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What Holds After the Builder Leaves

Robert Vera reflects on execution, education, and Arizona's next phase.

Page 32

Why Phoenix Leads & How It Got There

How Phoenix reached the top by staying steady as conditions changed.

Page 16

Not a Science Fair. A Pipeline.

How four student builders and a Sunday conversation revealed where Arizona's innovation ecosystem really begins.

Page 11

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Silicon Oasis Magazine

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR EDITOR

Kyle Macdonald
Editor-in-Chief,
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As **Silicon Oasis** moves into 2026, the focus is less on what's emerging and more on what's holding.

This issue reflects an ecosystem that's beginning to show its shape. Student builders are staying with problems for years, not semesters. Founders are making quieter decisions around execution, pricing, and systems rather than chasing visibility. Capital is moving more deliberately, toward technologies that operate inside real constraints hospitals, buildings, regulatory environments rather than around them.

Across **Arizona,** the pattern is consistent. Growth isn't coming from a single corridor or moment. It's distributed, steady, and tied to people who are willing to do the unglamorous work: iterating, validating, fixing what breaks, and showing up again.

Phoenix's rise isn't presented here as a victory lap. It's context. What matters more is how builders are responding as conditions tighten and expectations rise. The stories in this issue point to an ecosystem learning how to function under pressure not perfectly, but honestly.

Kyle MacDonald
Co-Founder, Silicon Oasis

VISION & IMPACT

Transforming Arizona into a global tech hub led by local founders, built for the future.

Silicon Oasis is a nonprofit dedicated to uniting Arizona's tech ecosystem. Our mission is to strengthen the local innovation economy by bringing together founders, investors, and entrepreneurs—and by creating spaces where collaboration can thrive.

We do this in three key ways:

- Centralizing the Ecosystem through startup-focused events and practical workshops led by experienced builders and funders.
- Cultivating Community by fostering authentic, expectation-free connections that go beyond traditional networking.
- Spotlighting Talent with dynamic video podcasts and media that highlight Arizona's most promising innovators.

OUT IN THE OPEN

A public, family-friendly night at Cul-De-Sac offered a clear look at how Arizona's startup community is choosing to show up.

On a recent evening in **Tempe, Arizona's** startup community gathered around something refreshingly simple: showing up.

Hosted at **Cul-De-Sac,** the **Celebration of Technology** brought founders, families, technologists, and first-time attendees into the same space without pitch stages, closed rooms, or curated guest lists. Instead, the night unfolded as an open, public invitation to see what's being built across the region.

The event was organized by **Silicon Oasis ambassador Jordan Fourcher** in partnership with **Cryo-X,** and its structure was intentional. As Fourcher explained, "The cost of doing events is so cost-prohibitive for startups. To do a booth at any big convention can be five to ten thousand dollars. A small startup can't do that."

Rather than asking founders to compete for visibility, the goal was to remove friction altogether

Obsession as the Common Thread

Fourcher credits the inspiration for the event to conversations about what actually attracts long-term capital and momentum to the Valley.

Registration doubled in the final days, with more than 220 attendees signed up and over 75% turnout a rare showing that reflected the community's willingness to be present.

"The only way we're going to attract real capital to the Valley is to stop complaining about the fact that there's no capital," he said. "Put our heads down and show off the crazy tech we've been building."

That mindset shaped the night's lineup. Founders brought what they had not polished decks, but working technology. The courtyard filled with robotics navigating the crowd, drones designed for medical delivery, mobile workspaces, and early-stage software platforms still very much in motion.

"These are people who will be told it's a dumb idea," **Fourcher** noted. "And they'll keep going anyway. That's what separates a startup founder from a small business owner.

Designed for the Public

What made the event feel distinct wasn't just what was on display it was who the event was built for. "This event, from the ground up, was designed to be public," **Fourcher** said. "Anyone could show up. Not only that, but it was family-friendly. People are bringing their kids. People are bringing their families."

Kids ran through the space while founders explained products. Music played. Ice cream was passed around. The environment encouraged lingering rather than rushing. "It creates a celebration of technology," he added. "People aren't here just to network. They're here to build culture and community."

That approach changed the energy of the room. Conversations were unforced. Founders compared notes instead of pitching. Attendees asked questions out of curiosity, not obligation.

Showing Up Matters

The response surprised even the organizers. Registration more than doubled in the final days leading up to the event, and turnout exceeded expectations.

"As of last week, we had about **120 registered attendees**," **Fourcher** shared. "As of today, we had over **220 registered.** We're completely sold out of food. I think we had over a **75 percent attendance rate**, which for an event is rare."

For **Fourcher,** the takeaway was straightforward: "People showed up. And they should continue to show up."

Organized by Silicon Oasis ambassador Jordan Fourcher, the event was designed to remove cost barriers for early-stage startups.

A Snapshot of the Ecosystem

Throughout the night, conversations extended beyond the main event. Founders from **DevLabs** shared updates from a recent demo day, including grant funding awarded to local startups. Early-stage companies spoke openly about fundraising, traction, and the challenges still ahead.

Rather than presenting a finished picture of **Arizona's** tech ecosystem, the **Celebration of Technology** offered a snapshot imperfect, evolving, and very real.
It wasn't a showcase designed for outside validation. It was a moment of visibility for the people already building here.

And in a community that often measures success by what comes next, the night focused on what's happening now: builders in the open, supported by a growing culture that values participation over performance.

A ROOM FULL OF BUILDERS

Inside Silicon Oasis Pitch Night and Arizona's emerging PropTech momentum

Someone laughed softly when the first slide stalled for half a second not out of impatience, but familiarity. The room had that feeling. Not polished. Not performative. Focused. This didn't feel like a pitch competition. It felt like a working session.

Founders leaned forward instead of back. Investors stayed present. Conversations began before the first presentation and continued well after the last one ended. **Silicon Oasis Pitch Night** wasn't about who won the room it was about who was building something real, and who else in the room might help carry it forward.

Why Arizona, Why Now

Arizona is at a particular moment right now. Growth here isn't abstract. It's visible in cranes rising against the desert sky, in housing demand colliding with affordability, in infrastructure stretched by speed. The built environment is under pressure, and that pressure is shaping the kind of innovation that shows up.

The founders who took the stage weren't chasing distant futures. They were solving problems that already exist right here, right now.

Rhome reframes homeownership through secure co-ownership, using trust-based structures that simplify equity, title, and long-term planning.

Rethinking Ownership from the Ground Up

Rhome set the tone early. Founder **Bronson Hixon** spoke about homeownership without nostalgia. He described it as a system that hasn't evolved alongside the way people actually live more mobile, more collaborative, more financially creative. Rising costs and rigid models have pushed many would-be buyers out, not because they lack commitment, but because the rules no longer fit reality.

Rhome's approach reframes ownership through secure co-ownership, using trust-based structures that simplify equity, title, and long-term planning. It landed because it didn't ask the room to imagine new behavior. It named what's already happening people buying together and offered infrastructure to support it.

When Performance Becomes Infrastructure

From there, the focus shifted from how we live to how buildings perform. **ZeGlass** followed with a problem so common it's almost invisible: windows. Buildings lose enormous amounts of energy through conventional static glass, yet many smart alternatives remain expensive, centralized, or visually compromised.

ZeGlass' solution intelligent, AI-controlled glass designed to be manufactured locally at scale felt less like a feature and more like infrastructure. In a state where heat, energy efficiency, and commercial growth intersect daily, the implications didn't need embellishment. The room didn't react loudly. It simply nodded.

Compressing Time in a Capital-Intensive World

If **Rhome** addressed ownership and **ZeGlass** addressed performance, **HABU** zoomed in on the process behind it all. Founder **Bryan Tharalson** described real estate development as it actually is: **slow, manual, and fragmented**. Zoning research, underwriting, feasibility studies work that takes full teams weeks and still leaves gaps.

