BUILDING BIG IDEAS

How Northwestern's entrepreneurial ecosystem helped the founders of computer-vision technology startup HaptE find their focus

When Trevor Abbott ('26) arrived at Northwestern, he knew he wanted to build something big. He'd grown up among ambitious thinkers: his father was an adjunct faculty member; his brother, an alum, is CTO of Acorn Genetics, a Northwestern-born startup. So, when Trevor met fellow mechanical engineering student Victoria Israel ('26) at a Wildcat Welcome event, he knew he'd met a kindred spirit.

"I felt a fire inside of me," Israel says. "I wanted to do something beyond school, beyond clubs."

The two were ready to create a business. The only question was which problem to solve.



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Hayes Ferguson
Endowed Director of the Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation

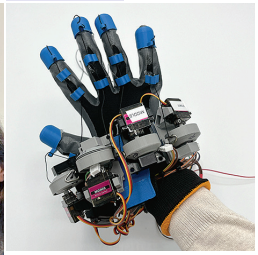
A home for explorers

Entrepreneurial ambition is a common story at Northwestern, according to Hayes Ferguson, endowed director of the Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

"Northwestern increasingly attracts entrepreneurial students who want to explore ideas, take initiative, and learn from experience," Ferguson says. "We see many students like Trevor and Victoria who make thoughtful use of multiple opportunities through the Farley Center, The Garage, and elsewhere in the University's vibrant entrepreneurship ecosystem. It's exciting to see how they continue to build on the foundation they gained at Northwestern throughout their careers."

Northwestern's entrepreneurship ecosystem includes opportunities for students to connect with like-minded founders and mentors and access resources such as incubators, classes, fellowships, and funding. Spread across multiple programs and schools, this ecosystem also enables students from diverse academic areas and backgrounds to plug in at any stage.





Trevor Abbott ('26) and Victoria Israel ('26) created a haptic technology digital sensing glove that first was designed for virtual reality gaming then pivoted to physical therapy applications.

Starting with a haptic glove

Abbott and Israel took full advantage of the ecosystem's offerings. In their second year at Northwestern, they had homed in on their first product idea.

The spark came to Israel early one summer morning when she stumbled on a video essay about how a software update to the virtual reality game *Half-Life: Alyx* might make the game feel dramatically more real through VR gloves.

"I thought, what if you took it further?" Israel says. "What if you created a glove that allowed you to feel things digitally outside of gaming?"

As an international student missing the feeling of hugging her parents or petting her cat back home, the idea felt personal. She pitched the haptic glove idea to Abbott. The two named their startup HaptE, short for haptic electronics, and began prototyping.

They refined their idea during Jumpstart, a 10-week accelerator at The Garage, Northwestern's cocurricular space and community for student entrepreneurs. Early on, they discovered similar haptic gloves already existed in the gaming space, prompting a rethink. After interviewing hundreds of people from various industries, they discovered a new direction.

"There were many problems in the physical therapy space, and a lot of them could be solved by our glove," Israel says.

But they soon hit a wall. Potential physical therapy customers wanted clinical studies proving the glove's therapeutic outcomes, which experts warned could take five to 10 years. As students approaching their third year and hoping to have something to launch by graduation, that timeline was not workable. It was time to look elsewhere.





above HaptE affixes AI-powered cameras and small computers onto forklifts that move across warehouses. HaptE's cameras read labels and track products as they move across a warehouse floor, and the computer alerts warehouse administrators of errors and inventory status in real time. Photo courtesy of Trevor Abbott and Victoria Israel.

right Abbott and McGinley ('28) won the $100,000 grand prize at the 2026 VentureCat, Northwestern's annual student startup competition. Photo by Joel Wintermantle.

Finding a new problem

The answer came through the Northwestern network. The team attended a talk at McCormick given by Tom Wagner, CEO of warehouse robotics company Berkshire Grey. Afterward, the team spoke to him, told him about their device, and asked for advice. When they described their technology, Wagner told them it could be valuable for logistics.

Abbott was hooked. Israel, comparing the timeline in physical therapy with what Wagner described in logistics, saw the opening, too. "That's an interesting tangent we could explore," she said.

The duo spent the following months visiting manufacturing and logistics warehouses. They learned that most manufacturing facilities operate with a certain picking error rate—when workers select the wrong items during fulfillment—which can add up to significant losses in revenue. Confronted with a compelling problem, they turned to the Farley Center and dug in on finding potential solutions.

