

STUDENTS LIVING **CARDINAL**, **GOLD** AND **GREEN**

Student passion at Iowa State University is hard to miss. Heart-driven work is evident in the classroom, on various sports fields and late at night in the library. All across campus, opportunities and initiatives help nurture that heart into successful entrepreneurship ventures, leading to Iowa State University's ninth place ranking among U.S. universities in [The Princeton Review's 2026 best undergraduate entrepreneurship programs list](#).

The university's emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship provides the support and resources for student businesses and products to flourish. Numerous programs offer student entrepreneurs the opportunity to develop their products, brand and marketing strategy. This month's article features two such programs, CYstarters and Innovate 1858.



Photo Courtesy of Ivy College of Business

CYstarters

CYstarters is an 11-week summer program designed for ISU students and recent graduates to turn their passion projects into lasting businesses. Since its creation in 2016, 10 cohorts have

passed through the program. The competitive program introduces participants to a wide variety of topics, including customer discovery, marketing, business pitches and more.

Participants work closely with mentors both inside and outside of ISU, along with faculty at the Pappajohn Center for Entrepreneurship. Each participant also receives substantial funding to cover initial startup costs.



Photo Courtesy of ISU Pappajohn Center for Entrepreneurship

Sixteen students showcased their heart and drive in Cohort 10, which took place over the summer 2025 term, rounding out a grand total of 151 CYstarters since the program's beginning.

As well as innovating and visioning, many student businesses address one or more of the pillars of sustainability (environmental, economic and social). This month's article features three CYstarters from the ninth and tenth cohorts. Alana Corwin, Boluwarin Ojo and Anders Otness put their hearts into businesses focused on mental health workbooks, specialized

welding caps and STEM-based, build-it-yourself kits, respectively.

Alana Corwin — Apricity

After struggling with mental health throughout her early life, Alana Corwin, a senior studying entrepreneurship, recognized an accessibility gap in mental health support. From that gap, [Apricity](#) was born. The company's mission is focused on providing mental health support in an accessible way. "Apricity really reflects my passion for creating what I once needed: accessible support that meets people where they are," Corwin emphasized.



Photo Courtesy of Alana Corwin

Apricity began after Corwin's search came up empty when looking for a daily journal during the COVID-19 pandemic. She wanted a journal that combined daily planning, habit tracking and personal reflection. When unable to find such a product, she was inspired to develop it herself. The creation of Apricity was not an easy journey, as Corwin faced

many roadblocks while designing and funding her passion project.

“There were many moments when I questioned whether trying so hard to make something work was ‘worth it,’ particularly when progress felt slow,” Corwin said of her experience. After completing the CYstarters program, however, Corwin was able to turn her idea into a sustainable business model.



Image Courtesy of Apricity

In addition to her initial passion project, Corwin has been able to further follow her heart and create a collection of products including journals and reflection cards. Each product has been designed through considerable research and focuses on connecting traditional therapy and everyday life by supporting both mental and physical daily needs.

Each product is adaptable and can be reused throughout different phases or journeys. For example, a core goal of the company is to produce ringed journals, allowing users to easily swap out inserts. “We focus on creating tools that people can return to again and again throughout different

seasons of their mental health journey,” Corwin commented.

Environmentally, these journals are more sustainable as they encourage continued use and reuse. In addition to environmental sustainability, Apricity’s mission advocates for social sustainability by supporting users through difficult times. The motto “Here for the We” emphasizes the belief that nurturing mental health and wellness is a joint journey that no one should navigate alone.

Additionally, Corwin stated that “Apricity supports sustainability by making mental health tools accessible without requiring diagnosis, disclosure or long-term financial commitment.” Building a support network directly contributes to social sustainability and the health of a community, “because healing is stronger, more sustainable and more meaningful when it is shared.”



Photo Courtesy of Alana Corwin

“Taking Apricity from an idea to where it is today required constant reworking, patience and A LOT of heart,” Corwin

highlighted. The program faculty and mentors encouraged her to keep working and helped her “understand that building something with this level of depth requires time (and that’s okay!),” she emphasized.

CYstarters helped her develop the business side of the operation and introduced her to mentors and peers to navigate the details. “I learned my “why,” validated my ideas through real customer discovery and learned to change a lot of my fears into motivation,” she noted.

To learn more about Apricity, visit the company [website](#), Instagram ([@hereataprivity](#)) or reach out to Corwin via email, alanaataprivity@gmail.com.

Boluwarin Ojo — SparkDefy
Inclusivity and safety form the heart of [SparkDefy](#). While working at a welding shop, Boluwarin Ojo, a senior studying industrial design, struggled to keep her hair covered and away from sparks. This posed a significant safety risk and made it difficult to follow shop safety guidelines. “I want to emphasize how important safety is in ensuring that everyone makes it home,” Ojo noted.