HABU's AI-native platform compresses those workflows, automating analysis so teams can move faster with clearer signals. What stood out wasn't the technology itself, but the framing. Even small gains in speed and certainty can dramatically change outcomes in a capital-intensive industry.

Solving the Friction Everyone Accepts

Auto BIM Route AI closed the founder lineup by dropping even deeper into the daily realities of building.

ZeGlass' AI-controlled smart glass is designed for local, scalable manufacturing less a feature, more infrastructure for energy-efficient buildings.

Founder **Dr. Suleiman Alsafouri** spoke to anyone who has spent hours coordinating MEP routing only to discover conflicts late in the process. Manual routing has long been accepted as tedious but unavoidable.

Auto BIM Route AI challenges that assumption, automating clash-free routing directly inside **BIM environments**. The value wasn't theoretical. It showed up in **reduced hours, lower costs, fewer materials wasted**. For contractors and design teams in the room, the reaction wasn't excitement it was recognition.

Where Experience Meets Execution

Throughout the evening, panelists **Ville Houttu**, **Josue Romero**, and **Joseph Phillips** played a quiet but critical role. Their feedback wasn't about spectacle. It was about fit.

Would teams actually use this? Would it integrate into real workflows? Would it shorten timelines or reduce risk in measurable ways? The message was consistent: novelty fades quickly. Adoption is what matters.

With support from Weiss Brown and AZ Proptech Collective, Silicon Oasis Pitch Night became less about the stage and more about the connections forming in the room.

A Snapshot of an Ecosystem Coming Into Its Own

That practicality defined the night. There was no sense Arizona was trying to imitate another market. The problems discussed were local affordability, heat, speed, scale and the solutions reflected the realities of building in a fast-growing, resource-conscious state. This wasn't PropTech as abstraction. It was PropTech as response.

Support from Weiss Brown and partnership with AZ Proptech Collective made the night possible, but the real value lived in the moments between presentations quiet introductions, side conversations, the unmistakable energy of "let's continue this."

By the end of the night, it was clear this wasn't just an event. It was a snapshot of a region growing into its role as a proving ground for built-environment innovation. Not loud. Not flashy. Just builders, solving real problems, in a room full of people paying attention. And in Arizona, that's usually how the next chapter begins.

NOT A SCIENCE FAIR. A PIPELINE.

How four student builders and a Sunday conversation revealed where Arizona's innovation ecosystem really begins

It was a Sunday, and **Josue Romero** did not rush it.

As founder of **Silicon Oasis**, Romero has spent years documenting how innovation ecosystems actually form long before companies scale or capital arrives. Before any projects were introduced, before titles or explanations, he paused and acknowledged the day almost in passing. It was not framed as a sacrifice or a gesture. It was simply noted as fact. When people are passionate about what they are building, the day of the week does not matter.

The room reflected that sentiment. Four students sat across from **Romero,** not with slides or rehearsed pitches, but with years of work behind them. They introduced themselves by name, grade, and the problems they had been trying to solve. There was no urgency to impress, no pressure to compress the story. The conversation moved at the pace of the work itself.

Students sat across from Josue Romero with years of work behind them discussing the problems they'd been trying to solve.

Romero did not position himself as a judge or a moderator, but listened the way builders listen. He asked how long projects took, what sparked them, and what did not work the first time. He let explanations finish. He stayed with the details.

This did not feel like an event staged for visibility. It felt like a working session, one builder sitting with four others, creating space for them to articulate what they had been building quietly for years. And when the first student said she had been working on her project since seventh grade, it became clear that what **Silicon Oasis** had convened that Sunday was not a showcase of ideas.

I've Been Building This Since Seventh Grade

When **Suhana Chand,** a tenth grader at **BASIS Peoria,** was asked how long she had been working on **RDVision**, her answer came without hesitation.

She had been building it since seventh grade. **RDVision** is an assistive device for visually impaired individuals that combines text to speech, facial recognition, and emotional recognition. But Suhana did not present it as a list of features. She presented it as a response to what she witnessed while volunteering at a senior home.

She described seniors who were unable to recognize their own family members because of visual impairment. She spoke plainly about how significant that loss was and how clear it became that something needed to be built. What matters here is not just the technology. It is the timeline.

RDVision did not emerge from a short term assignment or a one off prompt. It exists because the problem stayed unresolved and she stayed with it.

Iteration Is the Work

When **Saanvi Naik** introduced the **Magic Glove,** an assistive device for individuals with alien hand syndrome, she began not with mechanics but with consequence.

She described how involuntary movement could turn something as simple as grocery shopping into isolation.

RDVision began in seventh grade, not as a feature list, but as a response to a real gap Suhana saw while volunteering with seniors.

Reaching for milk could result in striking someone unintentionally. Everyday life becomes inaccessible. Only after grounding the problem did she walk through the work itself.

Multiple prototypes. Materials that failed. Servo motors that worked better. Future plans to integrate machine learning so the glove could distinguish involuntary movement automatically rather than requiring manual activation.

She explained that it took time to figure out what worked and what did not. She started the project in seventh grade. She finished the core prototype in eighth. Two years of iteration not for recognition but for functionality.

When the Problem Is Personal the Work Endures

For **Nitika Satish,** the problem was not abstract. It came from her own family.

She is developing a **non-invasive diagnostic device** for inflammatory bowel diseases such as crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. When asked what motivated her, she spoke about family members who suffer from these conditions.

She described how her sister was admitted to the emergency room and how difficult and invasive the diagnostic process was to witness.

She spoke about early detection not as a concept but as something urgently needed before complications arise. There was no overstatement. Just clarity and commitment.

Questioning Technology Instead of Worshipping It

The final student presentation came from **Kashyap Avancha**, who is researching memory retention and screen time using brainwave data. His starting point was personal observation. He noticed his own memory declining. He could not remember where he placed his phone minutes earlier. He felt that should not be happening at his age.

His project explores how external stimuli and screen exposure affect cognition. Artificial intelligence is part of the work, but it is not framed as a shortcut. It is framed as a tool that must be used deliberately.

He spoke about using data to understand memory retention and potentially improve it rather than outsourcing thinking altogether.

Saanvi Naik didn't start with mechanics. She started with consequence how involuntary movement can turn everyday tasks into isolation.

In a moment when artificial intelligence is often applied faster than it is questioned, that restraint stood out.

The Architecture Behind the Builders

Only after all four students spoke did the structure supporting their work come into focus. **Rachna Nath,** the educator and founder behind **DRIPBL,** explained that this was never intended to be a startup accelerator.

DRIPBL stands for **Dream Research Innovate Problem and Project Based Learning.** It functions less like a curriculum and more like a repeatable system for early builder formation. She described how the work began as part of the classes she taught. Students start with prompts rather than solutions.

They research before building. They scale ideas realistically. They build in blocks. They stay with projects for years.

Mentors parents and subject matter experts support the process but the ownership remains with the students. The goal is not speed. It is depth. Students are given permission to stay with complexity long enough for real understanding to form.

What the System Produces

What followed from **Nath's** explanation was not hypothetical. It was measurable. During the **2024 to 2025** academic year alone, **DRIPBL** students and alumni produced outcomes that mirror early stage research programs and pre collegiate incubators, not extracurricular clubs.

Among those outcomes were a 3M Scientist Award, three provisional patents and one non-provisional patent filing, and ten Grand Awards and four Special Awards at Regeneron ISEF. Students also advanced through Sigma Xi IFoRE project qualifications, earned National Innovation Challenge wins, and secured recognition through BioGenius and Thermo Fisher nominations.

