

Groundswell Startups marks 10th anniversary, created to support entrepreneurs; Sagastume new managing director; now accepting 'Pitch the Future' applications

By Ken Datzman

MELBOURNE — For the past decade, Groundswell Startups has played a foundational role in the startup ecosystem in Brevard County.

The nonprofit organization has nurtured early-stage ventures by providing essential resources, from shared office space to mentorship, pitch competitions, networking opportunities, access to investors and industry experts, and a prototype laboratory to help founders move from idea to market.

The Groundswell Startups concept was the idea of four cofounders: Bud Deffebach, John Vecchio, Mark Mohler, and Jenna Reid. Groundswell Startups formalized as an organization in 2016.

They took a shuttered indoor skate park and converted it into an 11,300-square-foot technology incubator.

"It's exciting to be celebrating Groundswell Startups' 10th year, and we are growing," said Marifer Sagastume, managing director for the startup community at Groundswell Startups.

"We continue to see a need for having a place like this on the Space Coast, where there are a lot of innovators looking to start and build enterprises. We've had a number of success stories as businesses that started at Groundswell have graduated and are now thriving elsewhere."

An example is Tomahawk Robotics. It was formed and incubated at Groundswell Startups in late 2018. The firm had three employees. By 2020, they moved from a 4,000-square-foot office attached to Groundswell to an 8,500-square-foot facility nearby. In 2022, they expanded again into a former Walgreen's building on U.S. 1 and Montreal Avenue. One year later, AeroVironment Inc. acquired Tomahawk Robotics for \$120 million in a mix of cash and stock.

Other successes include Alertgy, a pioneer in non-invasive, sensor-equipped wristbands for continuous blood glucose monitoring for diabetes; SwiftPaws, a company that developed high-speed lure systems for pet engagement and exercise that expanded from a backyard, locally supported idea to a growing commercial venture; and Kalogon, a health technology company that specializes in "smart seating" solutions designed to prevent pressure injuries and improve blood flow for people who sit for long periods.

Companies supported by Groundswell Startups generated more than \$50 million in revenue in 2025, created over 250 jobs across five companies, and contributed to more than \$240 million in "successful exits."

"There is a lot of interest in Groundswell Startups," said Sagastume. "We have more than 20 offices of varying sizes, and currently we have a wait list. Adjacent to our main building on Irwin Street, we have two more offices. And we recently purchased a property next door that we now have available. This is an opportunity for a business to take that space and fit it to meet their needs."

Sagastume has lived in the area for 12 years and recently joined the Groundswell Startups team.

"I originally moved here from Panama to attend Florida Tech," said Sagastume, who is a two-time graduate of that school, with a bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering and an MBA. She spent the last five years at Florida Tech's Vertex Applied Innovation Hub supporting program operations and business acceleration initiatives. "That was a great experience."



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Marifer Sagastume is the managing director for the startup community at Groundswell Startups in Melbourne, a coworking and incubator/accelerator entity that is celebrating its 10th year. Ruchir Gupta is Groundswell's industrial designer and leads the prototype lab. In 2025, companies supported by Groundswell generated more than \$50 million in revenue and created over 250 jobs across five businesses.

"When this job with Groundswell Startups came up, I knew it was a good opportunity for me to continue to support the community, not only established businesses but also startups and people with ideas for new ventures. We are here to help them with their journeys."

She added, "In my role as managing director for the startup community, I want to provide more accountability to our founders (visionaries who build businesses from scratch). I want to introduce them to mentors and potential investors."

"She added, "I can bring all the resources together because I have worked with different resource providers in the area and across the region. I'm going to be their cheerleader, but also provide the accountability they need to move forward. I'm excited about that. It's part of my

role, as well as the operations of the facility that includes coworking capabilities, office space for startups, and the prototype lab."

Sagastume works closely with Ruchir Gupta, an industrial designer at Groundswell Startups. He leads the prototype lab, which is fully equipped for all types of projects. Gupta has been with Groundswell almost since the start.

"The prototype lab will be three years old in May," he said. "We are extremely excited about the success of the lab. We have done more than 120 projects. Out of that number, perhaps more than 10 products have made it into the market. And we have also hosted over 25 interns at the

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lab from universities across the state, including the University of Florida, University of Central Florida, Eastern Florida State College and Florida Tech. It's called the Industry Amplified Intern program. All of this was made possible by a Brevard County workforce development grant."

