



Stellar Industries honored with Legacy Award

Celebrating Entrepreneurship in North Iowa at the 2024 Pappajohn Gala

The 2024 Pappajohn Entrepreneur Gala celebrated North Iowa’s entrepreneurs on October 3, 2024 at a special recognition event at North Iowa Area Community College in Mason City. Entrepreneurs and businesses across North Iowa were invited to apply for four awards categories: Young Entrepreneur of the Year, Entrepreneur of the Year, Student Entrepreneur of the Year, the Innovation Award, and Business of the Year. Sixteen finalists were named, and the winners were announced at the gala. A new recognition, the Entrepreneur of Purpose Award, was awarded to Cassii Calaway of Kutz by KZ in Mason City.

Stellar Industries was honored with the Legacy Award. The Legacy Award recognizes a business that has made significant contributions to North Iowa through their vision, passion, and leadership. Stellar Industries and the Zrostlik family embody entrepreneurship in North Iowa, constantly innovating and expanding their footprint both locally and beyond. Stellar designs and manufactures a diverse range of market-leading equipment that sets new industry standards. To ensure the long-term success of the company and the well-being of their workforce, Stellar took a forward-thinking step by establishing an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). This initiative turned employees into shareholders, fostering a deeper sense of community, culture, and commitment within the company. The award was accepted by David Zrostlik, President of Stellar Industries.

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The 2024 Pappajohn Gala

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Caleb Renner [Renner Ag Solutions; Klemme, IA] received **Student Entrepreneur of the Year**. Caleb Renner is a fifth-generation farmer working alongside his father and grandfather on 1,800 acres in North Central Iowa. He is the founder of Renner Ag Solutions, who's developing a patent-pending bin sweep replacement that automatically unloads bins, eliminating the need for farmers to enter during the load-out process, ultimately saving lives and limbs.

Student Entrepreneur of the Year finalists also included **Catherine Dow [Instatat; Clarksville, IA]** and **Casey Schilling [K2 Enterprise; Britt, IA]**.

Cody Purvis [Pampered Pets Resort & Spa; Kanawha, IA] received **Young Entrepreneur of the Year**. Cody Purvis founded Pampered Pets Retreat and Spa in Kanawha in 2014. Starting from home, she built the business part-time. By 2017 she constructed the first commercial building to be built in Kanawha in 25 years and has since expanded. Pampered Pets has revitalized Kanawha, attracting hundreds of monthly clients. They give back in a variety of ways including donating dog food to local shelters, holding charitable events for local shelters and humane societies and supporting community causes.

Young Entrepreneur of the Year finalists also included **Jake Buss [Marathon Media; Charles City, IA]** and **Cort & Lanie Sanvig [Tellurian Brewing; Charles City, IA]**.

Luke Pickar and Jordan Oulman [Pickar-Oulman Plumbing, Heating & Electrical; Riceville, IA] received **Entrepreneur of the Year**. Luke Pickar and Jordan Oulman are the owners of Pickar-Oulman Plumbing, Heating, & Electrical Services in Riceville. In 2011, at just 23 years old, Luke and Jordan purchased the business from Luke's father. The community soon realized that these young entrepreneurs had a bold, forward-thinking business plan that went beyond delivering quality products and services. Their vision included a deep commitment to community support, highlighted by their volunteer efforts and financial contributions to a wide range of local events.

Entrepreneur of the Year finalists also included **Tyler Johnson [Charlie Golf Co.; Mason City, IA]** and **Catarino Martinez [Avion Azul & The Surf Galley; Mason City, IA]**.

Zack Smith received the Innovation Award. Zack Smith is the founder of The Stock Cropper located in Lake Mills. Beginning in 2020 The Stock Cropper team had an idea to create a system designed to re-intersect livestock and crops working together in a closed loop, low carbon intensive, synergistic field arrangement. The solution was designed and has become the world's first autonomous, solar powered, self-steering multi-species grazing barn. In the spring of 2024 the Stock Cropper story was included in the release of the film, "Food Inc 2, Back for Seconds".

Innovation Award finalists also included **Billie Asmus [Repaint Studios; Hampton, IA]** and **David Kingland [Renovo Media Group; Clear Lake, IA]**.

Pritchard Companies received Business of the Year. The Business of the Year Award honors outstanding North Iowa businesses that have demonstrated exceptional practices in driving economic growth and creating value for our community improving the quality of life for all residents. Pritchard Companies, originally founded as Pritchard Family Auto Stores in 1913 has a rich history rooted in family and community values. The company's adherence to these core principles and its innovative spirit led to its expansion into various industries beyond automotive dealerships. Over five generations, they have continued to grow and innovate, building a legacy of trust and excellence and remaining committed to its core values of: relationships, integrity, work ethic, and a passion for serving its communities.