Photo Courtesy of Boluwarin Ojo

Back on campus, Ojo was tasked with designing and sewing a project for an industrial design class. She saw this as an opportunity to address the safety and inclusivity concerns she had faced and designed a [flame-resistant welding cap](#) to protect long and thick hair. The cap includes a “ponytail pouch” that prevents hair from sparks, dirt and tangles. Her company, SparkDefy, produces the cap for purchase.

“When I created it, I was trying to solve my own problem and had no intention of it becoming a business,” Ojo added, “SparkDefy reflects my personal passion for learning and trying new things.”



Image Courtesy of SparkDefy

Fortunately, the CYstarters program encouraged Ojo to develop her product idea into a business, and SparkDefy was born. Developing a brand identity was an initial challenge, along with developing a mission statement. The CYstarters program provided the resources and mentorship to work through those challenges.

Her advice for future entrepreneurs? Start. “Many people get caught up in trying to make it perfect, which stunts progress because perfect isn’t realistic,” she emphasized, adding that facing setbacks is a part of the process. SparkDefy went through many changes, including a name change, before it became the business it is today.

At the heart of SparkDefy is a dedication to advancing social sustainability, something that has remained constant throughout every change. By providing a vital supply need for those with long hair to participate in welding safely, SparkDefy reflects Ojo’s own passions for inclusivity and representation for everyone.

She hopes to empower female welders through her safe and comfortable product. “At the end of the day, the heart of my business remains the same: inclusivity,” Ojo stated.



Photo Courtesy of Boluwarin Ojo

Readers can learn more about SparkDefy on the company [website](#), LinkedIn ([SparkDefy](#)), Tik Tok and Instagram ([@spark.defy](#)).

Anders Otness — North Star Scientific

For Anders Otness, a junior in aerospace engineering, a passion for science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) led to a successful business. As a personal interest project outside of the classroom, Otness took on the challenge of designing and printing a 3D portable telescope.



Photo Courtesy of Anders Otness

After posting the project on social media, he received valuable, positive feedback and was encouraged to turn the one-off product into an actual business.

Otness took the encouragement to heart and [North Star Scientific](#) started to take shape. With the focus of providing access to high-quality STEM kits and learning opportunities, Otness hopes to grow excitement for and interest in STEM and inspire future engineers, scientists, astronomers and more. “I have had the privilege to be able to share my passions with others and show them everything there is to love about STEM,” Otness stated.



Image Courtesy of North Star Scientific

Education and connection are at the heart of North Star Scientific's sustainability efforts. North Star Scientific promotes social and environmental sustainability by providing science material access to everyone. Currently, the company sells a [3D-printed telescope](#) and an expansive [electronic learning kit](#).

Through these products, Otness is able to give others the opportunities he wishes he had growing up. "North Star Scientific is empowering students to get a sense of what real engineering and science is like," Otness added.



Photo Courtesy of North Star Scientific

As a solopreneur, Otness has been able to learn about every side of the business world through the CYstarters program. "CYstarters helped me significantly with being able to network with fellow entrepreneurs, get guidance by business professionals and a lot of help throughout my entire business," Otness emphasized, adding that the program assisted him in taking his business to the next level.

He emphasized the important role of heart and passion in entrepreneurship. "No matter what your passion is, follow it with all your heart," he commented, "There's so many people around you that are happy to help support your dreams!"

To find more information about North Star Scientific, visit the company [website](#).

For more information about CYstarters and all the Cohort participants, visit the [program webpage](#) on the ISU Pappajohn Center for Entrepreneurship website. Cohort 11 will kick-off this coming summer — applications are currently being accepted and are due on March 16 at 11:59 p.m. Application materials and specific program information can also be accessed on the CYstarters webpage.

Innovate 1858: [Innovate 1858](#) offers Iowa State University students the opportunity to see a retail business from every angle by offering a student enterprise retail experience. The store is located

within the Student Innovation Center on ISU's campus and is completely student-run. The student employees, referred to as Innovators, enroll in a for-credit course to complement their real-world experience in the store. Innovators acquire hands-on experience in marketing, operations, merchandising, product development and more.



Photo Courtesy of Innovate 1858

Ana Orescanin, a graduate student studying apparel merchandising and design, works as the instructor and managing director for the class and store, respectively. "A majority of the merchandise is created by Iowa State University students and alumni," Orescanin emphasized, "reflecting the store's commitment to innovation, creativity and community support."