Others moved beyond competition entirely. **DRIPBL** students earned paid SCENE internships, advanced to national finals in space settlement and applied science challenges, and secured placements as Helios Scholars and Flinn Scholars through the Flinn Foundation.For graduating seniors alone, **DRIPBL** alumni collectively earned **$2.6 million dollars** in scholarships during the 2024 to 2025 academic year.

For Nitika Satish, the problem wasn't abstract. It came from her family and from watching how difficult and invasive diagnosis can be when time matters.

What makes those numbers meaningful is not scale. It is consistency. These outcomes are the result of sustained research, iteration, mentorship, and student ownership over years. The work seen in the room that Sunday was not an exception.

It was the output of a system doing exactly what it was designed to do. Taken together, these outcomes place **DRIPBL** not as an enrichment program, but as an upstream contributor to **Arizona's** future technical workforce.

Why This Matters Now Especially in Arizona

What made the room compelling was not only what the students built. It was how they talked about the work. They did not rush to outcomes. They did not present their projects as finished. They spoke openly about what failed, what took longer than expected, and what still needed refinement. They described years of iteration without apology. That posture matters now.

Arizona is undergoing rapid transformation across advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, healthcare innovation, and technology infrastructure.

As the state attracts capital intensive industries that demand long horizon thinking, depth becomes a competitive advantage. Ecosystems optimized only for speed and visibility tend to fracture. What unfolded in this session offered a counterbalance.

These students are being trained early to sit with complex problems, connect solutions to lived experience, iterate without immediate validation, and stay with work long enough for it to become durable.

They are learning innovation as a practice, not a performance. That distinction is critical. Ecosystems do not fail from a lack of ideas. They fail when too few builders are equipped to carry ideas through uncertainty, friction, and time. What **DRIPBL** cultivates quietly and over years is that capacity, and it is happening before pitch decks, before accelerators, before anyone asks for scale. In a state moving as quickly as Arizona is right now, that kind of early builder formation is not optional. It is infrastructure.

What It Meant to Be in the Room

As the session drew to a close, there was no countdown, no announcement, and no formal wrap. Just four students sitting across from **Josue Romero** talking through what they had built and why they stayed with it.

They were not presenting to judges. They were not pitching for approval. They were being taken seriously by someone whose work centers on documenting how ecosystems form and grow.

Kashyap Avancha asked what constant screen time does to memory and how AI should be used without replacing thinking.

Throughout the conversation **Romero** did not rush them. He asked how long the work took. He asked what inspired it. He paused when answers mattered. When a student explained a failure or a future iteration, he leaned in instead of moving on. This was not mentorship as ceremony. It was recognition as practice.

By giving these builders time, attention, and space to explain their work in their own words, **Silicon Oasis** did something subtle but important. It treated early stage builders as participants in the ecosystem now, not later.

For **Suhana Chand**, **Saanvi Naik, Nitika Satish**, and **Kashyap Avancha**, this was not just an interview. It was a moment of translation. Their years of solitary work met an audience that understood process, not just outcomes. For **Silicon Oasis,** it reinforced something fundamental. Innovation ecosystems are built by those willing to listen long before results are guaranteed.

WHY PHOENIX LEADS AND HOW IT GOT THERE

How Phoenix reached the top by staying steady as conditions changed.

Phoenix didn't rise to the top of the startup rankings by catching a lucky wave. It's leading because its ecosystem was already built for the moment we're in not the one we just left behind.

When the funding environment tightened after 2021, many startup cities struggled to adjust. Capital became selective. Costs mattered again. Survival quietly replaced speed as the real measure of success. Phoenix didn't need to recalibrate. It already had.

When the Map Changed

For years, startup geography was driven by noise. Founders chased momentum wherever it sounded loudest. Density signaled legitimacy. Burn was tolerated as long as the next round felt close enough to justify it. Then the cycle shifted.

Rising interest rates, inflation, and supply-chain pressure forced investors to narrow their focus. Capital didn't disappear it concentrated. AI, SaaS, fintech, and health tech continued to attract attention, but only when paired with discipline and real fundamental

In that environment, ecosystems stopped being a backdrop. They became the difference between companies that lasted and companies that didn't. When **CommercialCafe** examined U.S. cities through this new lens, one place consistently surfaced not because it was flashy, but because it functioned.

Phoenix By the Numbers

Among U.S. cities with more than one million residents, **Phoenix** ranked **#1** overall, earning 62.1 out of 100 points. The headline matters but why it happened matters more.

Phoenix led all major U.S. cities in startup density and startup growth. Density means founders aren't building in isolation. Growth means new companies are still forming even as capital tightens. Most cities manage one or the other.

Phoenix has both at the same time. That combination signals an ecosystem that isn't just active, but self-reinforcing.

Talent Didn't Chase the Boom

One of **Phoenix's** strongest advantages isn't about startups at all. It's about people. Between 2019 and 2024, **Phoenix** recorded the **second-largest increase in college-educated residents among major U.S. cities,** expanding its talent pool by nearly one-third in just five years.

That kind of growth doesn't come from hype cycles. It comes from alignment opportunity, affordability, and quality of life moving together.

In practical terms, it means:

- Hiring pipelines deepen instead of tightening
- Skill diversity grows alongside company formation
- Wage pressure stays closer to reality

Talent growth that keeps pace with startup growth is one of the hardest things ecosystems get right. **Phoenix** did quietly.

Cost Structure Is the Hidden Advantage

In this cycle, cost isn't just an operational detail. It's a survival factor. Commercial Cafe's data shows **Phoenix** maintaining competitive office and coworking costs compared to other major U.S. cities, paired with manageable labor costs and a growing freelance workforce.

That mix allows companies to scale deliberately, rely on contract talent early, and avoid locking into overhead too soon. These aren't the kinds of advantages that generate headlines.They're the kinds that keep companies alive long enough to matter.

Density Without the Burn

Many startup hubs eventually collapse under their own weight. Density turns into congestion. Networking becomes transactional. Costs outpace value. **Phoenix** shows a different pattern.

The city ranks highly for networking opportunities, but without tipping into saturation. There's enough activity to create collisions introductions, partnerships, shared learning without forcing companies into constant competition just to stay visible. It's density that still leaves room to breathe.

Why Phoenix Holds When Others Strain

What makes **Phoenix** lead the pack isn't any single metric. It's cohesion. The ecosystem continues to produce new companies, attract educated talent, preserve affordability, and support connection without congestion even as conditions tighten. That's the difference between a city that thrives in boom times and one that functions under pressure.

The Quiet Conclusion

The leaders in this cycle aren't the loudest cities. They're the ones that were ready before the pressure arrived. **Phoenix** was one of them.

INSIDE DRIVE HEALTH'S CLINICAL AI PLATFORM

Backed by new capital, the company is focused on AI workflows that fit inside real hospital operations.

Healthcare AI company **Drive Health** has raised new capital from **Vitalis Ventures** and **Inside Capital Partners**, with an additional tranche expected to close in Q1 2026. The funding will be used to expand operations and continue development of its clinical workflow platform as hospitals move from AI experimentation toward production-grade systems.

Led by CEO **Kevin Longoria**, **Drive Health** is not trying to reinvent medicine. Instead, it is focused on a narrower and increasingly urgent challenge: turning AI into something health systems can audit, govern, and trust.

AI as Infrastructure, Not Experiment

Drive Health's platform, **Avery,** is a clinical workflow engine designed to automate specific, repeatable nursing and care-team tasks such as discharge orchestration, secure message triage, and rounding follow-up. These are not edge cases or speculative use scenarios. They are high-volume operational workflows that quietly determine whether hospitals run smoothly or fall behind.

Drive Health, a Gilbert, Arizona–based healthcare technology company, raised $15M to scale Avery.