Groundswell Startups launched the prototype lab in 2023, supported by a \$500,000 grant from the Brevard County Commission. The grant was awarded through the American Rescue Plan Act.

"This year we are focusing on bigger projects for the prototype lab," said Gupta, who has a master's degree in human-centered design from Florida Tech and a master's in industrial design from Florence Design Academy in Italy.

Gupta has worked on creating innovative design solutions for urban and rural target audiences for the Internet of Things, wearable and emerging technology, and additive manufacturing. His website is <https://www.balance.net/ruchirgupta>.

There are various ways in which to engage with Groundswell Startups. You can join as a member for coworking and mentorship, apply to their incubator/accelerator program, attend community events, or become a mentor or sponsor.

"We have virtual memberships, too," said Sagastume. "It gives the business operator access to a mailing address. He or she can collect their mail and packages at Groundswell Startups."

Groundswell Startups provides in-house resources such as access to high-end computers, software licenses, and connections to engineering and business interns.

For more details on hooking up with Groundswell Startups, email admin@swellstartups.com or visit swellstartups.com.

Community-focused startups and supporting ecosystems are growing rapidly in Florida, with the state now boasting one of the highest rates of entrepreneurship in America. The Sunshine State ranks in the top 10 for startup investments.

In fact, according to "WalletHub," a free personal finance website, "Florida is the best state for starting a business in 2026." It has the highest percentage of adults who engage in entrepreneurship. The number of small businesses in the state grew by nearly 16 percent between 2017 and 2023, the fifth-highest percentage in the country.

There are plenty of "reasons why so many people start businesses in Florida, including the fact that it has the 15th-lowest corporate taxes," the WalletHub report says.

The working-age population (age 16-64) is growing faster in Florida than in all but five other states. And, Florida has the "third-highest percentage of workers who say they are enthusiastic about and committed to their work."

Groundswell Startups is preparing for its signature event of the year, "Pitch the Future 2026," and is accepting applications. This event is touted as the "Space Coast's premier pitch competition for early-stage technology startups."

The event is Nov. 13 at Groundswell Startups and will spotlight founders building scalable solutions in advanced technology, artificial intelligence, hardware, space, defense, and other emerging industries.

Pitch the Future is the capstone of the "Space Coast Initiative," a yearlong, three-event pipeline that moves founders from the first idea through hackathons and a product summit before reaching the main pitch stage.

The competition is built for pre-revenue and early-revenue startups ready to move from prototype to investment readiness, connecting them with capital, strategic

partners, and long-term ecosystem support.

"The winner of Pitch the Future will receive a \$10,000 cash prize and the runner-up \$5,000," said Sagastume. "There will also be in-kind donations from sponsors and ongoing support from the Groundswell ecosystem."

Eligibility is open to early-stage, technology-driven startups across Florida, with priority given to companies headquartered in Brevard County or maintaining a substantial operational presence on the Space Coast.

Applicants must submit a single online application covering company overview, problem and solution, market and competitors, team and technology, traction and revenue projections through 2028, and an 8-to-10-slide pitch deck.

Submissions will be evaluated by a panel of subject matter experts, mentors, investors, and ecosystem partners against six criteria: problem and solution clarity, value proposition, market opportunity and scalability, competitive differentiation, execution readiness, and investment readiness.

The deadline for applications is Oct. 23. Founders can apply at <https://swellstartups.beehiiv.com>.

Sponsorship opportunities are available at three tiers: Presenting Sponsor, Stage Sponsor, and Hospitality Sponsor for organizations interested in supporting the next generation of Space Coast companies. Interested sponsors and applicants can contact community@swellstartups.com.

Selected finalists for Pitch the Future 2026 will be notified two to three weeks before the event and will receive coaching and pitch preparation ahead of their main stage appearance, said Sagastume.

"We will be helping startups, connecting them with the resources and the right mentors, so once they have their pitch ready they can communicate to the world what their venture does. This pitch competition is the perfect place for them to do that. So when they are prepared to present in front of investors and other people along their journey, they will be ready and polished."

Sagastume added, "We are excited to host this event annually for the startup ecosystem community. It's thrilling to hear their pitches and their stories. These are high-energy events that offer valuable exposure, networking, and potential funding. We're looking forward to Pitch the Future 2026."

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