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Windham women chase start-up prize for coffee cuff

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WINDHAM — Two women entrepreneur-inventors are chasing a \$25,000 business start-up prize in New Hampshire.

Windham residents Annalise Pitt and Neelima Gogumalla are finalists in the New Hampshire Start-Up Challenge, organized through the Manchester Young Professionals Network.

Their environmentally friendly coffee cup sleeves could change the way consumers handle their morning java.

A reception for all of the finalists is set for tomorrow in Manchester. The field of competitors will be narrowed next month, with the winner announced in June.

"This is going to make the difference to us whether we go forward or not," Pitt said.

The challenge is a business plan competition that aims to connect entrepreneurs with seed capital and support as they try to bring their products to market.

Their product is called Jute eCoCuffs. It slides over the cup and protects your hand from the heat coming from the coffee.

Jute is a vegetable fiber, produced from plants, that can be spun into threads.

Pitt showed off the difference between Jute eCoCuffs and the cardboard version yesterday.

"This used to be a tree. Takes 40 years to grow," Pitt said, showing off the cardboard sleeve.

"This wasn't," she said, showing one of the Jute eCoCuffs. "This took 40 days to grow."

Among the advantages the two women tout are jute is grown and harvested quickly, no chemicals are used in the process and it can be repeatedly reused.



Annalise Pitt, left, and Neelima Gogumalla pose with their invention, the Jute eCoCuff, at Pitt's home in Windham. The women are competing for a \$25,000 award from the Manchester Young Professionals.
MARY SCHWALM

"We're trying to seamlessly replace the paper coffee cup sleeves," Pitt said.

"It is a neat product," Gogumalla said.

Their business plan calls for using jute grown in India and having their product manufactured there, then exported to the U.S. for sale here.

Long-term, the hope is to get the sleeves marketed in a creative way, perhaps by selling the New Hampshire Fisher Cats or Manchester Monarchs on the idea of putting their logos on the sleeves.

First up is the financing, though.

"Money is scarce out there," Gogumalla said.

That's why they've entered the New Hampshire contest. They also are seeking start-up funding through other competitions, such as the Cartier Women's Fund.

The product is a simple one, the kind that appeals to the Warren Buffetts of the world, who often make their money through products everyone will use.

"Our challenge is making our product look exciting," Pitt said.

Gogumalla has been pursuing entrepreneurial projects for two decades. Pitt operates Thistledown Cozies, which makes cozies to insulate tea kettles.

There really wasn't an ah-ha moment for these experienced business women. The collaborators were looking for something that could be successfully marketed, but also wasn't wasteful or destructive to the environment.

"What this is going to do for the environment is fantastic," Pitt said.

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