

SPECIAL REPORT: 10 Kansas City Startups to Watch in 2021

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2021 Startups to Watch: Ronawk's T-Blocks stack the future of stem cell research in an Olathe lab

By: Channa Steinmetz - January 13, 2021



A.J. Mellott and Heather Decker, Ronawk

Editor's note: Startland News selected 10 Kansas City firms to spotlight for its annual Startups to Watch list. The following is one of 2021's companies. Click [here](#) to view the full, ranked list of Startups to Watch — presented by sponsors [Husch Blackwell](#) and the [Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#).

Born out of a frustration with growing stem cells, scientists A.J. Mellott and Heather Decker found a solution that would make cell production more efficient and consume fewer materials, Mellott shared.

“We came up with these Tissue Blocks, also referred to as T-Blocks,” said Mellott, who co-founded [Ronawk](#) with Decker in February 2019 after the duo left their jobs at University of Kansas Medical Center to pursue the idea.

T-Blocks’ 3D model allows researchers to rapidly expand the growth of cells, eliminate the need to subculture and greatly reduce labor costs, Mellott stated. With all these benefits at hand, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated Ronawk’s timeline.

“COVID gave us this unique opportunity,” he continued, noting the pandemic caused heightened interest in using T-Blocks as a way to research the never-before-studied virus. “But even outside of COVID, there are several applications to how our technology can be used.”

Click [here](#) to read more about Ronawk's journey throughout the pandemic.

Already having closed a first round of funding and other additional open funding in 2020, Ronawk is set to launch its Series A funding in early 2021. The funding is designated to allow Ronawk to expand both its team and Olathe lab facility to meet the production needs of customers, Mellott stated.

The biggest goal for 2021: secure a manufacturing partner able to do large-scale production.

“That need is there,” Mellott shared. “We are also already in conversations with a large distributor — that is testing our product — because they are looking at the potential to include it co-branded with a product that they sell. It’s another exciting opportunity.”

Ronawk is also on track to receive its Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) certification this year, Mellott added.

“Our product right now is what is considered 510K exempt; it’s a class one device with the FDA,” Mellott explained. “What that means is we only have to manufacture under GMP conditions, but it does not require an FDA approval to be used. We will be making this leap from what was a [research and development] product to now a GMP grade version of the product.”

Having a GMP-certified product will help close production deals, Mellott said — noting that several companies already in trial with the T-Blocks are interested in large purchase orders once the product is certified.

“We have 23 product trials going on in four of the seven continents,” he said. “Some of our customers are testing stem cells, others are testing cancer cells, and even some are actually looking for things that they can procure from the cells.

“We’re hoping that we’ll have some of that positive data, possibly by the turn of the year, but we expect the bulk of it to come in early to mid-quarter one of 2021.”

Click [here](#) to read about Ronawk's T-Blocks run for the Kansas Chamber's “Coolest Thing Made in Kansas” prize.

As a scientist who added entrepreneur to his title, Mellot said he has learned a lot from the innovative ecosystem and is grateful for the chance to share his expertise.

“It’s been chaotic and intense, but also fun and rewarding,” Mellott said of his journey so far. “It’s allowed us to meet a number of people, and we’ve gotten to learn more about the human aspect of community — which is a main reason we founded the company. We wanted to be able to help people with our knowledge.”



**Elevator pitch:** *Ronawk develops customized 3D-printed consumables to accelerate cell production in the biotech, healthcare and agriculture industries.*

- **Founders:** A.J. Mellott, Heather Decker
- **Founding year:** 2019
- **Amount raised to date:** \$1.3M
- **Noteworthy investors:** Undisclosed
- **Programs completed:** NIGMS Sustainable Heartland Accelerator Regional Partnership Hub, Wichita State University Shockers Innovation Corps, UMKC E-Scholars, Digital Sandbox KC, Pipeline Entrepreneurs
- **Current employee count:** 3 (2 FTE, and 1 part-time)

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Startups to Watch in 2021

- 1) TripleBlind
- 2) LaborChart
- 3) Bar K
- 4) Ronawk
- 5) SureShow
- 6) Daupler
- 7) PMI Rate Pro
- 8) Scissors & Scotch
- 9) Replica
- 10) The Market Base

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