



## EDUCATION

# This inventor's life-saving idea needed nurturing. Miami Dade College did it.

BY REBECCA ELLIS  
*rellis@miamiherald.com*

August 01, 2018 11:18 AM

Updated August 01, 2018 10:29 PM

Growing up, Brizeyda Constantiny wouldn't touch an instruction manual.

She preferred to fix burned-out televisions and cassette players by touch, determining for herself which wires went where.

Constantiny wanted to invent. But her parents, who migrated from Nicaragua in 1979, depended on their daughter for a steady income. The stop-and-start salary of an aspiring entrepreneur not going to cut it. Constantiny eventually went to school for supervision in management.

Privacy - Terms

Still, after hours, Constantiny kept sketching prototypes and watching “Shark Tank.”

---

## Breaking News

Be the first to know when big news breaks

Enter Email Address

SIGN UP

---

In her home in Kendall, she says, “they see me like a crazy woman.”

“When there’s a problem, my head starts pumping.”

In 2009, Constantiny turned on the news and saw a problem all too familiar to South Florida. A baby had died of heat stroke after the mother left the baby in the car on a grueling summer day. Only this time, the face on her screen was a familiar one — her dog’s vet.

It didn’t make sense that the same responsible veterinarian who had cared for her ailing terrier could have forgotten a baby in the backseat.

She feared “it could happen to anyone,” just like car crashes and fender benders. So why, she wondered, were cars programmed to alert drivers when they veer and forget their key, but not when a 6-month-old remains buckled in the backseat of a parked car?

She sketched a prototype — a Volkswagen Beetle with a boxy weight sensor embedded in each seat. If the driver turned off the engine while a child remained in the back, the box would screech, “Baby still on board.”

Eager to get her creation on the market, Constantiny found herself scammed out of \$1,000 by a company that offered to assist her with a patent. She hit the same roadblock she always did.

“The disadvantage I always had? Money,” she says. “Money is what makes your dream come.”

A few years later, an email appeared in her inbox. Her alma mater, Miami Dade College, was offering prize money to students or recent alumni with a solution for a problem plaguing the county. Constantiny submitted a video showcasing her idea with a homemade clip of three frantic Barbies forgetting their child in a hot pink buggy.



**Brizeyda Constantiny**  
Miami Dade College

---

It was a hit. “Baby Still on Board” received a \$5,000 check at an award ceremony in July.

The unexpected win has made Constantiny’s product tangible, lifting the design off the paper and catapulting it toward a legitimate patent. Now, backed by MDC, the 50-year old assistant at the college’s International Student Services says she has begun to see herself fully as “an inventor and an entrepreneur,” one ready to “get my feet into the business world.”

“This is giving me the incentive that my idea counts,” she says. “It makes you think that you’re valuable.”

If not for Miami Dade, she says, “I would not even have tried.”



Students watch the winners of Miami Dade College's Innovation Prize. Brizeyda Constantiny won \$5,000 for "Baby Still on Board."

Liliana Mora - Miami Dade College

Constantiny is one of thousands whose entrepreneurial spirit has been kindled by South Florida's community colleges, which are increasingly providing residents an "in" to a tech world dominated by white, usually wealthy, males.

In the past few years, Broward College and Miami Dade College have nestled entrepreneurship hubs into their sprawling campuses. In 2014, Miami Dade planted the Idea Center on the eighth floor of its newest, shiniest building downtown. Broward followed suit one year later, opening the Innovation Hub on the 11th floor of its center in Fort Lauderdale.

Broward and Miami Dade are hardly the only ones to notice a generation of residents determined to found the next hottest startup. Colleges and universities nationwide now moonlight as tech incubators, channeling funds into erecting glass-laden entrepreneurship centers.

But directors of both the Innovation Hub and the Idea Center say community colleges are molding a much-needed asset in the startup world — diverse innovators.

And the field is desperate for them.

According to a recent study by the Equality of Opportunity Project, your ability to become an inventor in America depends on two things: “excelling in math and science and having a rich family.”

If minorities, women, and those from low-income backgrounds invented at the same rate as white men, the report reads, America’s “innovation rate would quadruple.”

