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**Mayor Turner Announces Winners of 11th Annual Liftoff Houston Startup
Business Plan Competition**

HOUSTON – Three promising startup entrepreneurs each received \$10,000 in seed money for their business after winning the City of Houston’s 11th Annual Liftoff Houston Startup Business Plan Competition (Liftoff Houston). Nine finalists, selected from more than 100 applicants, competed in Liftoff’s Pitch Day on November 18, 2023 in three categories: Service, Product, and Innovation, pitching their business ideas to a panel of expert judges.

The 2023 \$10,000 winners are:

- Teria Johnson: Charleston Kitchen, offering sweet and savory pies, inspired by Teria’s Gullah Geechee culture. Currently operating as an e-commerce company, Charleston Kitchen’s plans to open a brick-and-mortar restaurant.
- Zoey Barker and Mohammadmehdi Mortazavi: ExoBraced created ExoBak, a non-powered light-weight exoskeleton designed to help manual workers prevent lower back injuries and pain, while helping businesses reduce injury rates, high labor turnover, and unnecessary compensation expenses.
- Giovanni Garza: Classic Borrego Retail, dedicated to offering high-quality, handcrafted artisanal cowboy boots. As part of its long-term plan, the company aims to expand its presence by opening a brick-and-mortar store in the heart of Houston.

Runners-up were awarded \$500 each:

- Francesca Bonaduce De Nigris: Intrecci by Francesca collaborates with artisans around the world, to deliver one-of-a-kind handmade rugs, including antique, vintage, and contemporary rugs, kilims, and textiles that are expressions of the people who created them as well as of the places where they were created.

- Diana Tudela and Hailee Trombley: The Goodest Goodbye, redefining pet aftercare through cutting-edge, environmentally conscious water cremation (aquamation) and heartfelt farewell services for pet owners.
- Diane Nguyen: Flourishing Nexus LLC, aims to develop a dynamic virtual platform that unites health professionals worldwide, fostering professional networking, collaboration, and the global dissemination of knowledge and expertise, ultimately elevating the standard of patient care

The public was invited to attend in person or view the competition live, on HTV Houston Television or by livestream on Facebook, and vote for their Fan Favorites. Classic Borrego, The Goodest Goodbye, and Flourishing Nexus received the most community votes, winning the Fan Favorite title and a cash prize of \$500 each.

2023 Houston Liftoff judges were: Jennifer Dale; LiftFund, Adriana Gonzalez; Chamber of Latin Entrepreneurs of Houston, Anthony Lopez; PeopleFund, Daniel Luu; America's Small Business Development Center, Kyra Hardwick; The Kyra Company, Sandra Louvier; HCC Center for Entrepreneurship, Kiley Summers; SpenDebt, Grace Rodriguez, ImpactHub Houston, Kym Adams; The Business Team

"The program is especially significant as data collected from recent competitions shows Liftoff Houston made an impact on populations that have been historically marginalized." said Mayor Sylvester Turner. "More than 90% of participants identified as people of color, more than 70% were female, 44% had no college degree, and 54% earned less than \$50,000 a year."

The annual Liftoff Houston competition is sponsored by Capital One Bank and administered by the Houston Public Library (HPL) and the Office of Business Opportunity (OBO). Capital One Bank has given more than **\$330,000** in prizes for aspiring entrepreneurs since Liftoff Houston's inception.

Of all competition finalists over the 11 years, 33 winners started businesses in retail, merchandise, consulting, software, hardware, hospitality, health and wellness, education, finance, technology, and logistics.

"The Houston Public Library (HPL) wishes all the finalists the very best. Liftoff Houston continues to be an outstanding program that is helping people from all over the city realize their goal of starting their own business." said HPL Director Dr. Rhea Lawson. "HPL is proud to be part of the program, and we remain committed to providing access to great, free business resources and services for anyone wanting to learn more about entrepreneurship."

"Liftoff Houston – and our finalists – have also made it this far because of our workshop partners, all who have given us the invaluable gift of their time." said OBO Director Marsha Murray. "The business, financial, legal and marketing education they have provided has allowed our participants to plan a roadmap to their success, including the creation of viable business plans."

All who completed the Liffoff Houston competition attended nearly four months of required workshops and met with business and financial mentors. They also submitted business plans which were reviewed and judged by representatives from SCORE Houston. Participants also leveraged free business resources from the Houston Public Library and the Office of Business Opportunity to complete market research, develop marketing plans, and to create viable business plans. In addition to the competition, Liffoff Houston also featured the Educational Pathway, which extended the business education opportunities to all interested, including those not ready to compete as well as participants who did not meet eligibility requirements to compete.

For more information about Liffoff Houston, go to www.liffoff-houston.com.