What distinguishes **Avery** is not the breadth of what it attempts, but the constraints it operates under. Each workflow runs within hospital-defined risk caps, controls, and escalation paths. Performance and safety are continuously monitored, producing audit trails that allow health systems to review what happened, when, and why.

Avery is built to function inside the realities of healthcare operations compliance requirements, clinician oversight, and accountability rather than around them.

Designed for Clinician Judgment

Drive Health is explicit about what **Avery** does not do. The platform does not diagnose, prescribe, or replace licensed clinicians.

Avery automates repeatable nursing and care-team workflows from discharge coordination to secure message triage and follow-up.

Instead, it automates coordination and follow-through the work that often pulls nurses and care teams away from direct patient care. Judgment-dependent moments are surfaced, not suppressed. Exceptions are routed to humans. Controls are defined by hospitals, not the model.

That positioning reflects a broader shift happening across healthcare AI. After years of pilots and proofs of concept, providers are increasingly prioritizing systems that reduce burden without introducing new risk. AI that cannot be governed is no longer useful, regardless of its technical sophistication.

Capital to Scale What Works

The new funding will support operational growth and continued product development as **Drive Health** expands its footprint.

While the company has not disclosed customer counts or deployment metrics, the structure of the round including a follow-on tranche scheduled for early 2026 suggests a focus on scaling execution rather than chasing visibility.

For investors like **Vitalis Ventures** and **Inside Capital Partners,** the bet is less about AI novelty and more about durability: whether **Drive Health** can become part of the clinical stack, not just another tool layered on top of it.

As hospitals continue to navigate staffing shortages, rising patient volumes, and increasing scrutiny around technology adoption, platforms that treat AI as audited infrastructure rather than experimentation may be the ones that last.

HEMASENSE'S $630K EXECUTION SIGNAL

Backed by Arizona angels, the $630K pre-seed reflects steady progress toward clinical milestones.

HemaSense closed an oversubscribed **$630,000** pre-seed round in mid-November, raising capital from 19 individual angel investors through a rolling close. More than **65 percent of the funding came from Arizona-based investors.**

On its face, it's a modest round. In context, it's a meaningful one. The raise follows **a $250,000 WearTech grant awarded through the Arizona Commerce Authority and PEI's WearTech Applied Research Center.**

Together, the capital supported foundational development milestones work that tends to matter more than headlines at this stage: validating systems, advancing prototypes, and building toward clinical readiness.

For **Nathan Friedman, CEO and co-founder of HemaSense,** the moment marks progress, not arrival. "This is a big inflection point, but it still feels like the beginning," **Friedman** said. "The need for additional capital will continue as we move into future phases.

HemaSense closed an oversubscribed $630K pre-seed from 19 angel investors.

That framing is intentional. In an environment where early-stage companies are being re-evaluated less on vision and more on execution, **Friedman** has been explicit about how he views capital. "These aren't handouts or charity donations," he said. "They're investments meant to be converted into real value."

Over the past year, **HemaSense** has focused on proving it can do exactly that. The team has advanced development while remaining capital-efficient, prioritizing customer needs, rapid decision-making, and operational discipline over premature scale.

HemaSense's next phase will require more capital, more validation, and more time. None of that is in question. What this round establishes is something simpler—and harder to fake: forward motion.

BUILDING TO LAST: WHAT ENDURES AFTER SPEED

It reflects the belief that durable progress comes from simplifying what's complicated and building systems that work the way people actually work.

I've been building things for as long as I can remember not because I thought of myself as an inventor, but because I was bothered by how many things in the world around me felt inefficient or poorly designed. As a kid, I would redraw cars that looked awkward, rebuild toys out of cardboard or wood, and sketch cleaner versions of objects that frustrated me. A visit to an **IBM** lab in seventh grade, along with an early love for industrial design and science fiction, taught me something that has stayed with me ever since: every system no matter how established can be improved, clarified, and made more human.

That mindset carried into my career. For more than 25 years, I've worked on turning complicated, messy problems into straightforward, scalable solutions. Sometimes that meant building things ahead of the market, like web-based software for life sciences in the mid-2000s or mobile health tools before "wellness apps" were a category.

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Dirk Beth has spent decades de-risking innovation and building enterprise-grade systems.

Other efforts aligned more closely with timing, including imaging systems for medical education and surgical planning deployed in more than 80 countries. I've also spent time inside large, complex organizations, including leading a 70-person software turnaround team at **Accenture/Umlaut** and contributing to a manufacturing turnaround for a major OEM. Those experiences reinforced something fundamental: regardless of scale, the same design principles apply. If you can simplify what's overly complicated, clarify what's confusing, and build systems that work the way people actually work, progress follows.

BKPK grew out of that same belief. A few years ago, I began studying the widening gap between energy demand and the limits of our existing power grid. By 2030, the **United States** needs to double its grid capacity a century of growth compressed into a single planning cycle. That kind of expansion cannot come from traditional infrastructure alone. It requires rethinking how power is generated, stored, moved, and orchestrated.

The realization that advanced storage and AI are essential to that future became the foundation for **BKPK:** modular, composable power systems designed to scale from utilities and data centers to households, off-grid use cases, and military or emergency operations. It's practical, necessary work and it has to endure well beyond current cycles or trends.

What excites me about **Silicon Oasis** is its commitment to building something that lasts for **Arizona's** tech community. It isn't driven by hype cycles or short-term wins. It's rooted in reinvestment, collaboration, and the belief that meaningful growth comes from strengthening what already exists **Arizona's** engineering talent, manufacturing base, universities, founders, and operators.

Rather than trying to replicate another region's playbook, **Silicon Oasis** is intentionally shaping an ecosystem that reflects the realities and advantages of this place. It recognizes that durable innovation comes from aligning capital, infrastructure, and talent.

That realization became the foundation for BKPK: modular, AI-enabled power systems built to scale.

That philosophy mirrors how we think at **BKPK.** The challenges we're working on demand discipline, composability, and patience. They require systems that can scale responsibly and endure beyond any single technology cycle. This kind of work doesn't happen in isolation.

It depends on shared knowledge, regional investment, and communities that support builders who are willing to think long-term.

I'm grateful to serve as a **Silicon Oasis Ambassador** because I believe in that mission. Ecosystems grow the same way resilient infrastructure grows: steadily, intentionally, and with the understanding that none of us can build the future alone.

If **Arizona c**ontinues to invest in its people, its ideas, and its shared momentum, I'm confident we'll create not just a tech hub but a long-lasting foundation for meaningful innovation.

THE FOUNDER WHO DIDN'T CHASE THE CHATBOT ERA

After decades watching technology cycles rise and fade, Alan Steinberg chose restraint over speed and built the strategic layer small businesses were missing.

When artificial intelligence surged into the business world, it arrived loudly. Chatbots. Content generators. Tools that promised speed and clarity, often delivered the opposite.

Alan Steinberg watched that wave closely. Not as a skeptic of AI, but as someone who had seen this pattern before. "We're just coming out of the chatbot era," he says. "The lights are just starting to turn on."

What concerned him wasn't how fast AI tools were advancing. It was that many small and mid-sized businesses were becoming more uncertain, not less.

The Decision Not to Chase the Noise

For **Steinberg,** the turning point came quietly. He noticed that despite better tools and cleaner outputs, business owners still didn't know what decision to make next. Speed had increased, but understanding hadn't.

He could have built another generator. Another chatbot. Another layer of acceleration.

The Brainiest team, led by CEO Alan Steinberg, built small, on purpose, with a focus on durability.

Instead, he paused. Having lived through multiple technology cycles, **Steinberg** recognized the familiar warning sign: when tools outrun comprehension, confusion follows. "Speed without strategy doesn't help anyone," he says. That realization became the line he wouldn't cross and the reason he chose to build guidance instead of noise.

