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Syracuse startup develops fashionable technology that may save pedestrians' lives

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SYRACUSE — Exercising outside in the dark can be a safety hazard for pedestrians because drivers can't see them, especially if they're wearing dark clothing. A fledgling local business called EB Active may have a solution.

EB Active, an activewear company based in Syracuse, recently sent its first product prototype — a jacket with LED lights — to be developed by a manufacturer in China.

The jacket is designed for runners, cyclists, and pedestrians who exercise in the morning and late at night, according to the EB Active website. Each jacket has two LED wires, called EL wires, that are placed on the front and back. Customers will be able to charge jackets with a USB cord so the lights stay on for six hours. The jacket also has reflective ink for more visibility.

The jacket's body shape was designed to accentuate "a woman's curves and a man's tough lines," Mare Gomez-Bolaños, 29, EB Active's fashion designer, says.

The company has been working on the prototype since May but did not get it developed because it wanted to be certain that it was well done, Gabriela Escalante, 28, EB Active's CEO, owner, and co-founder, says.

In 2011, Escalante started the business Electro-Beats Apparel and sold T-shirts embedded with LED lights imported from China in her native El Salvador. In 2014, she stopped selling the shirts while she was pursuing a bachelor's degree in marketing and entrepreneurship at the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University. She expects to graduate in May.

Escalante and a co-founder who is no longer with the venture decided to start selling activewear. The idea for the LED jacket came after hearing about the car accidents that occur when drivers do not see runners or bikers, Escalante says. "If our customers can avoid getting into an accident by wearing our jackets, we're doing our job," she adds.

Escalante changed the company name to EB Active in May 2015 to make it sound more like it supported an active lifestyle, she says.

In June 2015, Escalante consulted with her former high-school classmate, Gomez-Bolaños, about the jacket's design. Gomez-Bolaños earned a degree in fashion and textile design from the University of Palermo in Argentina.

During that summer, the rest of EB Active's team was formed. The team includes Jaysin Lord, 28, technology developer; Talia Horner, 23, industrial designer; and Damiane Nickles, 22, graphic designer.

Escalante describes EB Active as a team of collaborators who are providing their expertise. Once EB Active earns revenue and has the necessary licensing paperwork, Escalante says she and the team members will determine whether they will continue as unpaid consultants or join as paid employees.

The EB Active team meets in the team rooms at the Whitman School and usually has to incorporate Google Plus or Skype because some members live in New York City or in Florida, such as Gomez-Bolaños.

The company hopes to have the prototype sent back to it in March. In the meantime, the EB Active team is designing the jacket's packaging. "Right now, we're thinking of a dark box because that goes better with the brand," Escalante says. "We want it to be simple and unique."

The EB Active team has earned \$20,000 in cash and in-kind services from several business competitions to finance its product. It is currently competing for the \$20,000 first prize in the Panasci Business Plan Competition at the Whitman School at Syracuse University. The winner will be announced on April 16. EB Active was also recently selected to pitch its company for the first annual Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) Innovation Challenge, where the winner will represent Syracuse University at the inaugural InVenture Prize event hosted on March 16 at Georgia Tech in Atlanta.

EB Active will be an e-commerce business, and is using its website to sell its jackets and to connect with customers by incorporating a blog.

If the EB Active team likes the developed prototype it receives from China, it will order the first 100 or more jackets, depending on whether it can attract an investor. The business has not yet sold any products to consumers. Two angel investors in Syracuse and California have expressed some interest in EB Active, Escalante says. The investor in California has not asked EB Active to move there. "I'm going to do what's best for the company," Escalante says. "And as of right now, I have no plans to move the company anywhere else." She would not disclose any more information until they've forged an investment agreement.

After graduation, Escalante will pick one of three Syracuse-based companies she has in mind for which to go to work. She would like to work in a position related to business development and keep EB Active as a side project. "If possible, I would love for [EB Active] to be my full-time job," she says.