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## Urban Planet Mobile makes a new home for phone-based learning in downtown Durham

An early stage company with high hopes and high potential has recently made Durham its new home.



**Urban Planet Mobile** has the mission of turning the mobile phone into a device not just for communication and entertainment, but for information and education as well.

The company was founded in April 2007 by Brian Oliver-Smith and his wife Catherine, and relocated to the Bull City from Savannah, GA in June.

One of their first products, launched last month, provides 700 English lessons in four levels and twelve languages. The lessons are delivered daily via text message through the use of a novel technology that uses ringtone capability to send audio recordings up to three minutes long.

Other products in the Urban Planet Mobile repertoire include daily SAT verbal prep lessons (and, soon, GRE lessons) and "Travelingo", offering useful travel phrases in one of ten languages.

The potential social impact of the English lessons product alone is enormous since at any time there are over 1.4 billion (with a 'B') people in the world trying to learn English, moving to an estimated 2 billion by 2020.

The product is built specifically for worldwide delivery because, while much of the world is still without a personal computer or a smart phone, ring tones can reach 80% of the world. The lessons range from basic vocabulary to advanced conversation to preparation for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and are delivered in an accessible way with language that is used in everyday conversation.

The idea for Urban Planet Mobile was initially inspired by a conversation with his son who was teaching English in Ecuador. Brian asked his son about what sort of technology Ecuadorians had, and his son replied that iPods and smart phones were too expensive for most people, but nearly everyone had a basic mobile phone.

That got Brian thinking about the untapped potential to deliver useful information to people in Ecuador and elsewhere through the use of basic mobile phones.

It's no wonder that investors have taken to the idea. The potential market is in the billions, and the potential impact for each person reached could be enormous. In some countries, learning English has the potential to more than double an individual's income because it opens up many more opportunities for education and training.

Urban Planet Mobile got its first investor in May 2008, and now has 15 different investors, all of the "angel" variety.

Urban Planet Mobile's new headquarters are in the old Accent Flooring building across from Measurement Incorporated at 426 Morris. After meeting Brian and learning about the mission of Urban Planet Mobile, Hank Scherich, the president of Measurement Inc. and owner of the Accent building that sits on the site of future phases of Morris Ridge, graciously allowed Urban Planet Mobile move into his spare space at a significant discount.

Brian said that the space may be temporary depending on how quickly his company grows and how long Hank is willing to keep him around, but his company's location in Downtown Durham certainly is not.

When asked if there was anything he noticed that was lacking in Durham, Brian's only response was "good boiled bagels". (A start-up opportunity, perhaps?)

Urban Planet Mobile currently employs six full-time staff plus other contractors and so far just two are located in Durham. Other employees and contractors are in Savannah, Atlanta, Singapore, Tokyo, Quito, Bangkok, and Cairo; Brian expects that soon two or three staff members will relocate to Durham.

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Brian originally chose to locate his start-up in Savannah because of its premier university program in audio engineering. But because Savannah is lacking a strong mobile technology scene, this year he started looking for a new location – specifically in Silicon Valley, Boston, Austin, and Durham.

He selected Durham over traditional start-up power cities because Durham offered tremendous sources of talent with the local universities, affordable office space, and the personal support available to start-ups. Brian said he was overwhelmed by local organizations such as Bull City Forward, the Durham Chamber of Commerce, and the Council of Entrepreneurial Development that basically laid out the red carpet.

Durham was also a perfect fit for him because of the high quality schools available for his young children, and for a more personal reason: opera.

Brian is a lyric tenor who has shared the stage with some of the premier opera singers in the world, and Brian, with his start-up spirit, was attracted to helping establish the new North Carolina Opera.

(More fun trivia: Brian started training at a relatively late age, in his 30s, and was training partners with Josh Groban.)

Brian's career path included insurance, investment, and consulting before working in a couple of technology start-ups in a sales and marketing role. One of the start-ups was an audio publishing company that had partnerships with publishers such as Random House and Harper Collins and was one of the first companies to deliver short audio recordings (under seven minutes) for 99 cents on iTunes.

For others considering taking the plunge into entrepreneurship, Brian shared some cautions and advice:

- The most important thing an entrepreneur can do is build a great team. Find people smarter than you.
- Remember that ideas are the easy part. Don't quit until you develop success.
- The number one goal of any company, including ones with social missions like his, is to be profitable. He recommends a book called *The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement* on this subject.
- As an entrepreneur, you have to be willing and able to ride the ups and downs because the life of an entrepreneur is a life of extremes.
- Brian suggests first reading "the basics" – books like *Good to Great* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* – and then reading non-stop in your field.