



IT STARTS HERE:

South Florida's Entrepreneurial Future

GROWING NUMBERS OF LOCALS ARE TAKING THE RISK OF LAUNCHING A STARTUP COMPANY. BUT THE AMOUNT OF INVESTMENT FUNDING IN SOUTH FLORIDA ISN'T KEEPING PACE.

By Lyssa Goldberg | Photography by Austen Amacker

Until a few years ago, South Florida native Adam Garfield had been living in Boston and working in corporate finance. He had a “good job” at a hedge fund, earned a stable salary and could comfortably pay his rent, but something was missing.

“At the end of the day, it wasn’t very fulfilling,” Garfield says. “I think everybody sees it, where they start a job and they grow into just being pigeonholed in what they’re doing, and they only have to use one part of their brain. I just wanted to use the whole thing.”

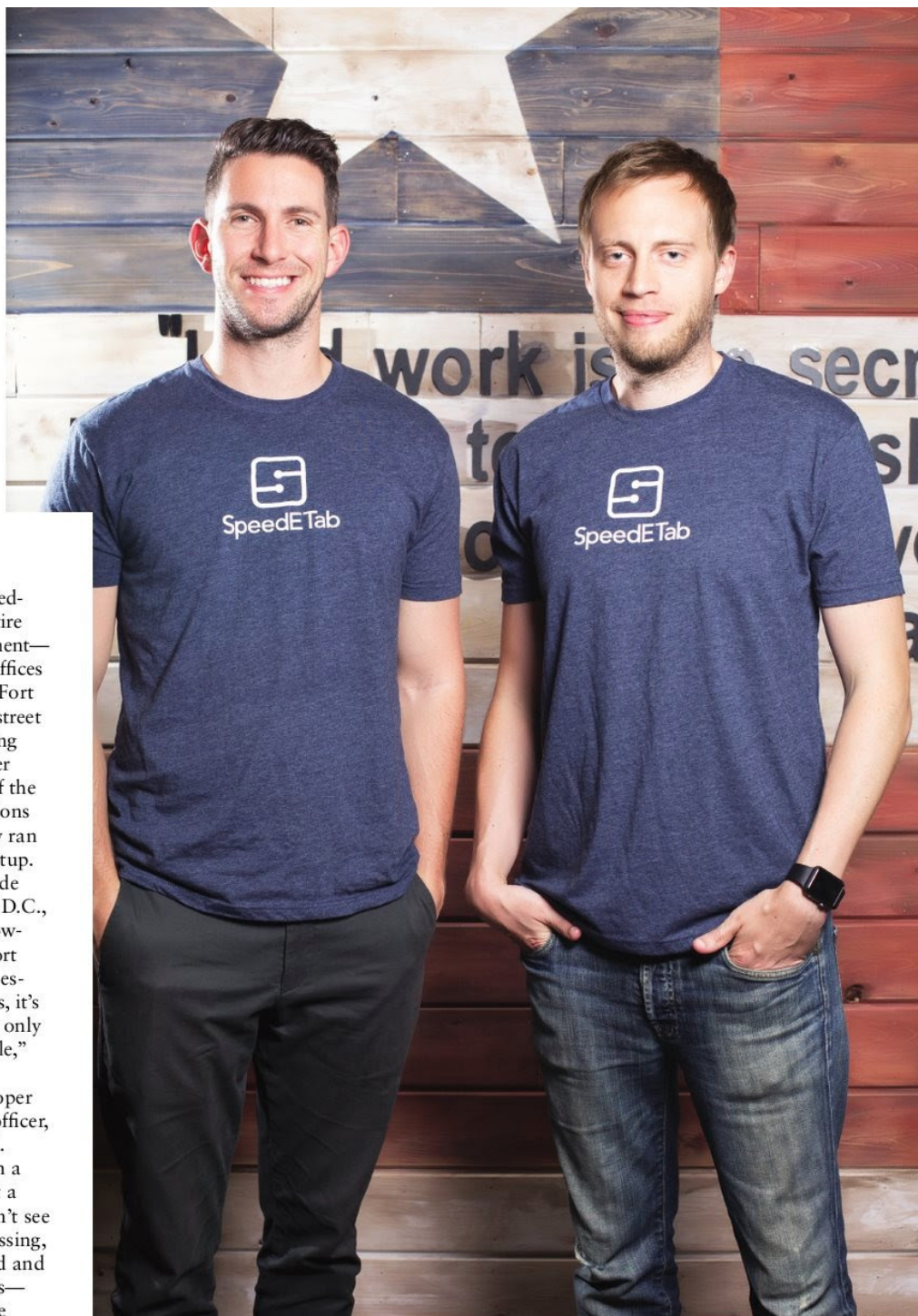
His idea to launch SpeedETab, a mobile app that lets customers pre-order and pre-

pay for to-go lunches at local restaurants or concession stand items at sporting events, would let him do just that. By starting his own company, Garfield could be analytical and creative. It was a risk, but it was one he felt he needed to take.

