

**For Start Up Daily**

## **Breaking Barriers and Building Futures: Australia's First Pride Pitch Night Shines Spotlight on LGBTIQ+ Innovation**

**By Veronica Mason, VRM Performance Coaching**

The first Pride Pitch Night dedicated to LGBTIQ+ founders in the Southern Hemisphere was a fantastic celebration of diversity, inclusion, and innovation, showcasing the untapped potential within Sydney's LGBTIQ+ entrepreneurial community with an estimated 75 per cent of LGBTIQ+ founders not comfortable disclosing their identity.

This is concerning not just for LGBTIQ+ entrepreneurs seeking funding but for its current and future impact on the viability of business ownership in the queer community. Business ownership is an empowering opportunity to create a life on your terms and in promoting and supporting businesses through platforms like Pride Pitch Night we are showcasing opportunities and possible futures for our community.

Duncan Orchard, winner of the Judges' Award for his startup, The Gay Agenda, a platform to consolidate LGBTIQ+ events in cities, encapsulated the essence of the night: "The Pride Pitch night was an eye-opening introduction into Sydney's dynamic, talented, and inclusive start-up community." His reflections not only highlighted the success of the event but also the crucial support system that we aim to provide for individuals like him, navigating the complex journey of entrepreneurship as a member of the LGBTIQ+ community.

Mentwell, a digital gift card for health and wellness services where the receiver gets to choose how they redeem, took home the People's Choice award. Mentwell's founder, Nikki Williams spoke of the night: "The event was an outright success in every meaning of the term. The room was filled with attentive supporters of the LGBTQAI+ community but also with those who were just interested in supporting the startup community." She articulated the nuanced challenges of being an LGBTIQ+ entrepreneur seeking funding in a fragmented investment landscape, underscoring the importance of events like Pride Pitch Night in amplifying queer voices and ventures.

Some new businesses were launched on the night, including Hank Paul's TheyConnect. On the event, Hank said: "As a genderqueer person, having the opportunity to pitch TheyConnect in an inclusive environment aligns with what our startup represents: helping people feel safe, seen, and celebrated for who they are".

The judging panel consisted of James Alexander, co-founder of Galileo Ventures, Elizabeth Kaelin, top rated Mentor in Australia and Principal at Mums & Co, and Jarrod Lomas, President of Sydney Gay and Lesbian Business Association. The judges echoed the sentiments of support that defined the evening. Lomas celebrated the diverse range of talent and ideas presented, while Kaelin remarked on the profound sense of inclusivity and empowerment she felt whilst judging.

"The inaugural Pride Pitch was a huge success and I can't wait to see how this event grows in the coming years! The fact that this was the first pride pitch night in Australia shows how badly we need more inclusive startup events," said James Alexander.

The Pride Pitch Night was also a fundraiser for the Pinnacle Foundation with over \$950 raised for the LGBTIQ+ education charity that provides mentoring and scholarships to young, disadvantaged youth.

The Pride Pitch Night did more than just showcase the entrepreneurial spirit of the LGBTQIA+ community; it ignited a conversation about the importance of representation, support, and opportunity in the startup ecosystem. By bringing together queer founders, allies, and industry leaders, we created a microcosm of the society we envision: one where the LGBTQIA+ community is not only accepted but celebrated for their contributions to innovation and culture.

The next steps for me include creating a directory of LGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs, business owners, community members, and allies. Anyone interested in supporting LGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs and business owners, or who is a LGBTQIA+ business owner themselves, are encouraged to get in touch with me at [veronica@vrmfuturesco.com](mailto:veronica@vrmfuturesco.com).

**Photos below:**



Organiser, Veronica Mason, High-Performance Coach and Speaker







Judges (Left to Right): Jarrod Lomas, Elizabeth Kaelin and James Alexander



Judge's Choice winner, Duncan Orchard, pitching his startup 'The Gay Agenda'