Products sold at the store go through an extensive selection process. The merchandising team hosts several pitch sessions per quarter for ISU students and alumni to share their products for retail consideration. The team then decides which products will fit into the store based on consumer needs. The entire Innovate 1858



team works together to make the final decision on what is sold in-store. This month's article features two Innovators who have also designed products that are for sale in the Innovate 1858 store: Lilly Arnold (t-shirt and candle label) and Shairvi Sardana (souvenir magnet).

Lilly Arnold

Lilly Arnold, a senior apparel merchandising and design student, has designed several products for sale at Innovate 1858. A deep understanding of Iowa State's campus community allowed her to create products that would connect with the hearts of the store's audience, including a ["Long Live Cyclones" t-shirt](#) and a [Sunday in Ames candle](#) label.



Photo Courtesy of Lilly Arnold

"For my Long Live Cyclones design, the trend research was leaning toward nature and a recurring theme of community," Arnold noted. She wanted to

capture the Midwest culture in a shirt, and incorporated aspects of ISU's agriculture program. Additionally, she wanted to create a product that could be worn year-round, helping reduce unnecessary purchases and waste.



Photo Courtesy of Innovate 1858

The final shirt, produced through a partnership with a company that prioritizes sustainable business habits, was placed in the 1858 store after countless iterations.

Her process included an extensive research and trend phase. After that, several draft sketches were created and reviewed by peers and the Innovate 1858 team. Finally, the group collaborated to revise the design until it was store-ready.

"There sometimes are multiple rounds of revisions and changes," Arnold emphasized, "However, it pushes me to get creative and think of innovative ways to work around things." She encourages other students pursuing a future in design or entrepreneurship to look at challenges and setbacks as opportunities for growth.

Shairvi Sardana

Shairvi Sardana, a senior studying business analytics, combined her passions for travel and Iowa State University into a fridge magnet for the 1858 store. She noticed a lack of small and affordable gift options for sale and was inspired to design her own. Her personal collection of travel magnets influenced the product.



Photo Courtesy of Shairvi Sardana

"Every time I see them, I'm reminded of the beautiful places I've experienced, and the memories attached to them," Sardana said of her inspiration.

She hoped that her product would generate those same feelings in others. "My goal was to design something that instantly brings back memories of late walks on campus, game days, friendships and the sense of community Ames offers," she noted.

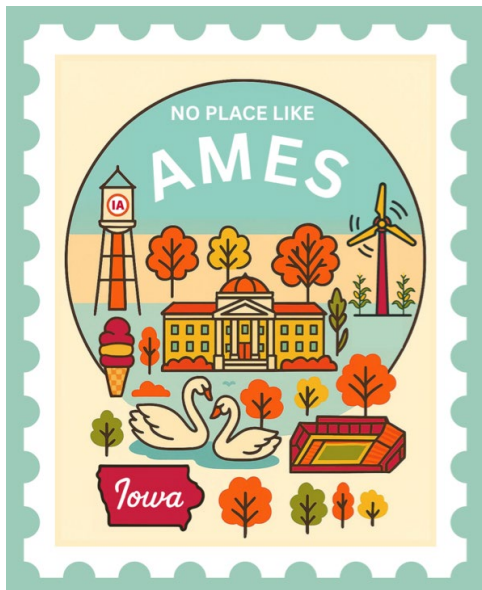


Image Courtesy of Shairvi Sardana

Considerations of sustainability were key factors in the development of the magnet. From an economic perspective, Sardana wanted to provide an affordable option that students, faculty, staff or visitors could enjoy. “Socially, it strengthens community pride and belonging while remaining accessible to students, families and alumni,” she stated.

In addition, the product promotes environmental sustainability through the long-lasting nature of the magnet, encouraging intentional consumption rather than disposable souvenirs.

Innovate 1858 provided the space for Sardana to workshop her design and turn an idea into a real product. “It allowed me to apply creativity and heart to something tangible that others could connect with,” she stated, emphasizing the role of heart in her personal process. Her advice for fellow student entrepreneurs reflected

that heart-forward sentiment. “The best advice I’ve ever received is that when you create something with love, the consumer can feel it,” Sardana added.

For more information on Innovate 1858 or to see the full line of products available for purchase, visit the store’s [website](#), Instagram ([@innovate1858](#)) or the retail store in the Student Innovation Center.

Iowa State University offers limitless opportunities to build and grow passion projects. Students in every college across the university have put heart and passion into various projects representing every industry through a number of entrepreneurship programs, including CYstarters and the Innovate 1858 retail store.

Additional innovation connections for students include [pitch competitions](#), [Start Something Academies](#) and activities at the [Student Innovation Center](#) to boost student passions from projects into sustainable products or business plans.

It takes more than an idea — CYstarters and Innovate 1858 Innovators highlight the importance of following heart in building a sustainable and productive future. To learn more about opportunities in entrepreneurship at Iowa State University, visit the [Innovation and Entrepreneurship website](#).

