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One Imaginative Idea at a Time

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Monday April 22, 2019

By Eric F. Spina

In a corner of Kennedy Union's Torch Lounge, Spencer Janning '20 chatted with passers-by about a comfortable leg brace he designed — and patented — to help a local child with cerebral palsy sleep better at night.

Not every University of Dayton student will graduate with a patent or a marketable product, but why can't all students leave here with an entrepreneurial mindset, the belief in what's possible?

I gazed into the University's future at an interactive poster session showcasing some of the initiatives of the faculty and staff who are working creatively to bring our strategic vision to fruition, one imaginative idea at a time.

This week we celebrate the intellectual and artistic accomplishments of students at the annual Stander Symposium, but last week the spotlight belonged to some faculty and staff champions.

In the School of Engineering, Spencer and a team of students created a prototype of a “Freedom Brace” in their first-year Engineering Innovations class (yes, that’s right: first-year!). When the class ended, he kept tinkering and received a provisional patent on the invention. In the school’s new business and technology incubator called Leonardo Enterprises, he received lab space, financial support, legal advice, and one-on-one business mentoring from across the campus.

“Our mission is to bring technology to the market. We want to help buy down that risk for students starting their own businesses,” says Emily Fehrman Cory, director of Leonardo Enterprises, who earned a Ph.D. in electro-optics from UD in 2014 and founded the Air Force Research Laboratory’s first makerspace.

As Spencer enters his senior year, he is seeking FDA approval for his device with the help of Leonardo Enterprises and additional support from The Entrepreneurs Center — our partner in the Dayton Arcade — to commercialize the medical brace.

That’s just one example of innovation and imagination at work as we strive to be The University for the Common Good.

In Roesch Library, librarians are working with a cross-disciplinary team to create “The Dialogue Zone,” a place designed to support students understand and respect different perspectives, develop empathy, and resolve conflicts through non-violent means.

In the GEMnasium, students from all disciplines are studying issues like the opioid epidemic and food insecurity, learning from each other. In this unconventional “test kitchen,” the transdisciplinary faculty of the future are working today to prototype new teaching and learning models.

And as we develop even greater capacity for servant-leadership and community engagement, we’re building a “front porch” at 1401 S. Main St. that will connect non-profits, neighborhood partners, philanthropists, and economic development leaders. Starting this fall, this new building will house the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community, the Dayton Foundation, and the Dayton Development Coalition under one roof with one goal — to build our community.

All aspirational visions are lofty, but together we can reach high and inspire new ways of thinking and educating students for a changing world. One imaginative idea at a time.