Romi Bhatia, the executive director of Miami Dade’s Idea Center, says tech giants like Apple, Google and Facebook are aware their field lacks diversity and have begun to take Miami Dade more seriously as a pipeline for young talent.

“They’re really going into the community colleges,” Bhatia says, in part because “they saw the demographics that we serve.”

MDC claims to enroll more minority students than any college or university in the U.S., with 73 percent of enrolled students identifying as Hispanic and 15 percent as African American. Two-thirds of MDC students come from low-income families.

By keeping the barrier to entry so low, Bhatia says the Idea Center can recruit these students traditionally barred from the white and wealthy tech world.

For those itching to code but cash-strapped, Bhatia says, “places are limited” in Miami. Comparable organizations can be pricey; an introductory course to web development costs \$4,000 at Wyncode Academy, a Miami-based coding camp. Miami Dade offers a similar course to its students and residents at \$399 and \$599, respectively.

Bhatia says the college is determined to keep supporting any and all entrepreneurs that the county has to offer. “My mandate is to make sure we’re cultivating the local talent here,” says Bhatia. “There’s no entrance exam.”

But he worries that the center’s impact may be siloed downtown, where many of the city’s hottest incubators are clustered alongside the Idea Center.

“Access to technology, access to opportunity shouldn’t be a foregone conclusion just because there’s a new organization downtown,” he says. Overtown, Liberty City and Homestead remain accelerator deserts relative to tech-heavy Wynwood and Brickell.

Doral, too, has been mostly missed by the frenzy, so MDC is expanding CS50X Miami, their introductory computer science course, to its West Campus.

Broward College is similarly looking to expand its entrepreneurship program to bring the county’s innovators out of the woodwork.

“We’re about access,” says Enrique Triay, director of the college’s Innovation Hub. The two accelerators stemming from the center are free — one targeted to any Broward resident with a high-school degree; the other, to any degree-seeking student.



Recent graduates from Broward College's Startup NOW Accelerator. The program is available to any Broward resident with a high school degree.

Enrique Triay

Even with these free programs, though, cost can remain a barrier for the young entrepreneurs looking to make their “Gatorade for dogs” and “Alibabas for Latin America” marketable.

“Many of them don’t have transportation,” says Triay, and therefore struggle to get to the hub for weekly meetings where they’re taught to woo CEOs and plot prototypes. He says the program is looking to expand one of its accelerators to Davie’s Central Campus near residential areas where students live.

Even if physical access becomes easier, carving out time for entrepreneurship remains a stumbling block for Broward’s students. This year’s batch were juggling jobs as real-estate agents, property managers, photographers and nurses.

Yet Triay says it is this determination that makes his students so prepared for the fast-paced world of startups.

Students at Broward “have more of a fighter spirit in them,” he says. “They know how to hustle and how to provide value.”

“That’s what you want if you are a startup.”

President David Jackson says his students — one-third of whom were born outside the United States — “are seeking the American Dream with passion.”

“They have grit, he says. “They have persistence.”

The 30 percent of students who make it through Triay’s accelerator, which he describes as “ ‘Survivor’ meets ‘Shark Tank,’ ” are the hustlers within the college’s larger pool of hustlers. Triay calls them “the hard-cores.”

Two months into the program, Tangy Frederick hopes to be one such hard-core.

Interested in cybersecurity, Frederick had first turned to a pricier four-year university in Florida. But she said the degree was draining her of cash, so she dropped out after a year and turned to Broward, set on becoming “a hard-core programmer.”

“Just because it’s really inexpensive doesn’t mean the education is horrible,” she says. Rather, Frederick credits community college with providing her with a more practical education than that of a four-year college, one that allowed her to slide seamlessly into the world of startups.

Now, after founding her own software company, Frederick says 95 percent of her hires come from community colleges.

Community college students, she says, are “more practical, more ready to go.” In South Florida, where small and gritty startups are on the rise, Frederick says, “we need people that can just jump in and get started.”





This is a still image from Brizeyda Constantiny's YouTube video depicting her idea for an alarm to alert a motorist to a child who might be forgotten in a car. She won a \$5,000 prize from Miami Dade College for her idea. YouTube

< 1 of 2 >