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Record-Breaking Startup Battle VI Crowns Two Founders With \$100,000 in Investment

Estate Shield VI founder Steve Lowe and UVI student Keturah Nelson of CTF Consulting emerged as the top winners after Startup Battle VI drew more than 120 applications and awarded a combined \$100,000 in investment Thursday night.

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A night built around entrepreneurship, local talent, and early-stage opportunity ended with two U.S. Virgin Islands founders securing a combined \$100,000 in investment, as Startup Battle VI 2026 returned with record participation and a new student track that expanded the competition's reach.

Held Thursday at the UVI Elridge Blake Sports and Fitness Center on St. Thomas, Startup Battle VI 2026 brought together early-stage and student-led ventures from across the territory for live pitches, networking, and performances by local artists. In partnership with Southern Equity, the UVI Research and Technology Park, and the University of the Virgin Islands, the event awarded \$80,000 to an early-stage startup and \$20,000 to a UVI student-led business.

The top early-stage award went to Steve Lowe, founder of Estate Shield VI, while the student-led investment went to Keturah Nelson, founder of CTF Consulting.

This year's competition drew more than 120 applications, more than four times the number received in the previous Startup Battle. From that pool, 15 semifinalists were selected to pitch to a group of mentors, and six finalists advanced to present live on stage: cpStacks, CTF Consulting, Estate Shield VI, Juju & Cece's Lemonades & Treats, MAPPIT, and RePlastic Recycle.



According to the finalists list provided by organizers, Estate Shield VI is described as a tech-enabled company focused on holistic estate planning for Virgin Islands families. CTF Consulting is described as an environmental consulting and waste management initiative centered on converting organic waste into fertilizer. Other finalists reflected a wide range of ideas, including agriculture-based food and beverage production, climate and recycling technology, AI-driven trading applications, and GIS mapping and drone-based spatial services.

Allen Nance, founder of Startup Battle, said the event reflects the life-changing role of both education and entrepreneurship.

“Education and entrepreneurship changed my life. As the first person in my family to graduate from high school, starting a business once felt impossible. The USVI is my home, and supporting these two life-changing pillars for others is an honor. It reflects the commitment of a broader community working to expand opportunity for local founders.”

The competition's first dedicated UVI student track was also highlighted as a major step. UVI President Dr. Safiya George said the new category reflects the university's effort to give students direct, practical opportunities to innovate.

“Our students are the driving force behind the University of the Virgin Islands' momentum. The launch of a dedicated student track in Startup Battle demonstrates our commitment to creating bold, hands-on opportunities that challenge our students to innovate and lead. I am incredibly

proud of our finalists for representing UVI with excellence, creativity, and determination, and I warmly congratulate this year's winners on this significant accomplishment. Through the strong partnership of UVI RTPark, its clients, and Southern Equity, our students are gaining transformative entrepreneurial experiences. This is GRAND Momentum in action — unlocking potential and shaping the future leaders of the Virgin Islands.”

The live pitch event was paired with performances by Pumpa and Kruziano, adding entertainment to the program and linking business innovation with local culture.

Eric Sonnier, executive director of the UVI Research and Technology Park, said the competition reflects the kind of ecosystem RTPark is trying to build.

“Startup Battle reflects the kind of ecosystem we’re working to build where investment, mentorship, and opportunity are connected in a real way. Events and initiatives like this don’t happen without the support of our clients, and we’re grateful to Southern Equity for entrusting us to help bring this back and build on it. The founders on that stage have taken a meaningful step by putting themselves out there, and that deserves recognition. We want to congratulate this year’s winners because earning investment at this level is significant. We’re proud to see both early-stage founders and UVI students stepping into this space.”

For Estate Shield VI, the award was framed as support for a broader effort to address longstanding financial vulnerability in the territory. Lowe said the company’s work centers on helping families protect assets and avoid difficult probate outcomes.

“Startup Battle was an inspirational night surrounded by such innovative, driven doers and support by our neighbors and community stakeholders. Spaces and opportunities like this are exactly what we need more of to continuously elevate our territory.” He added, “this critical investment will help us reach more Virgin Islands families with affordable estate and financial planning solutions that protect their loved ones, assets, and legacy while helping them avoid the probate nightmares that have plagued our territory for far too long. This is a community fight to break the cycle of poverty and financial vulnerability, and I sincerely thank the UVI RTPark for partnering with us in the fight.”

Nelson, a senior at the University of the Virgin Islands and founder of CTF Consulting, said the competition’s first-ever student investment was deeply meaningful to her.

“This entire experience has been an encouragement; every step of the way magnified my confidence, confirming what I see can become tangible. Winning Startup Battle means everything for this business. The RTPark supported that vision in a way that was so wholesome, and I thank God that the RTPark exists in this way.”

Organizers said Startup Battle 2026 underscored the importance of giving Virgin Islands founders mentorship, exposure, and access to early-stage capital at a critical point in their development. They described the event as the territory’s premier \$100,000 pitch competition and said this was the second time the competition has been held in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Startup Battle is described by organizers as a platform created to spotlight early-stage and student-led startups while connecting the territory’s startup ecosystem with investors and industry leaders. RTPark, for its part, described its broader mission as building a resilient, innovation-driven economy in the Virgin Islands through business incentives, strategic partnerships, clean energy investment, and STEM, entrepreneurship, and workforce development programs.