Zeroing in

During the summer of 2025, Abbott and Israel participated in the Farley Center's Morehead Family Innovator Fellowship, a 10-week, full-time program funded in part by a donation from Jennifer ('00, MBA '08) and Brad Morehead (MBA '05). The program's $6,000 stipend meant the cofounders could spend the summer working on HaptE instead of pausing their efforts to earn income in an unrelated job.

That's the gap the fellowship aims to close. "We hear too often from students who are making progress on a venture that they have to slow down over the summer to get an income-producing job that's not tied to what they really want to do," says Ferguson.

The major value of the fellowship was the dedicated time spent in warehouses conducting customer interviews and the weekly check-ins with Ferguson. She offered feedback, accountability, and connections, including an introduction to Farley Center advisory board member Mark Desky ('88, MS '90). Desky, an early marketer at Groupon, guided the students on messaging development.

During the fellowship, the team had a meeting that would finally define the company's mission. At the Chicago warehouse of Element Bars, a custom energy- and protein-bar company, they pitched company leadership an idea: a camera mounted on a forklift that could watch inventory move across a warehouse floor and catch costly errors in real time.

Their idea was well received, and "that's when modern-day HaptE was born," Abbott says.

Now an optical intelligence technology startup, HaptE uses forklift-mounted custom cameras, computer vision software, and an operational dashboard to track what happens on warehouse floors.

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Victoria Israel '26



The future of HaptE

The HaptE team has continued to evolve. In January 2026, shortly after Israel moved on to another opportunity, Quinn McGinley ('28), a rising third-year mechanical engineering student, met Abbott and joined HaptE as COO.

McGinley says Abbott's approach to HaptE aligns with his values. "The way Trevor thinks about this industry clicked for me. He spent so much time in warehouses absorbing as much as possible from that customer base. It told me this is a founder who really cares about deeply understanding the problem he is working on."

With McGinley on board, the HaptE team took advantage of yet another Northwestern opportunity and won the $100,000 grand prize at the 2026 VentureCat, Northwestern's annual student startup competition. The nondilutive money, Abbott says, means HaptE can keep building without giving away equity, a marked advantage over the typical venture capital route. As they look toward the future, the HaptE team aims to expand nationally, adapt their technology to warehouses of various sizes and types, and grow their team.

Help from the Northwestern network "has allowed the company to spread its wings," says Abbott. "That's what happens when a Northwestern Wildcat takes advantage of what the school has to offer."

"The one word I would use to describe Northwestern is support," Israel says. "It was always there for us, and I know that it's still there for us today."

ERICA MASINI



Photo by Jason Brown

THE POWER OF NUVENTION

Many Northwestern student startups begin in Farley Center NUvention courses. In class, interdisciplinary student teams work through the full startup lifecycle—from ideation, customer discovery, and business modeling to final pitches—with support from industry experts and faculty. Here are two notable recent examples.

HydroFlo

The idea A smart catheter technology to monitor shunt flow and detect shunt failure in hydrocephalus, a chronic neurological condition

The origins This startup began as a class project in NUvention: Medical, led by faculty from McCormick, the Kellogg School of Management, and the Feinberg School of Medicine.

The evolution Cofounders Rishi Garg (McCormick '27), Viet Tong (McCormick '27), and Eva Poliakova (Weinberg '27) enrolled in NUvention: Launch for another 10 weeks of development, mentored by Professor Lilli Zakarija, a medical device company founder. Simultaneously, the team incubated at The Garage and entered VentureCat in 2026, where they took second overall and first place in the competition's Life Sciences and Medical Innovations track, earning $50,000.

Restless

The idea An energy drink aimed at military members and first responders

The origins Founder Daniel Medina (MBA '27), a Marine Corps veteran, arrived at Kellogg already building the company. Drawn to Northwestern's founder community, he enrolled in the Jumpstart program at The Garage with his partner, economics student Jack Easterby ('28).

The evolution Medina took NUvention: Launch, which he credits with helping the team narrow their audience from "everyone who works hard" to a more specific customer segment. The team won first place at Jumpstart Demo Day and the 2026 VentureCat third-place prize of $25,000 along with the Audience Favorite Award of $5,000. Easterby, now Restless's vice president of marketing, also participated in the 2026 Morehead Family Innovator Fellowship.