**Best First-year Student Submission: Team Electric Velomobile**

An ultra-efficient EV that puts freedom of movement back in the hands of the average person.

Timothy Yon ’27, mechanical engineering

**Most Financially Sustainable Solution: Team College Connector**

A community-centered platform designed to alleviate the social, emotional and financial issues associated with collegiate life.

Brett Schultz ’26, business administration and sustainability dual major.
Advised by Joshua Cyr, interim director, UNH Entrepreneurship Center

**Most Impressive Presentation: Team HELPLink**

A cutting-edge digital platform idea that fosters connections between victims and NGO workers, elevating the effectiveness and speed of humanitarian aid response.
Daryna Serediuk '26, biochemistry, molecular, and cellular biology
Viktorie Vagnerova '26, mechanical engineering
Naranjana Thangam Archunaraj Indhumathy '26, neuroscience and behavior

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