

THOUGHT LEADERS

STARTUPS

Entrepreneurs follow different blueprints as they build their companies



ALL PHOTOS: JOED VIERA

Liz Tsai, center, of HiOperator and Scott Martin of ThinkTech joined attorneys Nathaniel Lucek and Nicole Tzetzko at a recent Thought Leaders discussion of startups at Hodgson Russ LLP.

BY DAN MINER
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Scott Martin knows he gave up a career of financial comfort and security for something much riskier.

But the 41-year-old couldn't pass up the opportunity to follow his passion and to practice what he had been preaching for years as an educator and coach.

Martin stepped down as principal of Sweet

Home High School last year to concentrate full time on ThinkTech, a startup that builds educational software tools for K-12 teachers.

"I'm a very fiery, competitive person, and some of those things that brought that into my life are now gone," he said. "I'm excited to go out and get after it."

Liz Tsai spent several years at Bay Area corporations in physical commodities before she founded HiOperator.

Tsai, whose background was in engineering and finance, has a passion in the back-end processes that power business throughout the world.

Her first startup was accepted to the Y Combinator accelerator program in 2016, and the process of talking to customers led her to a new understanding about the inefficiency of the customer service industry.

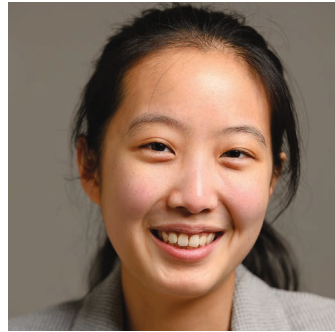
"We said, 'Let's start with building a platform that can automate the back end of customer ser-

with SCOTT MARTIN and LIZ TSAI



“I grew up in an era where you only came downtown when there was a Sabres game or to go to Chippewa (Street) when you were 20. To see the incredible growth the city has made, and the types of things that are coming out of Buffalo, is remarkable. There’s a different kind of belief that there are options that weren’t options and opportunities that weren’t opportunities.”

SCOTT MARTIN, founder and CEO, ThinkTech



“I enjoy taking complex processes and trying to wring efficiency out of them. Customer service, when we really started diving into it, was basically a supply chain. Once we started working on that, we were able to build a startup with a bigger macro vision but also to work on the day-to-day process of making inefficiencies more efficient. That’s what makes me tick.”

LIZ TSAI, CEO, HiOperator

► CLOSER LOOK AT THOUGHT LEADERS

Thought Leaders is an ongoing series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP. Throughout the year, leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists. Excerpts from the conversation are published after the roundtable. Discussions are held in the law firm’s Pearl Street offices in Buffalo.

vice,” Tsai said. “Instead of replacing the human, let’s just augment what they can do. Let’s try to make the human super accurate and super fast.”

She moved her company to Buffalo after winning a \$500,000 award in the 43North business competition in 2018. She hired more than 50 employees locally last year.

Tsai and Martin spoke about their entrepreneurial journeys at a Business First discussion Jan. 23 at sponsor Hodgson Russ LLP’s headquarters in Buffalo.

Hodgson Russ partners Nicole Tzetzko and Nathaniel Lucek, both of whom serve as judges in the 43North competition, participated in the discussion.

Tsai and Martin are examples of how a wave of entrepreneurship in Buffalo – supported by grassroots groups, private-sector businesses and government programs – has attracted and created company founders.

Would Tsai, a Texas native and graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or Martin, who was quickly rising the local ranks of K-12 adminis-



Attorney Nicole Tzetzko says leadership and investor support are key ingredients to a successful startup.

trators, have become Buffalo-based entrepreneurs in the past?

“More people are coming here,” Tzetzko said. “They find it welcoming not just from a community standpoint but from a business standpoint, as well. There is a lot of money to be deployed and a lot of people looking for investment opportunities.”

Both companies have exciting futures. With the support of Helm Experience and Design in Buffalo, ThinkTech has spent years developing learning tools and testing them in the classroom.

Martin said ThinkTech is finalizing a partnership with Erie 1 BOCES that will open up school district sales throughout the state and plans to put a concerted effort behind sales and marketing this year.

“We are in great shape and I feel very confident,” he said. “Our sales goals for 2020 are lofty.”

Tsai said HiOperator has spent the last year maturing and now plans to redouble growth efforts.

“The past year we learned a lot about Buffalo and what we’ll look like as we grow,” she said. “2020 is about taking that and scaling it up even more.”

► HODGSON’S TAKE



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NICOLE TZETZKO, partner, Hodgson Russ LLP



“One of the nice things as Buffalo’s startup community grows is that the community feeling is still part of it.”

NATHANIEL LUCEK, partner, Hodgson Russ LLP