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## Startup Battle Returns to the Virgin Islands With \$100,000 Pitch Competition

Applications are now open for the return of Startup Battle USVI, a live pitch competition offering \$100,000 in investment capital to early-stage founders and UVI student entrepreneurs, with finalists pitching live in St. Thomas this March.

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St. Croix brothers Khalid and Zayd Saleem, center left, founders of Boomerang Eats, won the Startup Battle competition in 2022. By. RTPARK.

Applications are now open for the return of Startup Battle USVI, a live pitch competition that will award \$100,000 in total investment capital to early-stage founders and University of the Virgin Islands student entrepreneurs, culminating in a final event on St. Thomas this March.

The 2026 competition, announced by the UVI Research & Technology Park, is being produced in partnership with RTPark client Southern Equity, the UVI Research & Technology Park (UVI RTPark), and the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI). The program is open to founders building tech-enabled businesses in the territory and is designed to support companies at the idea, prototype, or early-revenue stages.

Startup Battle is a curated pitch competition that brings together entrepreneurs, mentors, and investors with the goal of accelerating early-stage company growth. Throughout the program, selected participants work with experienced mentors to refine their ideas, strengthen their storytelling, and prepare to pitch to active investors, with a focus on the fundamentals of early-stage company building. The competition is open to all early-stage founders in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The program will culminate in a live “Final Battle”, where five finalists will present their companies before a panel of judges and a live audience. This year’s \$100,000 investment pool includes \$80,000 for U.S. Virgin Islands–based early-stage startups and \$20,000 dedicated to UVI student-led startups, a structure organizers say reinforces the program’s commitment to strengthening the local innovation pipeline.

Startup Battle’s return builds on its broader mission to support founders in emerging and underrepresented ecosystems by connecting them with capital, mentorship, and national investor networks.

“Building something from nothing is hard—with or without help,” said Allen Nance, founder of Southern Equity. “Startup Battle exists to increase the odds for founders by giving them access to feedback, capital, and relationships that can materially change the trajectory of a company.”

For the UVI Research & Technology Park, the program reflects what it describes as the power of client-driven investment to generate measurable impact while strengthening the territory’s broader innovation ecosystem.

“Our clients are more than companies operating in the Virgin Islands—they are true partners in building our innovation ecosystem. Through their investment and commitment, they help fund and fuel our community advancement initiatives, expand workforce opportunities, and strengthen the pipeline for local entrepreneurs. We’re especially grateful for partners like Southern Equity, whose \$100,000 investment reflects a shared focus on empowering founders in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Bringing Startup Battle back underscores what’s possible when private capital, mentorship, and local talent come together to support innovation at every stage,” said Eric Sonnier, Executive Director of the UVI RTPark.

A central feature of the 2026 competition is a dedicated track for University of the Virgin Islands students, highlighting a shared emphasis on expanding pathways for student-led innovation.

“This student track reflects our commitment to putting students first. Through our collaboration with the Research & Technology Park and its clients, we’re creating opportunities that encourage creativity, bold thinking, and real-world problem solving. We’re investing in the next generation of innovators—students who are developing their skills here at UVI and learning to take risks, think boldly, and build solutions for the future,” said Dr. Safiya George, President of the University of the Virgin Islands.

Organizers also pointed to the impact of previous Startup Battle competitions in the territory. The first Startup Battle winner, Boomerang Eats, competed against four other finalists selected from

dozens of applicants and secured a \$100,000 investment. Founded on St. Croix by brothers Khalid Saleem and Zayd Saleem, Boomerang Eats launched as a locally built food delivery app and job creator within the Virgin Islands' growing gig economy. Four years later, the company has expanded operations from St. Croix to St. Thomas, demonstrating how targeted capital and mentorship can support sustained growth and economic impact.

This year's program will begin with a Mentor Pitch Day on March 5, where selected startups will receive structured feedback to further refine their pitches and business models. The competition will conclude with the Final Battle on March 26, hosted live at the UVI Elridge Blake Sports and Fitness Center in St. Thomas.

Applications are open through February 12 to founders building tech-enabled startups with operations in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Individuals and teams in the idea, prototype, or early-revenue stages are eligible to apply. A separate, dedicated track is available specifically for UVI student founders.

Additional information and application details are available through the UVI Research & Technology Park.

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