“For me, the bigger risk was not doing anything and seeing someone else do it and succeed,” says the founder and CEO of the Fort Lauderdale-based startup.

Nowadays, more and more South Floridians like Garfield are taking a chance at becoming an entrepreneur, with the Miami-Fort Lauderdale metro area ranked as No. 2 for startup activity in the U.S., according to a report by the Kauffman Foundation last year.

Adam Garfield and Ed Gilmore,
co-founders of SpeedETab



SPEEDY SUCCESS

Garfield is wearing a fitted SpeedETab T-shirt—appropriate work attire for the company’s relaxed environment—when he steps out of SpeedETab’s offices in an industrial zone of downtown Fort Lauderdale. As he walks down the street to CoLab Workspaces, the coworking space where Garfield and co-founder Ed Gilmore first got the business off the ground, the 29-year-old CEO mentions he dropped his PR firm after a story ran that called SpeedETab a Miami startup.

As of fall, the app has been made available in New York and parts of D.C., but Garfield says he’s proud the growing company is headquartered in Fort Lauderdale. “Everyone knows how established Silicon Valley is, but for us, it’s really a chance to make a name not only for ourselves but for Fort Lauderdale,” he says.

Garfield and Gilmore, a developer who came on as chief technology officer, launched SpeedETab in April 2015. From there, it quickly evolved from a nightlife app for ordering drinks at a bar (an area where SpeedETab didn’t see much success) into an all-encompassing, everyday tool for pre-ordering food and beverages at a wide array of venues—including Warsaw Coffee, The Poke House, Flash Fire Pizza and Agave Taco Bar—in order to skip the line. “We want to let you have the most out of your lunch break, or we want you to be able to get to work on time but still get your coffee,” Garfield says.

Currently available at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami, SpeedETab also plans to expand to other theaters and sports and concert venues in the area to save eventgoers time at concessions stands during

intermissions. The startup’s growth now depends on a team of 16 people who are motivated by this “movement,” as Garfield calls it—making to-go orders in today’s on-demand society as efficient as possible. “Within our company, it’s really about making people want to come to work everyday, and obviously the main way that we do that is by building something that people are excited to work on,” he says.

NERDS TO THE RESCUE

Also catering to the on-demand market is Delray Beach-based startup Nerd Alert. The company offers in-home tech support to South Floridians, provided by a team of “Nerds”—an endearing name given to the tech support staff. Having 40 certified “Nerds” on staff gives each employee enough flexibility to pick up or pass on a job based on convenient hours.

Nerd Alert co-founder and
CEO Julius McGee

On “Nerd Academy” days, potential new hires are invited to do ride-a-longs with the veteran “Nerds” and have a chance to learn about the company culture. “They see that we’re real people, not on our high horses. I’m in the trenches, just like all the other ‘Nerds,’” says co-founder and CEO Julius McGee. The company also holds social events, like bowling or beach trips. Through efforts like these, McGee says he’s trying to change the connotation of a nerd. “People ask me, ‘Should I call you a nerd?’ I say, ‘It’s like calling me Superman.’”

It was following a stint as a “Genius” at the Apple Store that McGee started going into the homes of clients to resolve their technological issues one-on-one, much like he does with Nerd Alert now. With three friends—the entrepreneurs who founded Virgin Gaming alongside Sir Richard Branson—and a fifth partner with PC experience to complement McGee’s Mac expertise, McGee founded Nerd Alert, the Uber-fied version of the tech support and training.

The company launched its services in February 2015 and has grown through referral discounts and by building relationships with 55-plus communities where Nerd Alert holds technology workshops with residents who oftentimes end up booking their own sessions. Rather than simply fixing problems and hitting frustrated clients with a big bill, as so often happens in tech stores, McGee and the other “Nerds” work to educate clients about what went wrong and how to resolve it. Clients now range from people in their 40s to 80s, to small businesses or doctors’ offices with Wi-Fi issues, to accounting firms looking to hold seminars on how to use Excel.

