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# Entrepreneurial Fellowship Winners Create Unity Threads

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — United by their civic-minded entrepreneurial talents and empowered by Illinois Wesleyan University's \$5,000 bi-annual [Entrepreneurial Fellowship](#) grant, Liam Keffer '20 (Evergreen Park, Illinois), Benjamin Sestak '19 (Springfield, Illinois) and Zachary Walsh '20 (Lombard, Illinois) are developing an online specialty clothing store – Unity Threads – which caters to the needs of children with disabilities.

The trio of business administration majors will utilize their monetary award, presented during the spring of 2018, to open a small business bank

account, trademark the company name, purchase materials, create and then market prototypes on their website, and accomplish what seems like hundreds of other small details needed to launch Unity Threads.

"Our goal is to make any child or teen that wears Unity Threads feel no different than the kid sitting next to them," the Unity Threads entrepreneurs explained in their business plan.

Unity Threads is designed to be a "one stop shop" for families who have children with Down syndrome and other disabilities, rather than resorting to expensive tailors or subpar retailers. The entrepreneurs will have the clothing designed to comfortably fit specific body dimensions, while also making the aesthetic appeal of the clothes a top priority. They feel that by offering a hassle-free way for parents to purchase stylish, quality clothes for their children, the children will experience a confidence boost in their everyday lives.

"If nothing else, we hope that our clothes can give these children and their families a sense of confidence and comfort," Sestak said. "We want to make it easier on the families to find clothing that is comfortable, convenient, cost-friendly, and of good quality to last their children for years."

The idea for Unity Threads grew from a conversation between Keffer – who serves as CEO – and a family member who has a child diagnosed with Down syndrome regarding the difficulty of finding suitable clothing for her child. A variety of mentors through Coordinator of Entrepreneurial Activities and Adjunct Instructor of Business Administration Tara Gerstner's entrepreneurship course – such as Dave Breen, CEO of Special Olympics Illinois – have met with the three entrepreneurs and said they see firsthand the need for such a company.





Winners of the Illinois Wesleyan Entrepreneurial Fellowship, (L-R) Zachary Walsh '20, Benjamin Sestak '19 and Liam Keffer '20, founded Unity Threads.

In addition to business planning, project management and other business-related skills that were necessary to bring Unity Threads to where it is today, Sestak – who serves as Chief Operating Officer (COO) – believes that his involvement in the project could not have been possible without an Illinois Wesleyan education.

“Most importantly, the wide variety of knowledge I have gained through my liberal arts education has allowed me to widen my scope on the business,” Sestak said. “Whether it is marketing, economics, writing, finance, or organization of the business, the knowledge I have gained from professors and mentors at IWU has helped me in ways that I could have never imagined.”

Although the group’s initial focus was toward children with Down syndrome, the sensory-friendly and easy-to-manuever clothes can also be comfortably worn by children with other

disabilities as the company develops, including Asperger syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, and Rett syndrome.

To further their mission to improve the lives of disabled children, the entrepreneurs also plan to give customers the option to donate a fraction of their purchase to a charity of their choosing which supports children with certain developmental disabilities.

“It is of utmost importance to put a smile on the kids’ faces, to let them know that we are here thinking of them, and that they deserve to be confident and stylish just as much as anyone else,” Sestak said.

Keffer, Sestak and Walsh collaborated to earn the fifth Entrepreneurial Fellowship award, which was established with funding support from Illinois Wesleyan alum [Marc Talluto '94](#). Previous winners include [David “Nico” Lopez '21](#) for developing a mobile meme game app, [Claudia Richman '19](#) for her lacrosse-themed apparel, [Cameron Loyet '18](#) for launching a company marketing honey-based gourmet chocolate bars, and [Tim Leiser '16](#) for developing an app to help nonprofits track volunteer hours.

Applications for the next round of funding for the Entrepreneurial Fellowship will be available online beginning in the fall: [www.iwu.edu/business/entrepreneurial-fellowship.html](http://www.iwu.edu/business/entrepreneurial-fellowship.html).

*By Rachel McCarthy '21*