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# How PS27 Ventures Female Founders Forum is changing the conversation for female entrepreneurs



VyStar attendees at the PS27 Female Founders Forum.

PS27

By [Matt Denis](#) – Reporter, Jacksonville Business Journal

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Last week, the PS27 Foundation held its annual celebration of International Women’s Day with its Female Founders Forum.

PS27 is a venture capital firm [that focuses its investment on early-stage technology companies](#). When most of its early clients were men, PS27 leaders realized that they had an opportunity to support female entrepreneurs.

Established nine years ago with only five attendees, the Female Founders Forum is now an all-day event and competition that brings together over 350 women entrepreneurs, business leaders and students there to be inspired by remarkable women presenters and to be wowed by Shark Tank-style pitches.

As the forum grew, another community lender, VyStar, took note. As Florida’s second-largest credit union with 75 branches, more than 925,000 members with assets of over \$13.5 billion, VyStar realized that it could play a large part in helping women to achieve their dreams on International Women’s Day.

In a conversation with the Business Journal, PS27 founder and CEO Jim Stallings and VyStar senior vice president of CDFI and impact lending Heather Horovitz talk about the evolution of the Female Founders Forum and its impact on women’s entrepreneurship.

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

### **How has the event evolved and what are you looking forward to this year?**

Stallings: It started in our office at PS27 in the conference room.

After about a year of investing in companies, we realized there were not a lot of women coming to us, asking for venture capital. So we said, 'How do we solve that?'

The idea really came from some young women in the office, they said, 'Why don't we just invite women to the office and talk about venture capital?' And we did. We offered

lunch and five people showed up. Over lunch and pizza, we were talking about venture capital and how it's different than banking and how it's different than angel investing, etc. And that was really it.

The next year, we did the same thing. and 25 women showed up. We had a nice lunch and a nice speaker, Delores Kessler ([the founder of what became Adecco Group](#)). She talked about her journey as a woman, entrepreneur and founder of a company.

Today, we've got over 350 women here. It's literally standing room only. I don't even have a chair myself.

It's a full day that ends with a shark tank where they compete for \$250,000 investment from our venture capital company.

### **What spurred VyStar's involvement in the event?**

Horovitz: We're really intentional about supporting our members and all of the communities that we serve. This event is another example of how we're living out our values, which is to do good. Our role isn't to solve problems, it's to come alongside the nonprofits and agencies that are really on the ground. This is a way that we can do that and support the PS27 foundation in the great work that they're doing in the community in supporting entrepreneurs.

There isn't equity in the VC that's going to these entrepreneurs, and we're trying to fix that problem. This is a way that we can acknowledge the inequalities and help solve that.

### **What are some of stories that stand out to you?**

Horovitz: It's almost like a leadership day for our ladies who work at VyStar. We send most of our female lending leaders because it's just such a phenomenal event. Of all the conferences that I go to, it really is one of the most impactful.

What I love about this is when successful females are talking about their experiences, we experience this journey differently than our male counterparts. We are typically responsible for more things at home – baseball practice and swim practice, and I gotta' get out of here because I didn't wash the uniforms for the game tomorrow.

I remember early in my career being afraid to talk about being a parent because I thought that might make my leader think that wasn't 100 percent. Everyone here who speaks is just so willing to be vulnerable and acknowledge that these are the things that are on my mind, and I can still thrive. It's so important for people to hear that you can have all of those challenges, you can have parents that you have to care for, and, and kids home sick and and you can still be successful.

Stallings: So many of these women started in their kitchen, started at home, started in front of the computer. It's an enormous amount of freedom you get when you build your own.

And this is hard. So today, you're around a lot of other people that realize it's hard. And you support each other because it's hard. You need support, you cannot do this by yourself. That's why we keep doing it. And I think that's why it gets bigger every single year.

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