Business of the Year finalists also included **Clear Lake Bank & Trust [Clear Lake, IA]** and **Popp Excavating, Inc. [Osage, IA]**.

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The 2024 Pappajohn Gala

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The Pappajohn Entrepreneur Gala was made possible with the generous support of our sponsors and community partners. We would like to extend our great thanks to our sponsors:

Visionary: First Citizens Bank; The John K. & Luise V. Hanson Foundation; MBT Bank; The NIACC Foundation; Pritchard Companies; Stellar Industries Inc.

Innovator: AgVentures Alliance; BrownWinick Law Firm; CL Tel; Farmers State Bank; Forest City Economic Development Corporation; Heartland Asphalt; Home Trust & Savings Bank; Hoover’s Hatchery; Hovland Property Developments; Huber Supply; Iowa Economic Development Authority; Motion + Brennan Industries; Murphy, Coe & Smith; NIACC Business & Workforce Solutions; Sukup Manufacturing Co.

Ambassador: Charles City Area Development Corporation; Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce; Clear Lake Bank & Trust; Dean Snyder Construction; FFC Advisors; Henkel Construction; Iowa Association of Business & Industry; Jamie Zanos; L&J Industries; Mason City Chamber of Commerce; Mitchell County Economic Development Corporation; North Iowa Corridor Economic Development Corporation; Plas-Tech Tooling; TechTalk North Iowa; WinnWorth BetCo.

Community Partners: The City of Clear Lake; The City of Mason City; Cerro Gordo County; NIACC Continuing Education & Economic Development; The Iowa State Center for Industrial Research and Service (CIRAS); University of Iowa John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center (JPEC)



David Zrostlik - Legacy Award



Cassii Calaway - Entrepreneur of Purpose Award



Cody Purvis - Young Entrepreneur of the Year



Caleb Renner - Student Entrepreneur of the Year



Luke Pickar & Jordan Oulman - Entrepreneur of the Year



Zack Smith - Innovation Award



Pritchard Companies - Business of the Year

Director's Notes

Looking Back on 2024: A Year of Growth, Innovation, and Impact

As we open the chapter on 2025, I find myself reflecting on the incredible journey we have taken together at the NIACC Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center. This past year has been a testament to the power of entrepreneurship, collaboration, and the unwavering spirit of North Iowa.

Two of the most exciting recent highlights showcase the impact of our work. First, we received an Honorable Mention from the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE) for Entrepreneurial College of the Year. Invited to apply, we were among five semi-finalists selected to submit a video, and ultimately, our story was one of just three showcased at NACCE's annual conference in Minneapolis. This national recognition highlights our commitment to fostering innovation and entrepreneurial success. Closer to home, we were honored with the Spirit of North Iowa Award by the Clear Lake Chamber of Commerce. This was a honor and a great acknowledgment of our team's dedication, passion, spirit and impact in driving entrepreneurship and economic growth in our region.



Our mission has always been to empower business owners at every stage of their journey, from elementary age students taking their first steps in entrepreneurship to seasoned professionals looking to scale or transition their businesses. As you will see when we release our 2024 Impact Report, in 2024 alone, our work contributed to an \$8.8 million capital infusion into North Iowa businesses, helping launch, expand, and sustain ventures that drive our local economy. Our flagship youth programs, like Entrepreneur for a Day (E4D) and the Youth Entrepreneurial Academy (YEA), have continued to inspire the next generation, while new initiatives like IDEA Camp (Innovation, Discovery, Entrepreneurship, & Achievement Camp) are shaping the future of entrepreneurship education for middle school students.

We continue to adapt and evolve, offering dynamic workshops that address core entrepreneurial essentials, emerging business trends, and regulatory changes. By bringing in industry experts from across the state, we ensure that North Iowa's entrepreneurial ecosystem stays informed, prepared, and equipped with the latest insights to navigate an ever-changing global business landscape.

At the heart of it all is our commitment to fostering an entrepreneurial mindset, not just for business owners but for our entire community. Whether through education, mentorship, or strategic partnerships, we are building an eco-system where bold ideas thrive, and businesses flourish.

Looking Ahead to 2025: A Future Filled with Possibilities

While 2024 has been a year of remarkable progress, I am even more excited about what lies ahead in 2025.

