America's Seed Fund Road Tour 2024 - Little Rock
Innovator Insights: Arkansas Success Stories
PANELISTS

Noah Asher, Vascugenix (Moderator)
Noah Asher is an experienced entrepreneur with a background in corporate finance, management consulting, and investment banking. He joined Vascugenix in 2018 to help make the Speed Torque® a reality.

Noah's passion for health care entrepreneurship began during his undergraduate studies when he was a staple on the New Venture Business Plan Competition circuit with notable successes including winning the Arkansas Governor's cup twice in a row and a top 10 finish in the prestigious Rice Business Plan Competition as an undergraduate.

Noah previously served as the CFO for another early-stage medical device company and is a graduate of the National Science Foundation's I-Corps program as an entrepreneurial lead.

He holds bachelor's degrees in economics and finance from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock where he was named the Outstanding Graduate in Finance and graduated Summa Cum Laude. Prior to joining Vascugenix, he was involved in equity research for Stephens Inc.

Nhiem Cao, Lapovations
Nhiem Cao has over 10 years of experience in manufacturing, process engineering, and consulting. As an entrepreneur he has raised venture funding and won nearly $900k in grants through the National Science Foundation Small Business Innovation Research program.

Nhiem has successfully led the development and commercialization of novel sustainable wood-based thermoplastic materials. His background is in paper manufacturing, working for International Paper and Packaging Corporation of America. During his time in the paper industry, he evaluated and implemented new technology, designed innovative solutions, developed and led production trials for paper machines, and developed standard operating procedures and metrics to evaluate various processes.

He received a bachelor's in chemical engineering from the University of Arkansas and has a master's in business administration from the university's Sam M. Walton College of Business.

Matt Francis, Ozark Integrated Circuits
Dr. Matt Francis is founder and president/CEO of Ozark Integrated Circuits, Inc.

At Ozark IC, he leads development of high-temperature semiconductor computing solutions for energy, defense, aerospace and space applications. and has served as a remote payload specialist for Ozark IC's payloads on the International Space Station.

Matt is an expert in the scalable design, manufacturing, and assembly of extremely reliable single-board computers. Through R&D funding from NASA, DARPA, the Department of Energy, U.S. Air Force and commercial partners, Ozark IC has demonstrated one of the widest ranges of semiconductor-based solutions for remote sensing and actuation. Under his leadership, Ozark IC has been recognized as a leader in the rugged computing space, evidenced by wins in the MassChallenge accelerator Gold award (2020), the Army XTech Hypersonic Manufacturing

Prize (2nd prize, 2022), and the American Made Geothermal Prizes (Set! and Geophone Prizes, 2021-2023).

Active in the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Dr. Francis serves as a region director, elect (Region 5 USA Southwest), is the IEEE-USA representative to the IEEE Industry Engagement Committee, and is past chair of the IEEE MGA Chapter Operations Support Committee.

Dr. Francis is passionate about entrepreneurship and growing the next generation of scientists and engineers. He is an IEEE STEM Champion, volunteering weekly with his local robotics club. He is an advisor to science-based startups through the Science Venture Studio. In 2022 he was selected as the recipient of the IEEE-USA Entrepreneurship Achievement Award for leadership in Entrepreneurial Spirit for furthering both entrepreneurial growth and spirit in the U.S., as well as his service in mentoring small-businesses in the deep-technology space.

In 2023, he served in multiple roles to help stakeholders engage in the CHIPS+ Act, including serving as an organizer and treasurer for the first IEEE-USA Innovation Research Workforce Conference.

He earned his BSEE ('03), BS Physics ('04), MSEE ('07) and PhD ('09) degrees from the University of Arkansas.

Elizabeth Hood, Green Lab
Dr. Elizabeth Hood is founder and director of research and development at GreenLab, Inc. She has worked in plant biology for more than 40 years, generating 80+ publications and patents. Her groundbreaking work developed the agrobacterial strain EHA101, which is now used globally for gene transfer into plants for crop improvement.

In her work at Pioneer Hi-Bred International and ProdiGene, she developed the first commercialized product from a plant production system and led an internationally recognized transgenic plant research group. Later, she served as a cell biology program director at the National Science Foundation.

Darren Sommer, Innovator Health
As both a practitioner of telemedicine and a technology executive, Dr. Darren Sommer understands the importance of creating telemedicine systems that exceed expectations. With a focus on reliability and simplicity, his vision is to deploy Innovator Health technologies so that all Americans have access to the highest level of care.

He received his Doctor of Osteopathic degree and holds a master’s in public health from Nova Southeastern University’s College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Dr. Sommer also has more than 20 years of military service and two combat deployments in support of the Global War on Terrorism. It was his work in these austere environments that generated his passion for telemedicine. Dr. Sommer went on to earn his Master’s in Business Administration from Duke’s Fuqua School of Business and is a Health Policy Fellow of the American Osteopathic Association.