A Long View Earned in Arizona

Steinberg has lived and worked in **Arizona** since 1978, giving him a rare vantage point on how industries actually mature. He has watched companies relocate with promise and capital, and then plateau.

"We've had companies move here," he says, "but not grow here. **Arizona** is missing that one unicorn company that originated here." That observation wasn't frustration; it was unfinished business.

Alongside longtime collaborators **Mike McGowan** and **Scott Gobel** both with deep Intel roots **Steinberg** kept returning to the same conclusion: the missing layer wasn't technology. It was disciplined thinking.

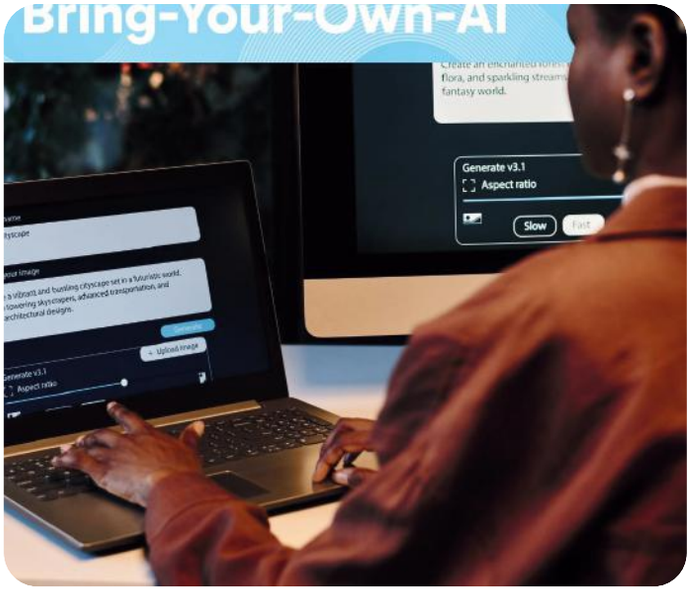
Why He Refused to Build Another Chatbot

That philosophy led to **Brainiest AI**, a platform designed not to generate clever text, but to guide businesses through the discipline of marketing itself.

"We're not just building a tool," **Steinberg** says. "We're building the way people think about marketing." **Brainiest AI** is not a chatbot or a content generator. It is a guided marketing intelligence system built around structure, logic, and proven frameworks.

The platform integrates roughly **30 AI models** and supports **55 marketing capabilities**, but users never see that complexity. They are walked through the decisions that matter. Brand voice, positioning, personas,messaging, planning, and PR before execution ever begins.

"All the other platforms are fragmented," **Steinberg** says. "Blogging platforms, social platforms, writing platforms. This puts it all in one spot."



A guided marketing intelligence system built to bring structure and clarity to AI focused on judgment, process, and disciplined decision-making rather than speed alone.

Built Small, On Purpose

The platform itself reflects that restraint. **Brainiest AI** was built by a five-person team. "**Mike McGowan** is the architect," **Steinberg** notes. "He did ninety-eight percent of the whole platform."

There was no rush to over-staff or over-announce. The focus was durability building something that could outlast a hype cycle rather than ride one.

Where the Idea Was Tested in the Real World

Real estate quickly became **Brainiest AI** proving ground. The industry's pace, regulatory structure, and inconsistent marketing education expose weak tools fast. **Brainiest AI** guided approach translated cleanly.

The platform has been fully adopted by the **Vail, Colorado MLS** and is currently under evaluation by multiple Arizona real estate associations, including **Phoenix,** Scottsdale, and the **West Valley**, with the latter showing the strongest engagement so far.

Pioneer Title Group is scheduled for a demo in **December 2025.** A real-estate-specific applet, co-developed with broker **Greg Peterson**, allows agents to upload property photos and instantly generate **MLS**-aligned marketing copy tailored to listing type and brand voice.

"Upload a picture of a kitchen," **Steinberg** explains, "and it gives you headings and tells you what and how to describe it."

Solving the Real Barrier

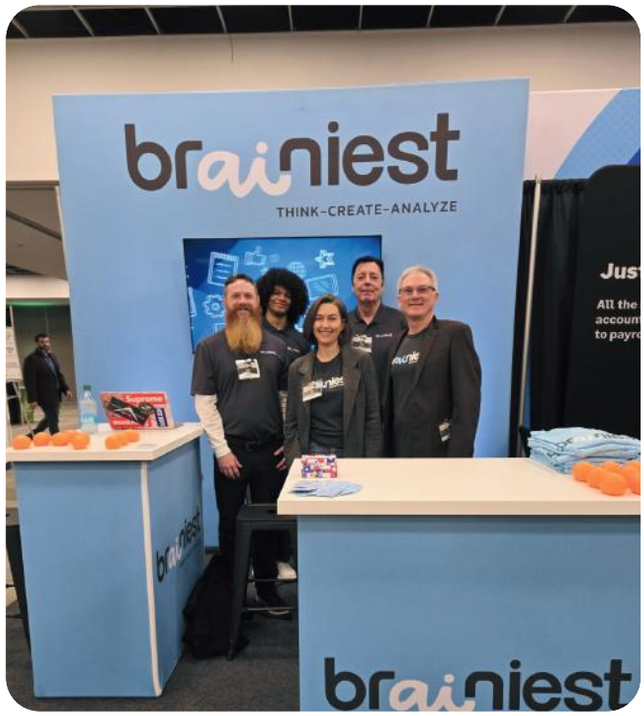
For **Steinberg**, this adoption confirms a deeper belief: AI isn't the barrier. Education is. **"Arizona Department of Real Estate** would nix this," he says. "They only teach contracts, not marketing."

Brainiest AI doesn't teach marketing in theory. It teaches through guided execution embedding marketing literacy directly into the work. Users don't need to understand AI at all. They just need clarity.

"AI will become embedded in everything you do," **Steinberg** says. **Brainiest AI** is built for that future one where complexity fades and structure remains.

A Platform and a Precedent

Brainiest AI's pricing reflects the same access-first philosophy: a free exploration tier, a **$5-per-week full-access trial**, and unlimited use at **$49 per month.**"



More than a product, Brainiest AI reflects a belief that Arizona can build and grow its own technology leaders.

"For many people," **Steinberg** notes, "one marketing consultant session costs more than a full month of capability here."

Looking ahead, he sees **Brainiest AI** as more than a product. It's a proof point that Arizona can build and grow its own technology anchors.

"Success breeds success," he says. If **Steinberg** were to write the headline a few years from now, it wouldn't mention AI at all: The standard go-to marketing platform for small to medium-sized businesses.

For him, the future isn't about flashy tools. It's about judgment, structure, and building something that lasts rooted firmly in **Arizona.**

CONNECTING THE BUILDERS

Why Don Fotsch believes Arizona's future is built on people, not platforms

Don Fotsch has spent his career inside complex systems building, scaling, and fixing them. From mechanical engineering at **John Deere** to a decade at **Apple**, from **PayPal** to leading a **$22 billion home-delivery pharmacy business**, his work has consistently lived at the intersection of hardware, software, and execution at scale.

So when **Fotsch** chose Arizona five years ago, it wasn't a lifestyle decision alone. It was a builder's decision.

"I've lived in a lot of states," **Fotsch** said. "What stood out about Arizona wasn't just the opportunity it was the people and the values. Those things determine what actually gets built."

A Builder who Still Builds

Fotsch's résumé reflects range, but also continuity. At **Apple,** he worked in manufacturing engineering, supply chain, and software including time in the operating system group. Later, at **PayPal,** he built the company's first consolidated user experience and design organization, bringing together UX, visual design, and research under one roof.

From Apple's operating systems to PayPal's first unified UX team, Don Fotsch's career spans hardware, software, and systems built to scale.

