

## REALITY TV INSPIRES REAL-LIFE COMPETITION AMONG EMERGING ENTREPRENEURS

BY M. KATHLEEN PRATT & PAUL ENGLEMAN

THIS MONTH, aspiring Ontario entrepreneurs will present their best ideas to a group of high-profile investors. Modelled loosely on the popular CBC reality show *Dragons' Den*, the Rotarian-run competition, called *Pythons' Pit*, started last year. Like the hard-charging investors on reality TV, local investors, or "pythons," challenge contestants to defend their concepts. If satisfied, investors back the winners with funding in return for an equity stake.

The competition includes two levels of contestants: Community entrants pitch ideas for a chance at an investment pool of more than \$150,000, and high school participants vie for cash and scholarships. Throughout the process, Rotarians and community members offer guidance. The pythons evaluate the finalists and back winning ideas.

"Entrepreneurship is the future of our country," says organizer Fareen Samji, a member of the Rotary Club of Burlington North, Ont. "It's amazing to give kids an opportunity to showcase their talents."

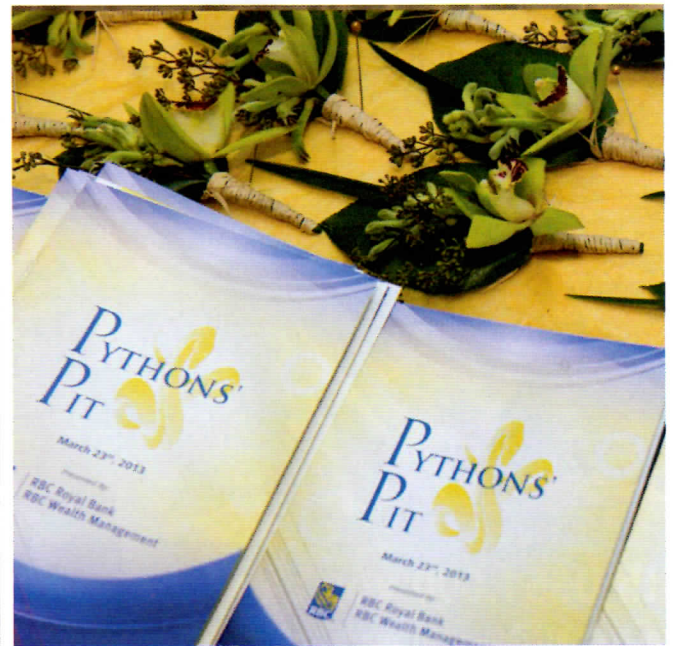
For the first event, Samji and co-organizer Tom McLeod ral-

lied support from all 10 clubs in southwestern Ontario's Halton region, as well as local businesses and chambers of commerce. The DeGroot School of Business at McMaster University was another key collaborator: DeGroot MBA students screened all applications, narrowing the field to the top 10 in each of the two divisions. In return, students gained experience assessing a business plan.

Unlike the reality TV show that inspired it, *Pythons' Pit* is about more than just funding and exposure, Samji says. "The most important part is the mentorship," she explains. "To be successful in business, not only do you need capital, but you need the advice along the way."

Pythons share their expertise with the competitors and provide mentoring through emails, phone calls, and in-person meetings. At the high school level, Rotarians help prepare participants for the big event, drilling them with mock questions and critiquing presentations.

"Traditional jobs aren't there like they used to be, so encouraging people to be entrepreneurs is important," says Virox



The *Pythons' Pit* competition takes vocational service to the next level, as local tycoons back winning ideas while serving as mentors.

Technologies president and founder Randy Pilon, one of the six investors who served as a python.

Entrepreneurs who made it to last year's finals, held before a live audience and aired on local TV in October, are already seeing results. One high school competitor who developed an application to ease order processing and scheduling for restaurants spent the summer interning at a python's office and is now working toward a licensing agreement for her technology. Another entrepreneur who competed in the community division has backing from several pythons, including Pilon, to expand her line of tote

bags made from upcycled promotional banners, seatbelts, and bicycle tubes.

For Ryan Muil, *Pythons' Pit* offered a way to take his nascent hot sauce business to a new level. He won \$2,500 for his top finish in the high school category, but Muil says the real payoff was the contacts he made. John Romano, a local brewery owner, took an interest in the product and invited Muil to use his facility for a production run. Romano then shipped 120 jars of sauce to distributors to help get it to a wider market. Muil is now studying business at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont., with a fledging enterprise on the side.



Canada  
AT A GLANCE

**\$250 million**

Canada's commitment between 2013 and 2018 to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative

**2018**

Target date to eradicate polio

**\$2.27 million**

Total raised by Canadian Rotarians and matched by the Harper government in support of polio eradication