(LUDINGTON, Mich.) -- My Inspired Studio had the winning pitch Wednesday, Aug. 7, inspiring judges at Epworth, a Ludington, Michigan, resort, to choose the startup to earn this year’s Momentum 5x5 prize.

Entrepreneur and artist Sarah Stechschulte was thrilled and grateful to win $5,000 to help with her new idea, offering subscribers a monthly creative kit that will include art supplies plus online instruction.

The funds for this second annual Epworth Momentum 5x5 are from the Epworth Assembly and the Epworth Church Association. Together, they provided the prize money, the venue, hors d’oeuvres and supplied the judges, four Epworth cottagers.

The event is a collaboration with the Ludington and Scottville Area Chamber of Commerce, whose talent and entrepreneur development coordinator, Tom Hinman, works with the presenters and the judges and emcees the show.

“It’s amazing,” Stechschulte said of the win. “I’m really excited to get it started.”

She’ll offer her business through a membership-based website she will create.

“We couldn’t be more thrilled,” said Epworth Assembly General Manager Kim Hamm. “It has been a wonderful experience to be able to encourage entrepreneurs and nonprofits in our community. We congratulate My Inspired Studio but also all our our presenters and everyone who submitted an idea.”

Other entities vying for the prize were:

- **Connexion Point**, an addiction recovery program (Dr. Michelle Kuster)
- **Ludington Development Partners**, offering tax breaks to develop underused properties through Ludington’s Opportunity Zone (Jeff Olmstead)
- **Rx4 Addiction**, a fishing guide service/mentoring program (Stephen Mishler)
- **Q Up!**, sauces and rubs available for fundraising projects through the Q Smokehouse (Dave Diephouse)

Each presenter had five minutes to pitch a new business idea.

The prize money was one focus of the evening, but it was about more than that, including allowing businesses and organizations to share information with a large audience and connecting the Epworth and Ludington-area communities.

“The Epworth Church Association does a lot of good in the area in quiet ways, behind the scenes,” said Heather DeVries, Epworth Church Association coordinator. “This is one
opportunity for us to give in a very open way. We hope it is encouraging to the presenters, to those who heard the presentations and to everyone who learns about the opportunity. It's all part of being a part of our community."

2019 judges were cottagers who spend as much of their summer in Ludington as possible -- Mallory Carr, a national account manager for Virtus Investment Partners who lives in Colleyville, Texas; Jim Moody, a retired federal judge who lives in Little Rock, Arkansas; Dick Strabel, a retired vice president and general manager for Panasonic who lives in Middletown, New Jersey; and Elizabeth Wright, a retired educator and supporter of international relief projects who lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

Moody announced the winner.

“"I was told, as were the other judges, that this was going to be an easy job. It was anything but," Moody said, joking with the crowd. “I want to commend everyone here who made presentations, the time they put into it, the messages they gave. It’s inspiring to all of us. They certainly should be commended.”

He said, sincerely, that the decision was a difficult one, with every presenter having a valid idea.

“We tried to be as objective as we could because they all had worthy projects to offer," Moody said. “We considered the impact on the actual number of people for the limited amount of money ... and we felt My Inspired Studio met the most criteria because they have a proven plan that they are going to involve a number of people in the community to implement the plan.”

Judges listened and then deliberated in a process led by Hinman.

“For these five (entities), just making it here is winning,” Hinman said. “For them to be able to share what they're doing could lead to that next person who is going to invest more than $5,000 in them.”

It was a close decision Wednesday, Hinman said.

In the end, Stechschulte won in part because of her preparation, the presentation and her explanation of how she plans to grow her business.

Stechschulte has had some experience.

She won the biggest prize, $14,000, in the chamber’s 2019 Momentum Business Plan Competition this spring for her business Inspired Parties, an in-person art experience.

It was interesting this year with the 5x5 that two of the entities presenting were related to overcoming addictions.

“Sometimes we get these themes,” Hinman said. “This year it was the opioid addiction issue (as presented by Connexion Point and Rx4 Addiction Charters)."
The 5x5 allows organizations to showcase how they’re working to make a difference, and they have the opportunity to do that in front of a crowd of more than 120 people, a mix of Epworth cottagers and Ludington area residents.

The pitch night featured not only the five presentations and a winner but a community gathering opportunity, mingling, learning and catching up over barbecue, bruschetta, strawberry lemonade and more, with food service by Gloria Ann's Catering.

Ludington Mayor Steve Miller was among the crowd.

"The Momentum 5x5 competition is on my calendar every year," Miller said. “Everything, starting with the gracious Epworth community hosts and the awesome venue (the Epworth Auditorium), to the tremendous benefit the award gives to the small businesses that participate, deserves to be commended. I loved every minute of the evening."

This is Epworth’s second Momentum 5x5. The first, in 2018, was won by Sister Bees, which went on to earn a $50,000 prize during the chamber’s Momentum Business Plan Competition.

Sister Bees’ proprietors Kelly Bonnema, Kim Ambrose and Amber Boerema returned to Epworth during this year’s 5x5 to provide an update on the business. Since last year, the business has grown substantially. Sister Bees locally made beeswax products are now in stores in 40 of the 50 states, with plans for expansion, the women reported.

This year’s Momentum 5x5 $5,000 winner, My Inspired Studio, will also have the opportunity to move on to the next Momentum Business Plan Competition, earning a slot in the top 10 contestants who hope to earn a portion of the $50,000 prize offered through the Pennies from Heaven Foundation. That competition is held in the spring.

More information is available at momentumstartup.org.

About Epworth

The Epworth Assembly was founded in 1894 on the shores of Lake Michigan just north of the city of Ludington. The seasonal resort has evolved over time but continues many of its long-time traditions. This year, Epworth celebrates its 125th anniversary. It is a private resort offering many public events throughout the summer. See more at www.epworthheights.net. The Epworth Church Association was incorporated 50 years ago. See more at http://epworthchurch1894.org/.

About the Momentum Business Plan Competition

Launched in 2015, the Momentum Business Plan Competition awards business entrepreneurs prizes of up to $50,000 for a new or early-stage business in Mason County. Funded by Pennies from Heaven Foundation and administered by the Ludington & Scottville Area Chamber of
Commerce, the competition is open to eligible independent for-profit or non-profit ventures with a viable business idea, plan or invention; or existing organizations or companies with less than $250,000 in sales or revenue annually. The competition was spearheaded by Pennies from Heaven Foundation founder John Wilson, with additional support by Ludington Daily News, Ludington SCORE, Metalworks, West Shore Community College and West Shore Bank. More than $260,000 has been awarded to 12 business applicants over the five years of the competition. momentumstartup.org.