Today, **Fotsch** is building applied AI companies focused on food inspection, beverage inspection, and battery detection in recycling work that addresses real-world safety and infrastructure challenges. **Lithium-ion batteries** improperly discarded into recycling streams, for example, routinely cause fires in trucks and facilities. The issue isn't awareness; it's friction. The solution has to be embedded into systems people already use.

That practical lens has attracted major customers, including beverage brands like **Tito's**, and potential interest from **Tesla** in battery detection. This time around, **Fotsch** is bootstrapping not because capital is unavailable, but because he knows the problems, the customers, and the path to execution.

Choosing Arizona and Leaning In

When **Fotsch and his wife, Kate,** moved to **Arizona**, they were looking for sun and a place that could support long-term family life. What they found was something more structural. **Arizona,** he observed, is a state people actively choose, and that matters.

A majority of residents are not native-born, yet many come specifically to build families, companies, and roots. Combined with an unusually broad mix of industries from semiconductors and aerospace to fintech, health tech, and advanced manufacturing **Arizona** has depth that often goes unnoticed.

“People think of **Arizona** as one thing,” **Fotsch** said. “But when you actually live here, you realize how many different kinds of builders are already here.”

The Arizona Nerd Network

That realization led to something unexpected. About two years ago, **Fotsch** began informally connecting **founders, engineers, designers, and operators** across the state. There was no grand plan just introductions, conversations, and a sense that people needed easier ways to find each other.

Today, that effort has grown into the **Arizona Nerd Network,** a community of more than **500 builders.** There’s no website. No marketing funnel. No formal membership process

The Arizona Nerd Network grew to 500+ builders with no website or growth strategy just shared values and people showing up.

“It’s literally an address book in my phone,” **Fotsch** said. “It grew because people wanted it.” **The Nerd Network** operates on a single rule: the **Golden Rule** treat people the way you want to be treated. That simplicity is intentional. In **Fotsch’s** experience, the most common failure mode across companies and organizations isn’t competition or product. It’s values misalignment.

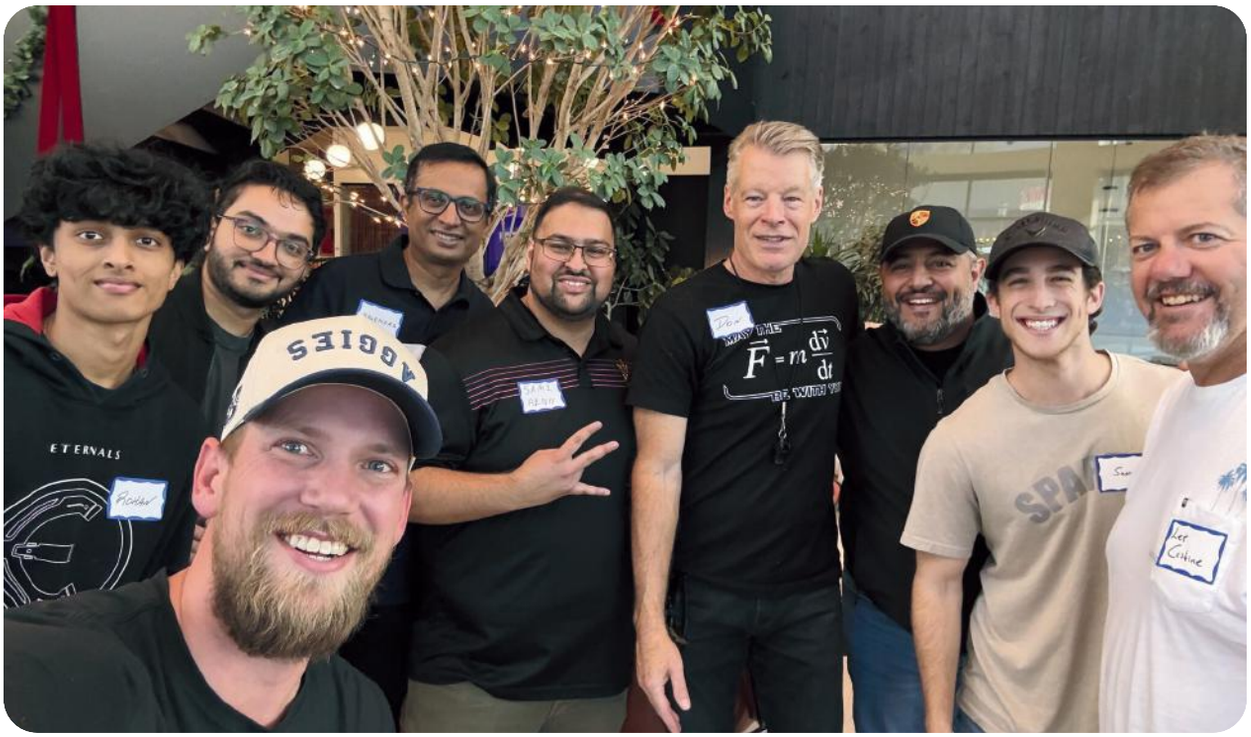
When values are clear, two things happen naturally:

- the right people find each other
- the wrong people quietly opt out

That dynamic, he believes, is essential for sustainable community building.

Culture as Infrastructure

Fotsch approaches culture the same way he approaches systems: if it’s not explicit, it breaks. That philosophy shapes how **The Nerd Network** shows up. Meetups are intentionally in-person. Kids are welcome. Relationships matter more than status. The focus is on building trust first, not extracting value.



Give first isn't a slogan. In Arizona, it's becoming a shared language among builders focused less on optics and more on doing the work.

It's also why the network hasn't chased sponsorships or funding. Support has emerged organically including early backing from organizations like the **Arizona Commerce Authority** once the value was obvious.

"When the private sector shows up clearly," Fotsch said, "it becomes easier for public institutions and universities to see where they fit.

A Builder's View of Tech and Prosperity

While **Fotsch** is clear that **Arizona's** future isn't **"tech-only,"** he's equally clear about tech's role. "Tech has always been the most powerful generator of productivity," he said. "And productivity is how prosperity scales." For him, prosperity isn't abstract. It's about participation getting more people involved in building, contributing, and creating value.

That mindset explains why he views community-building as real work, not extracurricular activity. It also explains why he believes **Arizona** is well-positioned: a state with strong work ethic, broad industry exposure, and a culture that quietly prioritizes fairness and contribution.

Give First

Asked for a single principle that guides how he builds companies, teams, or communities, Fotsch doesn't hesitate. **"Give first."** It's not a slogan. It's a filter. And in **Arizona**, it's becoming a shared language among builders who are less interested in optics and more interested in doing the work. **Fotsch** isn't trying to build **Arizona** alone. He's doing what builders do best: **creating connective tissue, setting clear rules, and letting aligned people do the rest.**

BEFORE THE COLLAPSE

What Christopher Trocola's life reveals about responsibility, timing, and the cost of waiting

Christopher Trocola's entrepreneurial journey did not begin in a boardroom or a technology incubator. It began knocking on doors, selling Kirby vacuum cleaners. "My first venture into direct sales was Kirby vacuums," **Trocola** recalls. "Most people would see that as a stepping stone. For me, it was an education in human behavior, persuasion, and systems thinking."

That early exposure to rejection, persuasion, and decision-making shaped how **Trocola** would later navigate far larger systems. By the time he graduated from **Desert Rose High School** where he completed college coursework ahead of schedule and ranked among Arizona's top students he had already developed a habit that would define his career: noticing what people preferred not to confront.

The Reputation That Followed Him

During the renewable energy boom of the 2010s, **Trocola** built and scaled businesses across the solar industry. As growth accelerated nationwide, he developed a reputation for identifying weaknesses before they became visible to others.

