

Empowering Affordable Housing: Leatherby Center Helps Community Entrepreneur Bring AI Innovation to Life

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EINPresswire.com/ -- For LaShonda Smith, a single mother and career consultant from Orange County, the journey toward entrepreneurship began with a question that wouldn't leave her alone: Why do so many families miss out on the homebuyer assistance programs that already exist to help them?

That question inspired PreQualy, an AI-powered platform designed to make affordable homeownership more attainable by connecting qualified buyers to "hidden" funding opportunities. The system acts as a digital advisor, matching users with down payment assistance, grants, and local programs that can bring the dream of homeownership within reach.



PreQualy Unlocking Doors to Homeownership

Solving a Real Problem with Smart Technology

Smith has spent more than two decades working in local government and nonprofit consulting, helping agencies manage complex funding systems. Along the way, she kept seeing the same issue: hundreds of millions of dollars in housing assistance go unused each year because families simply don't know these programs exist – or how to qualify for them.

"I saw firsthand how confusing and disconnected the system was," Smith said. "People who worked hard, paid taxes, and dreamed of owning a home were missing opportunities that could change their lives. I wanted to fix that."

PreQualy's technology uses artificial intelligence to simplify that process. By analyzing a user's profile, the platform can instantly identify and "stack" all funding options available for that specific buyer – something no existing tool currently does.

"Think of it as a personalized financial navigator," Smith explained. "It's not just about finding programs; it's about helping people see a path to ownership they didn't think was possible."

Turning Vision into Venture at the Leatherby Center

The [Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics](#) at [Chapman](#) University became a turning point in Smith's journey. Although she is not a Chapman student, she joined the center's Women in Entrepreneurship program to refine her business concept – and found a community ready to help her build it.

“

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LaShonda Smith



Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics Exterior



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Business and Economics**

Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship
and Business Ethics

The Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship is a part of the Argyros College of Business and Economics, at Chapman University

Through the Incubator and Accelerator programs, Smith worked closely with Entrepreneurs in Residence (EIRs) who helped her strengthen PreQualy's business model, refine her pitch deck, and prepare to seek funding. She also took part in the Center's Panther Cage Match – a "Shark Tank"-style competition that gave her valuable exposure to investors and judges.

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"Information is power, and that is what PreQualy offers, information that helps lower income families to be able to purchase a home, which is one of the best ways families can build intergenerational wealth. We are excited to support LaShonda in her journey," said Dr. Cynthia West, Director of the Leatherby Center and Assistant Dean at Chapman's Argyros College of Business and Economics.

Our Solution



The Only AI-Powered
Advisory and Matching for
Hidden Homebuyer
Financing and Funding
that makes Affordable
Homeownership...

PreQualy Our Solution Slide

Fueling Growth Through Inclusive Innovation

Smith's progress also highlights how the Leatherby Center's role as Orange County's official [CalOSBA Inclusive Innovation Hub](#) is expanding access to entrepreneurship beyond the university. Funded through a \$1 million grant from the California Office of the Small Business Advocate (CalOSBA), the Center is one of only 13 hubs statewide – and the only one in Orange County – dedicated to helping underrepresented founders and community entrepreneurs turn their ideas into viable businesses.

"This grant allowed us to open our doors to the wider community of entrepreneurs. We are excited to help community members empower themselves through running their own businesses. LaShonda's story is exactly why our programs are open to the wider community," said Dr. Cynthia West, Director of the Leatherby Center and Assistant Dean at Chapman's Argyros College of Business and Economics.

Smith is now a candidate for a CalOSBA Innovation Grant, which would help her build PreQualy's minimum viable product (MVP), finalize intellectual property protections, and develop strategic partnerships with lenders and government agencies.

"I didn't even know programs like CalOSBA existed until I came to the Leatherby Center," Smith said. "This network helped me find resources, mentors, and people who believe in what I'm building."

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Building the Future of Homeownership

As PreQualy moves toward launch, Smith is exploring collaborations with universities, housing developers, and nonprofit partners who share her goal of making homeownership possible for more Californians. Beyond the platform itself, she hopes to educate families about financial literacy and build trust within communities historically excluded from the home-buying process.

“This isn’t just a tech startup – it’s a movement to close the wealth gap,” Smith said. “If PreQualy helps even one family buy their first home, that’s generational change.”

In addition to supporting entrepreneurs like LaShonda, the Leatherby Center offers no cost access to its Mentor Program, Incubator, and Accelerator initiatives – all open to the public, not just Chapman students. Aspiring founders, small-business owners, and innovators from throughout Southern California can take part at no cost. Participants are paired with experienced mentors and industry professionals who provide personalized guidance, feedback, and connections to help them grow their ideas or businesses.

To learn more or request a mentor match, visit <https://www.chapman.edu/research/institutes-and-centers/leatherby-center/mentor-program.aspx>.

About the Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics

The vision of the Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship is to inspire, educate, and empower the next generation of talent to have an entrepreneurial mindset. To teach students how to innovate and take risks, whether they are starting their own venture, or working inside a corporation. Through our curriculum and our incubator, we provide hands-on experience to the next generation of talent, teaching them how to develop, scale, and launch their own ventures as future global citizens in the world economy. <https://www.chapman.edu/research/institutes-and-centers/leatherby-center/index.aspx>.

About Chapman University

Founded in 1861, Chapman University is a nationally ranked private university in Orange, California, about 30 miles south of Los Angeles. Chapman serves nearly 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with a 12:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Students can choose from over 100 areas of study within 11 colleges for a personalized education. Chapman is categorized by the Carnegie Classification as an R2 “high research activity” institution. Students at Chapman learn directly from distinguished world-class faculty including Nobel Prize winners, MacArthur fellows, published authors and Academy Award winners. The campus has produced a Rhodes Scholar, been named a top producer of Fulbright Scholars, and hosts a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the nation’s oldest and most prestigious honor society. Chapman also includes the Harry and Diane Rinker Health Science Campus in Irvine. The university features the No. 4 film school and No. 66 business school in the U.S. Learn more about Chapman University: <http://www.chapman.edu/>.

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