- **Hosting the Iowa Student Entrepreneur Summit in April:** We are thrilled to welcome students from across the state for an engaging, hands-on experience designed to ignite innovation and entrepreneurship.
- **Innovating Our Entrepreneurial Ecosystem:** From refining the E4D program to launching a revised micro-loan and grant program, we are taking deliberate steps to provide more opportunities for aspiring and existing entrepreneurs.
- **Strengthening Our Digital Presence:** A new dedicated YouTube channel and a redesigned website will allow us to better share the incredible stories of our entrepreneurs and highlight the impact of our programs.
- **Deepening Community Connections:** Through enhanced mentorship initiatives, expanded partnerships, and new sponsorship opportunities, we are committed to ensuring that every entrepreneur in North Iowa has access to the resources they need to succeed.

I am incredibly grateful for the support, passion, and dedication of our team, our partners, and most importantly the entrepreneurs who trust us with their dreams. Thank you for making 2024 a year of impact, and I cannot wait to see what we build together in 2025!

The 2024 Annual Impact Report

Embracing an entrepreneurial mindset is essential when creating innovative solutions for today's challenges in all types of organizations, communities, and groups. At the NIACC John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center, we believe that embracing an entrepreneurial mindset is vital to crafting innovative solutions for the challenges faced by organizations, communities, and groups of all kinds.

Our center operates as a fully integrated business assistance hub, providing training, development, and support for entrepreneurs, businesses, and organizations within the NIACC region. We focus on fostering the growth of entrepreneurs, driving innovation, and assisting with successful business transition and succession planning. The NIACC Pappajohn Center & North Iowa SBDC serves as a comprehensive and trusted resource from K-14 entrepreneurship education to sophisticated deal-structuring for experienced entrepreneurs and established businesses.

Over the last 27 years, we've dedicated ourselves to inspiring, supporting, and accelerating business ownership and growth in North Iowa. We're excited to share with you the 2024 Annual Impact Report, which celebrates the success of our entrepreneurs and highlights the NIACC Pappajohn Center's impact in North Iowa.



Applications Now Open for 2025 Youth Entrepreneurial Academy



The NIACC Pappajohn Center Youth Entrepreneurial Academy (YEA) is a fun opportunity for North Iowa high school students to learn about starting a business and begin creating wealth by translating passion, interests, and hobbies into marketable strategies. YEA includes several components including an orientation session; five days of interactive activities, mentoring, and field trips; and an exciting pitch competition where students will compete against their peers for cash prizes. Students who attend will learn the ins and outs of starting a business and becoming their own boss.

This unique summer camp experience is free to participants thanks to the generous financial support from the John K. and Luise V. Hanson Foundation. Upon completion of YEA, every student will receive a \$500 NIACC scholarship and have the opportunity to compete for seed money to launch their business this summer.

The 2025 Youth Entrepreneurial Academy will be held at NIACC on Monday June 16th through Friday June 20th, 8:30am-4pm. The student pitch competition will take place on Monday June 23rd at 5:30pm. Learn more and apply at www.pappajohncenter.com/yea. Questions? Contact Raegan Hanson, Youth Entrepreneurship Coordinator, by email at raegan.hanson@niacc.edu or call 641-422-4111.

Entrepreneur Spotlight: Billie Asmus of Repaint Studios

As the founder and CEO of Repaint Studios, Billie Asmus is revolutionizing the painting and home DIY industry with her eco-friendly invention, the Repaint Tray. Her journey from a home-based furniture restoration side hustle to developing a sustainable product available in stores nation-wide showcases the power of innovation and determination in entrepreneurship. Billie’s inspiration for the Repaint Tray was sparked during her early days running a small furniture restoration business. “I was painting pretty much every single day,” she recalls. “I remember cleaning up my supplies at the end of the day and I looked at my garbage can – it was filled to the brim with those flimsy plastic paint tray liners. I remember thinking there’s got to be a more sustainable solution.” Finding that there was no reusable paint tray with a lid on the market, she decided to create one herself. Billie used foam board, hot glue, and raw silicone to create her first prototype. Her first prototype worked as she’d imagined it would. “And that was enough clarification for me to pursue this and that it could really be something big,” Billie says.

Billie enrolled in the Fall 2021 Venture School program at the NIACC Pappajohn Center. The University of Iowa Venture School is a premier statewide program for Iowa entrepreneurs, using a streamlined curriculum that emphasizes real-world innovation and hands-on customer discovery, with cohorts located across the state. Billie says, “In Venture School, I learned a lot about my business and realized who my true customer was going to be.” The Repaint Tray offers a reusable alternative to single-use plastic paint tray liners. This innovative product is not only environmentally friendly but also practical. Unlike disposable liners, it is designed to be used multiple times, reducing waste and cutting costs for consumers. The lid allows for extended usability, preventing paint from drying out and minimizing waste.

