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Contact: Vincenzo Caronna, 985.590.0045

[vcaronna@sttammany.com](mailto:vcaronna@sttammany.com)

[www.startupnorthshore.com](http://www.startupnorthshore.com)

## **Northshore Startup Takes Home Over \$100,000 Grand Prize Package**

*Cantaloupe AI wins STartUP Northshore's 2025 NSpire Startup Slam*

MANDEVILLE, La – STartUP Northshore today announced that **Cantaloupe AI** is the winner of the 2025 NSpire Startup Slam, securing one of the largest pitch competition prize packages in the Gulf South—valued at over \$115,000 in cash and services. Set against the backdrop of the historic Columbia Theatre for the Performing Arts in Downtown Hammond, on the evening of January 10, 2025, nearly 200 attendees celebrated entrepreneurship and innovation over food, drinks, and live music before witnessing the four finalist startups take center stage.

The competition, now in its second year, showcased the vision and creativity of three remarkable Louisiana-based startups—**Cantaloupe AI**, **ForeFront360**, and **QMS2GO**. Attendees enjoyed live music, curated food and drinks, and networking before the finalists took center stage to pitch their groundbreaking businesses to a panel of esteemed judges.

“To be born and raised just down the street in a town with one red light, and to come home a winner, knowing the impact we can have on this area—it’s special!” said **Rich Simmerman, Cofounder & CEO of Cantaloupe AI**. “We’ve got major product improvements to make with the launch of Cleo, our conversational AI interviewer. The \$40,000 in non-dilutive cash and more than \$65,000 in in-kind services will make a big impact for us.”

The judging panel, composed of highly successful business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the Northshore and Greater New Orleans Region, scored each startup on innovation, market potential, business model, traction, team, and regional impact. Cantaloupe AI, an AI-powered solution revolutionizing hospitality hiring with instant voice interviews, emerged as the top contender. The runners-up, ForeFront360 and QMS2GO, each received \$5,000 grants to support their ventures.

“The 2025 NSpire Startup Slam demonstrated the incredible momentum and talent within the Northshore entrepreneurial community,” said **Chris Masingill, CEO of St. Tammany Corporation**. “This event wasn’t just about competition—it was a celebration of innovation, collaboration, and the bold ideas shaping our region’s economic future. Congratulations to Cantaloupe AI on their well-deserved win! We look forward to continuing to support them as they scale and make an even greater impact. By bringing together resources, mentorship, and access to capital, STartUP Northshore continues to create opportunities for local entrepreneurs to thrive and drive economic strength in the Gulf South.”



**Cantaloupe AI** is transforming the hospitality industry with AI-driven voice interviews that empower every applicant across every role to speak for themselves, reducing time-to-hire and giving hiring managers powerful data on their next potential employee before they ever meet.

The prize package that Cantaloupe AI walked away with included \$40,000 in cash funding paired with high-quality in-kind services, mentorship opportunities, and access to a network of investors and industry professionals valued at over \$65,000. The wrap-around in-kind service package includes business advisement services from **The Bernard Group**, **Martin Business Solution, LLC**, **B2B CFO®**, and **MCDS, LLC**; marketing and branding strategy from **Ninety by Three, LLC** and **PERK Social**; startup legal, business, and intellectual property consulting services from **Arena Collective**; accounting and bookkeeping consultation from **Bienville Consulting Group** and **OfficeOps**; business card and sign printing services from **Mele Printing**; team design and human resource strategy from **JAJ Consulting**; a one-year founding membership to **Palette Northshore**, a workspace community for entrepreneurs; and memberships to the **St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce** and **Tangipahoa Chamber of Commerce**.

Following two rounds of a rigorous application and independent panel review, the three finalists were selected to advance to the main stage. As the finalists prepared to take the stage, each startup received one-on-one professional pitch coaching from Abbey Kish, CEO & Founder of **Kish Consulting** and a three-time national champion speaker.

In addition to Cantaloupe AI, the finalists who competed in the live competition were as follows:

- **Forefront360** transforms property insurance with data-driven solutions that ensure accurate claims, fair settlements, and quick repairs—bringing the industry back to its core mission of reliable coverage and recovery after disasters.
- **QMS2GO** streamlines brings a new dimension to Quality Management Systems (QMS) with AI-powered solutions, offering streamlined, cost-effective, and user-friendly solutions for the development, implementation, and improvement of Quality Management Systems.

The NSpire Startup Slam exemplifies STartUP Northshore’s commitment to empowering local entrepreneurs and strengthening the regional ecosystem through world-class programming, networking opportunities, access to capital, and mentorship from top industry leaders, investors, and founders—all provided at little to no cost to participants.

The panel of expert judges tasked with rigorously reviewing, scoring, and selecting the ultimate winner included:

- **Caitlin Hunter**, Corporate Affairs Representative, Chevron
- **Karen DeBlieux**, Head-US Corporate Banking and New Orleans Market President, Capital One
- **Kwamena Aidoo**, Managing Partner, Corridor Ventures
- **Will Boudreaux**, Founder and Board Chair, Netchex



- **Anna DeTiege**, Director of Innovation Capital, Louisiana Economic Development
- **Donna Miller**, Franchise Owner & Operator, PJ's

“What we witnessed at the 2025 NSpire Startup Slam was the epitome of community and innovation coming together to fuel entrepreneurship,” said **Ginger Cangelosi, Executive Director of Tangipahoa Economic Development**. “Tangipahoa Parish Economic Development congratulates the winner, Cantaloupe AI and their team. We were honored to host this event in the heart of Downtown Hammond, showcasing the incredible talent and bold ideas of entrepreneurs who are shaping the future of our region.”

The 2025 NSpire Startup Slam was made possible through the support and partnership of our presenting sponsor, **Chevron**, and our grant prize sponsor, **Capital One**. Additional investment partners include **Tangipahoa Economic Development Foundation, St. Tammany Corporation, Washington Economic Development Foundation, Cleco Power, Hancock Whitney Bank, Northshore Media Group**, and the **Northshore Community Foundation**. Event partners include Southeastern Louisiana University and the Columbia Theatre for the Performing Arts, with special recognition going out to Dr. William Wainwright, President of Southeastern Louisiana University, Dr. Tará Lopez, Dean of the College of Business at Southeastern Louisiana University, and the staff at Columbia Theatre. STartUP Northshore program partners include The Idea Village.

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### **About STartUP Northshore**

STartUP Northshore is a three-year entrepreneurial ecosystem pilot program with the purpose of catalyzing entrepreneurship, innovation, and business formation on the Northshore through strategic partnerships with recognized entities in the startup community, including anchor partner The Idea Village, to deliver first-class programming for entrepreneurs and second stage companies. STartUP Northshore is supported through the collaboration of St. Tammany Corporation, Tangipahoa Economic Development, and Washington Economic Development Foundation. Through this initiative, the next wave of local entrepreneurs from all three parishes will gain access to immersive education, networking opportunities, access to capital and mentorship from esteemed industry leaders, investors, and founders, all of which come together to form a critical support system that will set their business up for success. STartUP Northshore is managed by St. Tammany Corporation.

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