In order to win, you don't already have to be in business: “All you need, really, is an idea and the drive,” Esther Fraser, director of communications at Rising Tide Capital, said.

Rising Tide Capital, a nonprofit micro-enterprise development organization in Jersey City, held its sixth annual “Start Something Challenge” finals last week.

The business pitch competition provides aspiring and budding entrepreneurs with annual revenue of $250,000 or less the opportunity to win up to $10,000 in startup or expansion costs.

Alfa Demmellash, co-founder and CEO of Rising Tide Capital, said the competition also provides valuable learning opportunities.

“The ‘Start Something Challenge’ is unique in that participating entrepreneurs receive hours of training and expert feedback and have access to workshops, mentoring and coaching,” Demmellash said.

“Throughout the process, they learn how to transform an idea or concept into a business model, effectively promote their business and perfect an elevator pitch. They also then become a part of Rising Tide Capital’s networking community of entrepreneurs, experts and funders.”

Demmellash, who created Rising Tide Capital in 2004 with co-founder Alex Forrester, said she believes that, by creating business development programs specifically focused on local entrepreneurs’ abilities to begin, sustain and grow their own
businesses, she can help shape the economic growth of Jersey City.

"But some entrepreneurs simply feel uncomfortable talking about their businesses, regardless of how great or knowledgeable they are in their industry," Fraser said.

The "Start Something Challenge," she said, specifically focuses on entrepreneurs' abilities to connect with consumers and promote their products or services by encouraging them to find out where their target markets exist in order to effectively reach them.

"What is the message that these entrepreneurs need to tell their target markets in order to make them understand why what they are doing is important and necessary?" Fraser said.

The competitive process ranges from first being asked to create a short video commercial for the business, to gaining votes online, to live pitching to a panel of judges.

This year's first place winner, Brittany Graziosi, said that, as a finalist, she didn't feel like she was giving a speech.

"I was just simply telling my story," she said.

Graziosi established the Jersey City Oddities Market in 2016 after being laid off from her first job in software training.

"At 21 years old, I did not want to move back home, so I thought, well, maybe I could sell my artwork," she said.

Having always had an interest in biology, anatomy and nature, Graziosi developed a talent for creating jewelry from animal bones.

After six years traveling the vendor market and selling her jewelry at hundreds of events, Graziosi decided to create her own space focused exclusively on the niche oddities vendor community.

"Vendor events are either hit or miss," she said. "You can show up, pay a large vendor fee, plus gas and tolls, and never get a customer.

"I took what I learned, both the good and the bad, from the events I had attended, and thought, what if I put together a market to cater specifically to artists like me, bringing in only the customers that would want the kind of things that we sell?"

Graziosi said she began hiring vendors on Facebook and Craigslist, as well as by utilizing the book full of business cards she had collected from past events.

Today, Jersey City Oddities is a pop-up marketplace, typically held at Cathedral Hall in Jersey City, that hosts more than 100 rotating vendors, including taxidermists, costume designers, jewelers, crafters, tarot card readers and more.

Jersey City Oddities also has held smaller events with Harsimus Cemetery and the Liberty Science Center.

"Each event hosts, at minimum, 45 vendors; at maximum, 80," Graziosi said.

Graziosi said she averages more than $400 in sales at each of her own markets.

"I have been very happy to find that a lot of my vendors are minorities and single parents like me, from towns such as Jersey City, Paterson, Newark — places that I did not expect there to be so many artists," she said.

After her 4-year old son was diagnosed with autism last year, Graziosi said she decided to pursue this venture full-time in order to be home with him.
She also joined Rising Tide Capital's 12-week Community Business Academy in March after hearing good things about the program from other vendors.

"Rising Tide has been the most amazing thing that I never knew I needed," Graziosi said. "They provided me with tools and networks I never would have had access to otherwise. And, through the academy itself, I’ve met other business owners who I am now collaborating with."

What Graziosi said she needed most, however, was affirmation.

"I thought I was going to be met with weirdness about my idea," Graziosi said. "But when I met with Rising Tide, I saw their eyes light up when I explained my business.