When funding didn't follow, DevLabs didn't wait. They built their own model connecting high-agency builders to startups.

Within the industry, he earned a nickname: **"The Crystal Ball."** It was not branding. It was pattern recognition. Trocola worked on compliance innovations that protected billions of dollars in contracts, influenced state-level solar legislation including **Nevada's SB293** and helped develop one of the earliest AI-driven call center systems capable of replacing entire call centers while handling PII and KYC requirements.

Fox and CBS later dubbed him "The Solar Coach." National recognition followed. The metrics suggested momentum. But **Trocola** was growing uneasy.

The Warning No One Wanted

By the early 2020s, rapid expansion across the solar sector had exposed structural weaknesses uneven training, and inconsistent consumer protections.

"The house was on fire, and no one wanted to fix the wiring," **Trocola** warned. He spent five years building compliance technologies aimed at addressing those failures. Yet adoption lagged. Growth continued. Standards remained undefined. "You can't enforce a standard you never defined."

When **Trocola** exited **Mentis Technologies** in 2024, it was not because the company was failing. It was because the foundational issues he had been warning about were not being addressed. In the months following his exit, regulatory crackdowns, class action lawsuits, and systemic failures spread across the solar industry mirroring the outcomes he had predicted.

The Interruption That Changed Everything

Trocola's departure from the industry coincided with a far more personal reckoning. "I'm a cancer survivor," **Trocola** states simply. During treatment, he lost 80 pounds of muscle in 90 days. The pace of life slowed dramatically. Business ambitions gave way to survival, family, and faith.

"Matthew 6:19: Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourself treasures in heaven where moths and rust do not destroy and thieves cannot break in and steal."

"We keep what we have by giving it away. Don't worry about the car, the house, or the bank account. It will come. Continue to focus on doing the right thing and helping uplift those around you."

The pause forced clarity. When **Trocola** eventually returned to professional work, it was with a different orientation less focused on scale, more focused on consequence.

When AI Felt Familiar

While developing AI-enabled systems during his **Mentis** years**, Trocola** began to notice a troubling parallel. "I started noticing the gaps between the security of **LLMs** and agents versus what's necessary for actual **SOC2** compliance."

His concern deepened after reviewing the **AI 2027 report.** "It opened my eyes to the potential catastrophes ahead. I spent the rest of that year looking at how the communication between humans and technology is fractured."

What he recognized was not novelty, but repetition. Organizations were deploying AI faster than they understood it. **Shadow AI** was spreading internally, often without governance or consent.

"Most companies were unaware of the amount of shadow AI used in their organization employees using AI without consent and their exposure to data leaks by providing **PII** to the **LLM.**" AI, in **Trocola's** view, was not creating new risk. It was exposing unresolved ones.

In **May 2025,** the risks became visible to the broader market. **Workday** lost **$9.2 billion** in market capitalization in 96 hours after its AI recruiting system was found to discriminate against applicants over 40 and people with disabilities.

"This is going to happen to a lot more businesses who aren't prepared." **Trocola** emphasized that ignorance offers no protection. "The courts don't accept 'I didn't know' as an excuse, or 'there is no guidance. The regulations exist already. AI just exposes your vulnerability to them."

The Lesson That Emerges

What **Trocola** has learned first in solar, then through cancer, and now in AI is that most failures don't happen because leaders don't know what's wrong. They happen because fixing it feels inconvenient while momentum is still working. Responsibility almost always arrives early, when it's uncomfortable, expensive, and easy to postpone. Collapse arrives later, when there are no choices left. His story isn't about predicting what's coming next. It's about choosing to act before you're forced to.

Building With Restraint

Trocola later founded **ARC Defense Systems,** headquartered in Vail, Arizona, with the aim of preventing organizations from repeating the same pattern of delayed responsibility. The company focuses on verifying AI behavior, blocking deepfakes and rogue algorithms, and aligning AI systems with existing regulatory frameworks. But **Trocola** is careful not to frame AI itself as the enemy.

"AI isn't coming. It's here."The challenge, as he sees it, is accountability. "What they don't understand is that your AI is essentially operating as an employee that you are liable for."

When Government Steps Back

Following a **December 11, 2025** executive order targeting state-level AI regulation, **Trocola** fielded a recurring question from business leaders: could compliance efforts be relaxed?

"NO. When the government fails, the market has an opportunity to respond."He rejected the idea that regulatory ambiguity reduces liability, emphasizing that responsibility does not disappear when enforcement lags.

The Scale Ahead

Trocola has repeatedly pointed to the accelerating consequences of unchecked AI deployment. "This is NOT an industry problem. This is a society problem. If you're not using AI, AI is still using you."

Arizona's Role

That perspective shapes where Trocola has chosen to engage now. In early 2026, he will host the **AI Is Eating Your Business Summit** in Phoenix. Arizona, in his view, reflects where this work is happening in practice: universities, applied technology, and builders deploying systems in real environments rather than theorizing about them. The intent is not urgency, but understanding.

"You are taught how AI works, how to be safe, and how to protect yourself, your business, your employees, and your customers. You're going to learn something. There hasn't been answers given, just a lot of 'be afraid.' AI isn't coming. It's here."

WHERE ARIZONA'S BUILDERS ACTUALLY MEET

How a student-led community is closing the gap between talent and startups

Arizona didn't lack talent. It lacked a place where builders could collide.On a Saturday morning, that gap briefly disappeared.

Students, founders, and venture capitalists sat at the same tables not for a demo day or a panel, but to work. No stages. No schedules. No hierarchy. Just laptops open and conversations moving faster than introductions. This wasn't a program. It was a signal.

How Builders Actually Emerge

Dhanush didn't arrive at college with a startup roadmap. During the COVID lockdowns in high school, he did what builders tend to do when boredom meets curiosity: he opened Google and typed how to build a mobile app.

That search led him to **Flutter,** and led him to shipping small apps. Shipping led to freelance work. Freelance work led to hackathons, internships, and eventually a role at **Cloudflare** during his first year of college.

There was no accelerator in this story. No formal permission granted. Just momentum.

When funding didn't follow, DevLabs didn't wait. They built their own model connecting high-agency builders to startups.

When he arrived at **Arizona State University,** building was already instinctive. What wasn't obvious yet was that others felt the same pull and had nowhere to direct it.

The Gap No One Was Addressing

Tech clubs existed on campus. Information was available. Workshops were plentiful. But something essential was missing: urgency.

Students didn't need more introductions to **GitHub.** They needed rooms where building was the default behavior. So **DevLabs** began not as a mission-driven organization, but as an experiment: what happens if we create a place where builders simply show up and work together?

Founders & Builders

When an Idea Became Proof

The turning point came with an idea that, on paper, shouldn't have worked. A hacker house. In **Arizona.** Run by students. No funding secured. No institutional backing. Two weeks before launch, it nearly collapsed.Then one email landed. A meeting followed. A space opened. Support appeared. Within days, **Arizona's first student-led hacker house** was live.

What changed next couldn't be undone. Builders stayed late. Conversations continued after the event. Founders hired from the room. Venture relationships persisted. Trust formed across silos that rarely touched. **DevHouse** wasn't an event. It was evidence.

Builders Are Defined by Choice

DevLabs members include interns from **AWS, Waymo**, **NASA, Handshake,** and international space agencies. But what distinguishes them isn't where they could work it's where they choose to work.

One builder turned down a recognized brand offer to join an early-stage startup. Another left a safer role, betting that ownership and agency mattered more than stability. These weren't résumé moves. They were conviction moves.

Founders noticed. Again and again, the same problem surfaced across **Arizona's** startup community: hiring wasn't about skill gaps it was about finding people who treated the company like their own. **DevLabs** didn't set out to solve that problem. It became the filter naturally.

