

# CRAIN'S

## NEW YORK BUSINESS

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### SPOTLIGHT on WESTCHESTER

## In Westchester, an innovative way to inspire innovation

At ShelterZoom, founders Chao Cheng-Shorland and Allen Alishahi have spent the past six years using blockchain technology to birth what Alishahi calls "truly a new species" of documents for negotiations and contracts and digital preservation.

"From Mesopotamia when people would write on clay tablets, through papyrus and paper and PDFs, there were no innovations in the document, which is fundamental for humans," Alishahi says. "The surface area changed, but it never developed intelligence. We created a new type of contract for the entire journey from kitchen table to closing table, an intelligent document that can be interconnected, trackable transferable, and traceable. With our document GPS, you have total control over attachments and documents. You can send something and take it back."

Impressed by their product, Luiz Aragon asked the New York City-based residents to come to Westchester County and share it for free. This was more appealing than it might have sounded: Aragon is the project manager for the Westchester Innovation Network, a Business Council of Westchester program.

"We're always about taking the next step in terms of growth and economic development for our community," says Marsha Gordon, the business council's president, "so we began asking what the county of the future will look like. We want to develop a culture of innovation and brand Westchester as a place where innovation thrives. And we decided to be innovative ourselves and focus on innovation in a new way."

Heidi Davidson, who chairs the business council's board, said the council wanted a program to incubate new business ideas and decided to match local companies that were interested in innovation with startups or scaleups with commercially viable products ready to test.

"It's about finding the right synergy," she says.

Aragon says that "adding innovation to the county DNA" has meant reaching beyond Westchester's borders to welcome fresh ideas from all industries, all over the world. WIN began in

December, he says, and it's already working with 12 innovators and 11 companies.

"They would not have come across each other otherwise and are now exchanging ideas and adapting their businesses based on the feedback," the project manager says.

Business council members stopped going to events and trade shows when the pandemic struck, Davidson says, but WIN brings new ideas "to their doorstep and maybe they become customers or investors."

Meanwhile, the program gives the county a chance to demonstrate its appeal—the proximity to New York, the open spaces, the educated workforce—in the hopes that some of the innovators may want to stay after the program ends or set up a U.S. headquarters in Westchester, Davidson says.

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-Heidi Davidson

"It's not required that they move here," she says, "but it doesn't hurt that they'll see how fantastic Westchester is as a place to grow their business."

Growing WIN is the goal, Davidson says, but the program accepts only innovators who are good match.

"We want both sides to be learning," she says.

Cheng-Shorland says that's what appealed to ShelterZoom.

"We like having this relationship with a county that is an innovation hub, and the small and midmarket businesses are a good fit for us," she says. "And we like the community spirit and helping people looking for innovation."

Cheng-Shorland and Alishahi are showing two law firms how their platform can elevate the firms' practices. Cheng-Shorland says she has found that beyond that "sense of achievement," she

and Alishahi are benefiting from working hand in hand with the lawyers, getting feedback on how specifically to improve their product for law firms.

"It's a win-win situation," she says. "We want to educate people so the business world is familiar with the concept of what we are doing, and there's PR value in building a client base, but we're also getting that feedback. Everyone is benefiting."

Alishahi says the WIN program could have a tremendous impact on Westchester County in the long term.

"It's like they're building a smart city," he says, "not in the literal sense but in the way they are attracting innovative and smart companies to the area."



Iona MV BCW officials: L to R—Andrea Haynes, Mount Vernon Director of Economic Development; Christoph Winkler, Director of the Hynes Institute for Entrepreneurship & Innovation; Seamus Carey, President of Iona College; Mount Vernon Mayor Shawyn Patterson Howard; BCW President Marsha Gordon; Rob Kissner, Designer-in-Residence at the Hynes Institute for Entrepreneurship & Innovation. The officials gathered at Iona College on May 2, 2022, to hear student presentations related to the Westchester Innovation Network's community collaboration between Iona College and the City of Mount Vernon.

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Nicholas & Lence Communications highly commends  
the Business Council of Westchester on their  
pioneering WIN program

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We salute all participants, especially:  
Chao Cheng-Shorland and Allen Alishahi  
Co-Founders of ShelterZoom

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