“They said, ‘You have a very specific market, and that is good. If you know your market, you will have a clear path in which to advertise to your people,’ ”

The same could be said for Djenaba Johnson-Jones, founder and CEO of the Hudson Kitchen in Jersey City, and this year’s second-place finisher.

“We offer food entrepreneurs the tools and the resources needed to start and grow successful businesses,” Johnson-Jones said.

This year marked Johnson-Jones’ second time as a finalist in the competition.

“I reached out to a lot of people on Facebook that I hadn’t spoken to in years, from high school, college, my sorority,” she said. “I also made postcards and talked to strangers on line at Chipotle and at the bus stop.”

Having worked in business development for media brands such as Conde Nast and Hearst for more than 15 years, Johnson-Jones knew how to effectively get the votes she needed to advance in the contest.

It was when she was laid off from that job that she knew she wanted to do something different.

“I had planned to launch a health, fitness and food concierge service, which included booking training sessions for busy clients and the delivery of prepared meals,” Johnson-Jones said. “However, when I discovered that the preparation and delivery of meals from one’s own home is illegal in New Jersey, I began searching for a commercial kitchen.”

Johnson-Jones said she could not easily find one in the Hudson County area.

“I was told by local food entrepreneurs that they would simply rent church kitchens and restaurants after hours,” she said.

Johnson-Jones instead decided to turn this pain point into a business opportunity by creating the concept for Hudson Kitchen in 2015.

Working closely with the Jersey City Economic Development Corp., Hudson Kitchen acts as a full-service culinary incubator, helping food entrepreneurs launch and grow their businesses with low risk by raising brand awareness and connecting them with retail and catering opportunities.

“We assist with everything from packaging design, to food photography and video, to product launches and event management,” Johnson-Jones said.

Hudson Kitchen also provides low-cost culinary business workshops and networking opportunities throughout the year, such as “Pricing Your Food Product for Profitability,” and its quarterly networking and educational series, Table Talk Live.

It was after attending Rising Tide Capital's Community Business Academy that Johnson-Jones said she had the idea to launch Hudson Kitchen’s own Food Business Bootcamp at Hudson County Community College, a low-cost, nine-class series
that takes a food entrepreneur from concept to retail.

"Organizations such as Rising Tide are so important because they really do hold your hand throughout the entire process," Johnson-Jones said. "After almost two years of building a relationship with them, I know I can call on 10 people in that office to get an answer or recommendation."

Fraser said the feeling is mutual.

"It is wonderful that this year, the 'Start Something Challenge' gave entrepreneurs who are creating platforms to help others a platform in which to talk about their businesses and craft their messages," she said.

While the Jersey City Oddities Market's next event will be held at Cathedral Hall on Nov. 4-5, Graziosi said she would like to use her $10,000 winnings to transition into a permanent location complete with specialized manufacturing equipment, such as a silk screen printer and a jewelry kiln.

"I want artists to be able to come and use our community workspace and equipment in order to lessen their costs," she said. "Additionally, many of the artists I work with are educators who like to host workshops and teach classes."

"I would like to provide them with the opportunity to reach even more people with hands-on, interactive experiences that will open up more of an interest in science and art."

Johnson-Jones said she would like to use her $7,500 winnings to do much of the same by opening a 24/7 commercial kitchen, bakery and co-working space in Hudson County.

"My overall vision for Hudson Kitchen is to help 500 food businesses generate $50 million in collective revenue and create 1,000 jobs over the next five years," she said.

Fraser said it is common for graduates of Rising Tide Capital to give back by growing their businesses.

"I've seen so many people start off with an idea, build a business, hire employees, keep dollars in their community and go on to give back as coaches, instructors, elected officials and donors to causes that they feel passionate about," she said.

Today, on average, a new business is formed every three days at Rising Tide Capital in Jersey City and in five inner cities of northern New Jersey.

Additionally, over the past five years, nearly 500 entrepreneurs from across New Jersey have entered the "Start Something Challenge," with winners receiving more than $150,000 in total business grant support.

"At Rising Tide Capital, we are committed to transforming economically challenged communities through entrepreneurship," Demmellash said. "And the entrepreneurial journey today is a much more widely shared aspiration."

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