Co-founder Ryan Tenbusch says Nerd Alert made plenty of mistakes along the way—one being hiring some of the wrong people at the outset (applicants who were techy but not personable enough to work comfortably with clients in their homes)—but the important thing is they’ve learned to adapt, such as by implementing “Nerd Academy.” “It’s OK to make mistakes,” he says. “Honestly,

people are so afraid to fail. You’re going to screw it up; I guarantee we’re going to screw something up next week. We’ll laugh about it and figure it out. There’s no ego on our team.”

Operating out of The KTCHN coworking space located on Atlantic Avenue—surrounded by other startups in an area McGee feels is undergoing a

“renaissance”—has been advantageous for networking opportunities, McGee says. Some investors who learn about Nerd Alert have told him, “Hey, that’s a really cool idea—why don’t you go out to Silicon Valley?” But McGee insists that South Florida is where he belongs. “You don’t have to be in a certain location in order to be successful,” he says.



Coworking Spaces

Not only are new companies surfacing in South Florida, but so are new takes on work environments. Claim a desk nearby other creatives, entrepreneurs and freelancers at one of these coworking spots.

General Provision

This FAT Village coworking space is divided into themed rooms, such as The Hideaway, an alcove with a staircase for those who work best in a lofted setting, and The War Room, a presentation room lined with armor that features a Smart TV and video wall, and has a coffee bar with bicycle stools. It's also the new home of Wyncode FAT Village, a computer programming academy that takes participants through an accelerated coding boot camp. 525 NW First Ave., Fort Lauderdale

CoLab Workspaces

CoLab's open-plan workspace offers eclectic decor (think early 20th century-style telephone booth and a desk made from an old airplane wing) in a laid-back environment, as well as conference rooms and tons of freshly ground coffee from the Grind Coffee Project. Visitors are also welcome to book the conference rooms on a first-come, first-serve basis. 599 SW Second Ave., Fort Lauderdale

Innovation Hub at Broward College

This business incubator at Broward College's Cypress Creek Center features 5,400 square feet of private offices, shared working space for up to 16 people, small conference and mentoring rooms, and a large seminar room with audiovisual equipment for video trainings and more. In addition to working space, Innovation Hub provides mentoring and access to industry experts and investors. It also hosts six-month "Shark Tank-meets-Survivor"-style accelerator programs for Broward County residents in which entrepreneurs fine-tune their startup concepts and learn how to seek funding. 6400 NW Sixth Way, Fort Lauderdale

The KTCHN

The KTCHN in Delray Beach offers coworking space for the creative community right on Atlantic Avenue. The open workspace features a meeting room, galley kitchen and lounge area. Perks of membership include free food delivery from Delivery Dudes, fresh roasted coffee from Subculture and more. 135 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach

Quest Workspaces

Quest runs state-of-the-art shared office spaces in cities such as Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton and, most recently, Plantation. The offices feature a blend of open, communal areas and closed meetings rooms for privacy, with unique elements such as a treadmill desk, communal dining tables, an open kitchen, TV lounge and dedicated meditation space. 1200 N. Federal Highway, Ste. 200, Boca Raton / 101 NE Third Ave., Ste. 1500, Fort Lauderdale / 150 S. Pine Island Road, Ste. 300, Plantation

FAST-TRACKING FUNDING

Though South Florida's startup scene is certainly growing, the Kauffman Index shows a startling counter to these success stories: Of the 40 largest metro areas in the U.S., South Florida is ranked second to last in entrepreneurship growth when considering the number of startups scaling up into larger companies or how quickly (or not) the revenue for each is growing. "The entrepreneurial environment is here, but the know-how on how to scale a company, or the ability to scale it with additional funding is not here, and that needs to mature," says Thomas Buchar of The South Florida Accelerator, which has offices in Broward College's downtown Fort Lauderdale campus.

From Miami to West Palm Beach, the South Florida region takes in just under 1 percent of the total share of venture capital investment in the U.S., while Nos. 1 and 2 San Francisco and Silicon Valley combine for nearly 40 percent, according to the Martin Prosperity Institute. However, The South Florida Accelerator, which has partnered with local business giants like Citrix, is fast-tracking the typical investment-seeking process by connecting startups with large companies to back them. These Fort Lauderdale-headquartered firms give Broward County's emerging startup scene an edge. "Look at where the top, top companies are—Ultimate Software and Citrix—they're not in Miami," Buchar says.

