

## Innovators: Vakargo and JumpPhase Ventures

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Founding executives of the Oklahoma City startup company Vakargo talk to potential investors. From left are CEO and President Kelly Tran, Chief Operating Officer Chris Shilling and Chief Financial Officer Mimi Nguyen. (Courtesy photo)

OKLAHOMA CITY – The traveler space-sharing company Vakargo is tying up a seed round this month and looking to launch its smartphone app in time in February, just in time to tap into the excitement of the Chinese New Year, officials said.

Early this year, JumpPhase Ventures in Oklahoma City announced open enrollment in a new business accelerator called LaunchOklahoma that allowed any startup to participate in dozens of seminars, workshops and networking events. The effort attracted 43 entrepreneurs and 26 startups, JumpPhase Managing Director Kraettli L. Epperson said.

Vakargo quickly proved itself as a LaunchOklahoma success, as did Who's On My Wifi and Wintkts.com, by getting a working business model into the market and attracting development funds. Vakargo executives wrapped up their LaunchOklahoma year with two private investor dinners; some of those angels flew from Silicon Valley in California to help contribute more than \$100,000 in the company's seed round. Epperson said he expects the round to top off before the calendar year closes.

In the meantime, Vakargo has been invited to attend the Web Summit in Dublin, Ireland, a major tech investor conference, and join the Silicon Women's Startup Lab next year. In order to make the most of such attention, company founders have established offices in both Norman and Menlo Park, California.

Vakargo executives said they plan to roll out a beta version of the company's smartphone app in February. The company will focus much of its marketing outreach on Asian travelers, said Vakargo CEO and President Kelly Tran, who moved to Oklahoma from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The company concept embraces the new culture of community-distributed services similar to Uber ride-sharing and AirBnB.com home rentals: Simply put, travelers become couriers, using their own cargo space for Vakargo clients' packages. The company promises cheaper prices, especially for international packages, improved cargo safety, detailed tracking data and faster shipping.

Epperson said he has been pleased at Vakargo's growth; even without the other successes he's worked with over the past year, Vakargo has proven the JumpPhase concept. He also praised The 404, a co-working facility and creative space for technologists on Film Row, which provided space for JumpPhase activities during 2014.

"JumpPhase loves running accelerators in Oklahoma," Epperson said. "The entrepreneurs are genuine and enthusiastic, the businesses are real, solving real problems, and the instruction and mentorship that we deliver appears to have a real and lasting impact on the startup community and on economic development in the state."