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## **BUSINESSES**

# Agent Ally wins spring Startup Weekend with plan to streamline Medicare software

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | April 17, 2018 8:00 am



The Agent Ally team from left: Purnendu Bhanjdeo, Nick Brown, Tyler Stephenson, Ben Browne, Jonathan Vanderford, Michael Wiseman and Leslie Erin Root. Judge Sean O'Leary,

## founder of Edj Analytics, gives feedback to the team. | Photo by Lisa Hornung

There were dinosaurs roaring on River Road this weekend at the [Interapt](#) Skills Center, and we don't mean a bunch of fossils who refuse to adapt to technology. Quite the opposite.

Jurassic Park was the theme for the [Startup Weekend Louisville](#), and eight teams battled for dominance, but only one T-rex came out ahead — Agent Ally.



The group, led by Jonathan Vanderford, hopes to streamline the jobs of insurance agents who must use several different tools to help people get signed up for Medicare.

Vanderford worked as a trainer at a large insurance company and was frustrated at how many tools were needed to sign someone up for Medicare. "To look up a doctor, there are six different systems that you might use," Vanderford said.

Because of this, he changed careers. He went back to school to get a degree in computer science and computer engineering to learn software development. He wanted to find a way to tie all those systems together and create one tool that agents could use to help medicare customers.

Luckily, there was also some serendipity involved. A couple of months ago, Vanderford learned that the federal government had implemented the Blue Button initiative, which allows patients to download all their medical information into a simple text file or PDF.

"So, something kind of clicked."

He contacted a friend who worked with him at the insurance company and asked him to get involved. He knew there was a Startup Weekend coming up, so he thought it would be a great time to start working on it. He went to a software development conference, and at the registration table was his former boss at the same company. He persuaded her to get on board and go to the Startup Weekend.

Soon after, he connected with another former boss online who had taught him all about sales and marketing. The four of them

joined forces with other participants at the event, and Agent Ally was born.

“We were going after a specific problem that I’d really wanted to solve for a long time,” he said. “I don’t know how much we were able to accomplish in a weekend, but my goal was to take action on an idea that’s been bouncing around in my head for so long. And Startup Weekend is a great time to do that.”

There were eight teams at the event:

- **First place:** Agent Ally
- **Second place:** Toti, a company that wants to create lightweight custom totems for music festival attendees.
- **Third place:** Uptrain, a group that wants to create a system for gymgoers to easily communicate their workouts to their personal trainers without having to write anything down.
- Travel Buddy, an app that would help travelers connect with locals to learn where the best places are to eat and visit.
- Flash Response, an app that would help neighbors get emergency help from each other before the police or fire departments arrive.
- Venew Live, a software tool to connect venue organizers with performers.
- ShapeofLife.CN, a website for story sharing in China.
- Community Compass, an app and website to help people learn which charities companies are donating to, so consumers can use this info to decide which businesses to patronize.

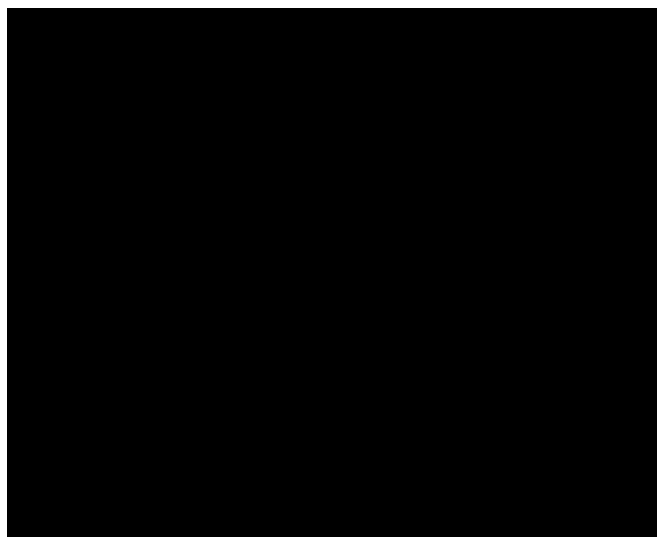


Volunteer judges were, from left, Sean O’Leary, founder of Edj Analytics; Brit

Fitzpatrick, founder of MentorMe; and  
Tendai Charasika and founder of  
SuperFanU Inc. | Photo by Lisa  
Hornung

This Startup Weekend was smaller than previous weekends with only about 40 participants, but it was no less energized, said Austin Lopesilvero, lead organizer. This time, about 80 percent of participants had never been to a Startup Weekend, which brought new ideas and energy to the group.

The event also had some new sponsors, including [KiZAN](#) and [Kentuckiana Works](#). Kizan offered a free tech consultation for all three winners, and Kentuckiana Works is also helping support the groups. Several participants were still in high school, and Kentuckiana Works' Summer Works program will actually pay high school students to work on their new company during the summer, Lopesilvero said.



Philip Devine pitches his team's idea,  
Uptrain, an app that communicates  
between personal trainers and clients.  
The team won third place. | Photo by  
Lisa Hornung

The winning team also secured one seat in the [Nucleus LaunchIt Training Program](#), which is a \$900 value. The other members of the winning team can take the course at a discount.

In past Startup Weekends, winners secured a spot in the semifinals of [Venture Sharks](#), a “Shark Tank”-style competition. This year, because of the timing of Startup Weekend, the semifinals had already passed, so Venture Sharks offered the winners a bid in the finals, which take place in two weeks. The grand prize is \$30,000 in cash and prizes.

This time, organizers tried to implement more education, with seminars on pitching, customer validation, pivoting of ideas and more. Organizers also teamed up with the [1804](#) entrepreneurship center to give teams a chance to use the center for work on their projects.

The weekend was also full of great moments, organizers said. “Saturday night — it never fails — we’ll have a couple of teams that just hit a point of, like, ‘Oh no.’ ” Lopesilvero said. “Saturday night is the point where exhaustion is at its highest or morale can be low. So we brought in Steel City Pops, and played the “Jurassic Park” soundtrack ...”

“They went from like 6 to like 11 (in energy),” said Paul Blakely, marketing coordinator. “It was fantastic!”

Lopesilvero mentioned that there was lots of great food provided by local vendors, and when he asked participants what they had gained over the weekend, one guy said, “Five pounds!”

Navjot Brar flew in from Santa Barbara, Calif., to facilitate the event. He said usually facilitators are there to help guide the event for inexperienced groups, but Louisville’s organizers are all very experienced. It’s the 12th consecutive event organized by the same core group.

Brar said he was honored to facilitate, and the weekend was “Fantastic, lots of energy, great folks. Agent Ally — I think they’re really onto something, and they have a good team that’s really experienced, and I’m excited to keep in touch with them and see how they progress.”

One of the prizes for the winning team is a consultation with KiZAN, which is where Vanderford works. “I am the product development director at KiZAN, so part of the prize package is to sit down with myself and discuss my idea. It’s going to be a fun conversation,” he said.

Vanderford said having an idea that you haven’t fully fleshed out is not unique.

“I think everybody has that idea that they’ve been thinking about for a long time and they’ve been meaning to do something about,” he said. “And it’s a good excuse to come out, meet a bunch of great people and make some real progress on an idea that you’re passionate about.”

## **LISA HORNUNG**

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master’s degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



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