A secretive Dania Beach startup with Google and other big-name investors backing it has also drawn attention—and capital—to South Florida's startup scene. MagicLeap is developing "mixed reality" technology (bringing virtual reality animations into a real-time setting), and even though its product is still at least 18 months away from hitting the market, the company is already worth \$4.5 billion, according to Forbes. Local entrepreneurs hope this may have a trickle-down effect, motivating venture capitalists to fund other startups in the area or even leading MagicLeap employees to become investors themselves.

In the meantime, Broward College's Innovation Hub Director Enrique Triay says entrepreneurs and venture capitalists are already moving from Silicon Valley and other startup hubs to South Florida for a number of reasons: lower taxes, the weather and overall quality of life.

KICK-STARTING THEIR OWN BUSINESS

One Fort Lauderdale startup duo has bypassed South Florida's funding shortfall by taking matters into their own hands: Jonathan Azevedo and Chris Lightcap of Plug and Play (PNP) Robotics put their ZenCrate anti-anxiety dog den concept on Kickstarter last fall and reached their crowdfunding goal of \$80,000 in just 11 days (in fact, they almost doubled it). "We wanted to go the route where we didn't have to reach out to angel investors," Azevedo says. "We didn't want to give up ownership of the company and didn't want to have more decision makers in the room."

It's been that way since the beginning for PNP Robotics, a product development startup. The co-founders, both engineers, became friends while working together for a medical company where they helped develop a surgical robot that can perform high-precision knee and hip surgeries. Azevedo and Lightcap eventually decided to start their own business to develop new products, and even then, they were hesitant to seek out investors. Instead, they first founded a



Jonathan Azevedo and Chris Lightcap, creators of ZenCrate

consulting firm, ADEX Technologies, to earn enough revenue through developing for other companies that they'd soon be able to launch products of their own.

Their ZenCrate came about after Charger, a guide dog Azevedo had trained, started showing signs of anxiety during thunderstorms. Azevedo tried veterinarian-prescribed medication, essential oils and every other solution he'd found through research before he and Lightcap applied that research toward creating an entirely new product.

The stylish, "smart" den they came up with plays calming music at frequencies ideal for dogs, has a motion-activated fan for ventilation, and plugs into the wall but also has a backup battery in case the power goes out during a storm. The ZenCrate's acoustic design keeps anxiety-inducing sounds out while keeping the relaxation music in, and its shape mimics the tight-spaced feel of a car's backseat, where Charger seemed most at ease. "Naturally, dogs in the wild would always take comfort in a den-type environment," Azevedo says. "It makes them feel comfortable, and they can kind of lessen their senses. They know nothing can come out of their blind spot, so they can lay down and relax."

The PNP Robotics team is also working to develop an app so pet owners can control the ZenCrate remotely, get notifications, or even watch a livestream. The first mass order of ZenCrate is set for delivery in March.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY

On the corner of Broward Boulevard and Federal Highway, a creative and tech hub has emerged in Fort Lauderdale that's looking to take South Florida's startup community to the next level. The new space, called Collective Ventures, offers an innovation center, a startup accelerator looking to invest \$5 million into 100 new companies during the next three years, and a community coffeehouse all in one. "Coworking exists, startup accelerators exist, collaboration exists and cafes exist. I put them all together," founder Brian Jacob says.

It takes four ingredients for an entrepreneur to be successful, Jacob says: knowledge, experience, courage and money. Most of the time, he meets people with only two of the four. But that's where Collective Ventures can step in, whether the entrepreneur is looking for funding, expert advice or professional services. Conveniently, the 20 compa-



Brian Jacob, founder of Collective Ventures

nies who are members of the coworking space all come from different industries essential to the growth of a startup—web development, search engine optimization, photography, PR, social media, legal services and more—and each of the agencies was hand-selected to be a top resource to whoever walks into the center. "I want people to come in for a cup of coffee and leave with a business," Jacob says.

The soon-to-open coffee shop will host Ted Talk-style presentations that,

even for the student who only comes in to study, Jacob hopes will be as inspirational as they are informative. Between the 110-seat cafe's open-plan design and seven presentation and conference rooms that are rentable by the hour, the venue is bound to be a breeding ground for entrepreneurs and innovators. And, designed with collaboration and community in mind, it could soon be the birthplace of South Florida's newest startups. "There's only so much you can do alone," Jacob says. ■