DevLabs launched its first hacker house, DevHouse. Arizona's first student-led hacker house.

Funding Without Waiting

Despite its momentum, **DevLabs** struggled to secure traditional sponsorships. The disconnect was clear: many talked about supporting the ecosystem; few were willing to fund the people actively building it. Rather than wait, **DevLabs** adapted.

They began connecting high-agency builders directly with startups that needed them functioning as a trust-based referral layer rather than a job board. Any revenue was reinvested into the community. No equity extracted. No personal upside taken. They learned early that waiting for permission slows builders.

What This Signals for Arizona

DevLabs is not the story. It's the pattern. **Arizona's** next generation of founders isn't waiting for institutions to validate them. They're creating gravity on their own and the ecosystem responds when given proximity and trust.

This is the kind of emergence **Silicon Oasis** exists to document. Because the next breakout companies won't come from louder programs. They'll come from quieter rooms where builders are allowed to work.

Featured Article

WHAT HOLDS AFTER THE BUILDER LEAVES

After stepping away from Grand Canyon University, Robert Vera reflects on execution, education, and Arizona's next phase.

In December, **Robert Vera** announced that he was stepping away from **Grand Canyon University**, closing a chapter that had defined much of his work over the past several years. The decision was quickly noted across Arizona's business and innovation circles and covered by other publications, marking the end of his tenure as Founding Director of the **Canyon Ventures Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship**. What received less attention was why the timing mattered.

By the time **Vera** made the announcement, the work at **Canyon Ventures** was no longer unproven. Companies were being built. Students were learning inside operating businesses rather than simulations. Outcomes—exits, jobs, traction—were established, not aspirational.

For **Vera**, that distinction is critical. Systems that are still forming need builders inside them. Systems that hold raise a different question: whether they can continue without their architect at the center.

As Founding Director of Canyon Ventures, Robert Vera helped create an environment where entrepreneurship was treated as a discipline of execution

That way of thinking less about position, more about structure has shaped **Vera's** career across government, corporate finance, startups, higher education, and venture capital. In each environment, the pattern has been consistent. Ideas are plentiful. The constraint is whether the systems around them can withstand pressure, growth, and consequence.

Where Knowledge Met Reality

As Founding Director of **Canyon Ventures**, **Vera** helped design an environment that treated entrepreneurship not as an academic concept, but as an applied discipline.

Under his leadership, the center worked alongside student and community founders to accelerate more than **40 startups and guide seven companies to exits in the Phoenix metro market, collectively valued at over $200 million.** But the distinguishing feature of the model was not scale it was exposure.

Students were not observing from the edges. They were embedded in operating companies. Founders were not protected from friction. They were expected to hire, price, sell, and adjust in real time.

"This is where knowledge goes to work," **Vera** often told students. "If learning never leaves the classroom, it fails both the student and the company."

That philosophy extended beyond GCU. **Vera** taught entrepreneurship internationally at the **University of Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia**, and through a **City of Peoria community program,** applying the same expectations everywhere: reduce abstraction, increase application, and make outcomes visible.

By the time he stepped away in December, the model itself was no longer in question. It had proven durable. What remained uncertain and more interesting was how that kind of execution-first thinking could operate beyond a single institution.

Under his leadership, Canyon Ventures helped accelerate 40+ startups and guide seven to exits in Phoenix.

Leaving something that was working was not without friction. But Vera has seen enough organizations stall by clinging to familiar structures past their usefulness. Staying too long can be as limiting as leaving too early.

Why Execution Became the Filter

Spend time listening to **Vera** work with founders and one thing becomes clear: he rarely starts with vision. "I don't care about your solution," he tells them. "I care about the problem." It is not contrarian for effect. It is observational. Over time, he has seen momentum stall in the same places early traction mistaken for product-market fit, customization confused with scalability, confidence rising just as systems begin to strain.
In one example he described, a founder built a promising software product and secured early customers through hands-on customization. Revenue followed quickly. So did the assumption that the company was ready to scale. When demand increased, every new customer required manual intervention.

Margins compressed. Growth slowed. Months were spent rebuilding infrastructure that should have existed from the start.

Scale, **Vera** has observed, does not reward effort. It reveals structure. “There’s nothing wrong with building a lifestyle business,” he says. “But building something that scales is a different discipline. You have to decide which game you’re playing.”

That distinction became the foundation for **Founders Forum**, a hands-on program **Vera** created to give early-stage entrepreneurs practical frameworks around pricing, capital, systems, and tradeoffs before the market enforced those lessons. The goal was never inspiration. It was survivability.

Arizona, Seen Without the Noise

Vera’s view of Arizona’s startup ecosystem is shaped by timing. When he first arrived, the state was heavily concentrated in real estate. When the market collapsed in 2008, Arizona felt the effects more acutely than most. There was no manufacturing base to absorb the shock. No technology layer to soften the downturn. The vulnerability was structural. What followed was not a rebound, but a rebuild.

Manufacturing came first. Semiconductor investment followed. Services and technology layered on top. Over the years that followed, **Arizona** developed a more resilient economic foundation one less dependent on a single industry or cycle.

By creating Founders Forum, Robert gave early-stage founders practical frameworks before the market enforced them with one aim: survivability.

That history explains why the ecosystem can feel difficult to read from the outside. “Emerging ecosystems are jazz,” **Vera** says. “There are quartets everywhere founders, funds, programs, universities all doing real work independently. At some point, you reach critical mass, and that’s when it starts to sound like an orchestra.”

Some prefer louder, faster ecosystems, where activity is concentrated and immediately visible. Arizona operates differently. Activity is distributed across **Phoenix, Mesa, Scottsdale, Peoria, Flagstaff, and Tucson**. Capital exists, but not in one corridor. Talent moves between institutions rather than clustering inside a single one. What can look like fragmentation is often density.

Capital Follows People. Talent Determines Staying Power.

One of the most common frustrations **Vera** hears from founders is that **Arizona** lacks capital. From his vantage point, that diagnosis is usually incomplete.

"Capital doesn't arrive before founders," he says. "It follows them."

In ecosystems that mature, exits create limited partners. Limited partners seed local venture funds. Those funds reinvest in the next generation of companies. By that measure, **Arizona** has entered a different phase.

The friction point is not scarcity. It is literacy. Founders pitch the wrong funds. They misunderstand investment theses. Rejection is interpreted as absence rather than misalignment.

Even so, capital is not what ultimately determines whether companies stay. "Talent," **Vera** says, without hesitation. "Companies don't leave because they can't raise. They leave because they can't hire people who can operate in ambiguity."

That belief underpins his insistence that education function as economic infrastructure. Students gain leverage when they graduate with real operating experience. Companies gain leverage when talent is deployable. Ecosystems stabilize when learning and labor move together.

From Institution Builder to Ecosystem Signal

Today, **Vera's** work is no longer anchored to a single campus and that is intentional. He continues to teach selectively, mentor founders, advise operators, and support early-stage companies as a partner at **Flagstaff Ventures.**

He continues to teach selectively, mentor founders, and advise operators supporting early-stage companies as a partner at Flagstaff Ventures.

His focus has shifted from building standalone programs to strengthening the connective tissue between systems that already exist founders, universities, capital, and operators working in parallel, but not always in coordination.

That shift mirrors where **Arizona** now stands. The state no longer needs to prove it has builders, capital, or infrastructure. What remains is alignment clearer pathways, visible resources, and shared understanding of how the pieces fit together."At some point," **Vera** says, "you need a conductor. Not to control the music but to help everyone play from the same book."

Vera has moved beyond building institutions. What matters now is whether the systems in place can hold as volume increases and whether the people inside them are ready to move together when it does.

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Privv

Ryan Moorehouse
Ruck

Christopher Trocola
ARC Defense Systems

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Kyle DeSousa
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