Billie’s creativity and innovation have led to remarkable achievements, but her journey wasn’t easy or instant. Billie notes that the Repaint Tray wasn’t an immediate success at pitch competitions and encourages other startups not to get discouraged. “Don’t stop applying for pitch competitions,” she says. “In the first two years, I didn’t make it through or got honorable mention. It wasn’t until the third year that I applied that I finally won.” With grit and determination, Billie has worked tirelessly to achieve her dream. In December 2023, Billie received the coveted Gold Ticket at “Into the Blue: Lowe’s Product Pitch Event”, a global pitch competition. The Repaint Tray secured the largest purchase order in the paint category, placing it in Lowe’s stores nationwide. After three years of competing, Billie won First Place at the John Pappajohn Iowa Entrepreneurial Venture Competition in August 2024. Then, in December 2024, Billie won the Iowa InnoVenture Challenge, a winner-take-all pitch competition for early-state startups with a prize of \$100,000. Through her determination and perseverance, Billie has brought her invention to national attention, secured critical funding for production and expansion, and built important relationship with investors and industry contacts.



Candi Karsjens, Billie Asmus, and Ashley Page at the InnoVenture Challenge

Billie is looking to the future of Repaint Studios. “We’re already working with European partners to expand into the European market and I’m really excited to see what happens there,” she reflects. Billie is focused on scaling production to meet demand, and is looking at the possibility of developing additional eco-friendly painting accessories. For those embarking on their own entrepreneurial journeys, Billie emphasizes the importance of seeking support and resources. “Tap into the SBDC and the Pappajohn Center because you can’t do it all on your own,” she says. “Entrepreneurship is not possible without support. You need those core people who believe in you from the very beginning.”

The Repaint Tray can now be found in Lowes’s stores across the United States, and on Lowes.com and HomeDepot.com. [Watch Billie share her entrepreneurial story in the North Iowa Entrepreneurial Showcase video series >](#)

Fall 2024 Venture School Launch Day Competition

The NIACC John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center hosted the University of Iowa Venture School Launch Day competition on Thursday November 14, 2024. The NIACC Fall 2024 Venture School cohort competed in person after attending classes virtually for 7 weeks of training, customer discovery, and developing their business model alongside local entrepreneur coaches. The judges were: Matt Curtis (Wayne's Ski & Cycle, Mason City), Caleb Renner (Renner Ag Solutions, Klemme), and Molly Watson (Home Style, Mason City). Seven teams competed in the competition. Three top prizes and a Director's Choice prize were awarded:

First Place – CaptuRE Recycling, Shaden Tweeten, Forest City, IA.

Awarded \$2000 prize. CaptuRE Recycling is a local startup tackling the world's single use plastics crisis. Through specialized waste bins, recycling education, and community participation, CaptuRE diverts plastic waste from landfills and reprocesses them into valuable commodities.

Second Place – Trained AF, Alyssa Staudt, Charles City, IA. Awarded \$1000 prize. Trained AF is a dog training business located outside of Charles City, providing not only training the dog but also giving owners the tools and resources to have confidence in maintaining the learned behaviors.

Third Place – The Athlete's Mentor, Teresa & Cody Alesch, Algona, IA. Awarded \$500 prize. The Athlete's Mentor is a professional coaching service that empowers student-athletes to reach their full potential. They offer personalized mentorship, interactive training programs, and a supportive community to cultivate mental toughness, leadership skills, and a growth mindset.

Director's Choice Award – Tacos La Patrona, Yoana Bustillos, Buffalo Center, IA. Awarded \$300 prize. Tacos La Patrona is a locally owned food truck serving up authentic Mexican tacos, bringing the flavors of home straight to you. Join us daily to share in the tastes and traditions we love.

Honorable Mention – Levenhagen's Cigar Lounge, Rusty Levenhagen, Mason City, IA. Levenhagen's Cigar Lounge blends a rich, sophisticated atmosphere with a space for relaxation and discovery. More than just a place to unwind, it's where you can deepen your appreciation for fine cigars and connect with a community that shares the passion.

Honorable Mention – Insight Business Solutions, Amber Hisler, Hampton, IA. Insight Business Solutions provides professional assistance and customized solutions for owners and office managers to help streamline office operations and free up time.

Honorable Mention – Jambo Bar & Restaurant, Ayoub Malata, Mason City, IA. Jambo Bar & Restaurant is a welcoming spot where people can enjoy good food, drinks, and games while connecting with others.

