



New company in Aberdeen
is improving life for seniors.
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Entrepreneur pursues ambitious goals

Travis Kiefer hopes to go national with latest high-tech venture

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Although he owns the Citizens Building, a six-story commercial landmark in downtown Aberdeen, entrepreneur Travis Kiefer considers investing in real estate essentially a hobby. His real passion is developing technology-based businesses. He thinks big and sets large goals.

The 28-year-old has racked up some impressive achievements since graduating from high school 10 years ago in Groton, which is 20 miles east of Aberdeen. He came from a family of limited means but attended Stanford University on a full-ride scholarship. He wanted to go to the prestigious school, he says, because that's where the founders of Google went.

He knew he wanted a career in technology, but he majored in urban studies at Stanford "to find out what makes humans human." While in California, he experienced his first big success with a software-based business that helped people book tours. He also ran seven marathons on all seven continents to raise money for a charitable venture that engages students in the fight against global poverty.

He returned to South Dakota in 2014 and, with help from the Small Business Development Center, got involved with the Aberdeen business community. Kelly Weaver, regional director of the SBDC, helped Kiefer during the early months of his return by introducing him to other entrepreneurs.

Kiefer and Weaver continue to meet regularly, but now they discuss issues related to Kiefer's latest business venture: Ease, a company that is developing a network of sensors to help improve the lives of seniors in their homes or in residential facilities.

Given the challenges of launching a new technology business on a national scale, it's important to regularly address issues such as progress metrics, financial modeling for growth and the development of systems, Weaver says.

Kiefer first met Weaver when he was in high school and wanted to create an online system to help students apply for scholarships. "I tried doing that my first year out of high school. Overall, it was a failed entrepreneurial endeavor. But I learned a lot," Kiefer says. Weaver says Kiefer is a bright student who probably was ahead of his time.

When he returned to South Dakota, Weaver was one of the first people that Kiefer contacted. “Kelly has been really helpful,” Kiefer says. “She’s great at the ‘how’ part of running a business.”

One of the local business people that Weaver helped Kiefer meet was Nathan Gellhaus, who owns an assisted living center in Aberdeen called Angelhaus. The two men initially were introduced by email. They decided to have lunch. Now they are working together.

Ease is deploying its first computerized sensor system in Angelhaus. “I affectionately refer to our building as Travis’s guinea pig. He’s going to take our environment and digitize it,” Gellhaus says. The system is expected to be operational within a few months.

Kiefer’s mother had experience working in assisted living centers, so he understood some of the challenges in the business. “He very much has a desire to build and create technology that is going to help mankind,” says Gellhaus, who is the vice chair of the Assisted Living Association of South Dakota.

Ease, which has two employees in addition to Kiefer, will install a series of sensors in rooms at Angelhaus to allow staffers and remote family members to check on residents of the facility and identify possible problems. For example, a sensor on a bed might indicate that a person is still in bed after his or her normal rising time. That could prompt a staff member to check on the resident.

There also could be a moisture sensor to indicate if a floor is slippery, for example. One residential unit might have 20 sensors to collect data and help chart a resident’s normal patterns. The information might help identify future problems. To respect privacy, electronic signals rather than cameras are used to monitor conditions and movement within residential rooms. The system also could be deployed in an older person’s house so that other family members could check on their loved one from a distance.

The deployment at Angelhaus is going well, Kiefer says. “It’s pretty early, but they’re happy with the hardware and software we’re putting together for them,” he says. “The idea is to grow it locally, create a success in the region, and then grow it nationally based on the success we have locally.”

Kiefer also is working to energize the entrepreneurial and investor community in Aberdeen. “I’m trying to create an entrepreneurial community in South Dakota that basically parallels Silicon Valley,” he says. “That’s a personal goal.”

About the SBDC

For more information about the South Dakota SBDC and its affiliated offices, see www.sdbusinesshelp.com.

The SBDC has regional offices in Aberdeen, Pierre, Rapid City, Sioux Falls, Watertown and Yankton, and satellite offices in Brookings and Mitchell. Other programs in the SBDC network include South Dakota Manufacturing & Technology Solutions, South Dakota Procurement Technical Assistance Centers, South Dakota International Trade Center, Small Business Innovation Research programs and the Enterprise Institute. The SBDC network is an outreach program of the Beacom School of Business at the University of South Dakota.

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