The University of Iowa Venture School is a premier statewide program for entrepreneurs. Venture School emphasizes real-world entrepreneurship and innovation based on leading edge curriculum. They get out of the building to talk to customers, partners, and competitors, rather than relying on statistics and secondhand market research. Each Venture School team is assigned a local entrepreneur as their coach. On Launch Day, participants compete for seed money. In addition, eligible teams may compete for cash awards at the state level during the University of Iowa Venture School Launch Day at EntreFEST in Cedar Rapids, IA on June 12-13, 2025. The cost for Venture School is \$299.

If you have questions about applying to Venture School or are interested in becoming a Venture School coach, please contact Ashley Page at ashley.page@niacc.edu.



From Left: Itzel Rojas Leana, Yoana Bustillos, Amber Hisler, Alyssa Staudt, Shaden Tweeten, Ayoub Malata, Teresa Alesch, Cody Alesch, and Rusty Levenhagen

Can Venture School help with your business idea?

Venture School is an opportunity for entrepreneurs to gain focus and clarity for their business idea and build their foundational business model. Learn more and apply at www.pappajohncenter.com/ventureschool/. Scholarships may be available for your city or county through your local economic development organization.

IDEA Camp

Innovation, Discovery, Entrepreneurship & Achievement

The NIACC Pappajohn Center has introduced IDEA Camp, a new day-camp program for 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students in North Iowa. IDEA Camp helps students practice some of life’s key components: innovation, discovery, entrepreneurship, and achievement. This hands-on program guides young innovators through the essential stages of business creation, from brainstorming ideas to crafting a solid business model. Whether students come with a business idea in mind or need help discovering one, IDEA Camp provides the tools and support needed to bring their entrepreneurial dreams to life.

IDEA Camp is for creative and ambitious middle school students who are eager to explore entrepreneurship, develop creative problem-solving skills, and build confidence in their ability to create and innovate. No experience is required—just curiosity and enthusiasm! IDEA Camp is one of many youth entrepreneurship initiatives at the NIACC Pappajohn Center. Raegan Hanson, NIACC Pappajohn Center Youth Entrepreneurship Coordinator, said “Teaching entrepreneurship is an investment in our students – the entrepreneurial mindset drives innovation, fuels economic growth, and empowers the next generation to turn bold ideas into lasting impact. When young minds learn to think like entrepreneurs, they build the skills and confidence to redefine what’s possible and shape the future.”

The inaugural IDEA Camp was held on President’s Day, February 17, 2025, with 28 students from 12 schools attending. During the day, students learned the key principles of entrepreneurship, created a business plan, created a pitch deck, and presented their business in a Pitch Competition. Three student teams were awarded the top prizes:

1st Place - Preston's Lawncare, Preston Gniadecki (Clarion-Goldfield-Dows Community School District, 8th Grade)

2nd Place - The Cat's Nook, Aaliyah Dodge (Rudd-Rockford-Marble Rock Community School District, 8th Grade) and Lily Fitch (Homeschool, 7th Grade)

3rd Place - Scrunch It! Ellie Borcharding, (St. Paul's Lutheran School, 7th Grade)

IDEA Camp will return for additional sessions in Summer 2025. For more information, please contact Raegan Hanson,



Lauren Lawson (Janesville, 6th Grade), Carli Blake (Janesville, 6th Grade), Emerson Sweeney (Janesville, 6th Grade) and Rylie Mayer (St Ansgar, 8th Grade) work on their business models



Preston Gniadecki, Ellie Borcharding, Lily Fitch, and Aaliyah Dodge

Upcoming Events

Info Session: GoldmanSachs 10,000 Small Businesses

March 18, 2025 | 1:00pm | Online via Zoom | Cost: Free

10kSB is a free, 12 week business training program that helps small business owners gain practical skills, tools, and support to develop a strategic and customized growth plan that will take their business to the next level. [Registration is required.](#)

Marketing Essentials: Entrepreneurship Essential Series II

April 3, 2025 | 1:30pm | Online via Zoom | Cost: Free

Marketing Essentials delves into the dynamic world of marketing and branding, focusing on the essential task of creating a strategic approach. Elevate your brand and connect with your audience through a strategic blend of digital and traditional marketing methods and develop a well-crafted marketing strategy. [Registration is required.](#)

Financial Essentials: Entrepreneurship Essentials Series III

April 24, 2025 | 5:30pm | Online via Zoom | Cost: Free

Financial Essentials explores the critical steps required to master your business's finances. Your business's financial health is a crucial determinant of its success. In Financial Essentials we demystify financial statements, empowering you to interpret and leverage these vital tools for decision-making. Discover how to create accurate projections that guide your business growth and unlock valuable insights into your company's fiscal well-being. [Registration is required.](#)

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