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**Grant Oliphant**

## Q&A: Laying foundation for cleaner air

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*Grants from the **Heinz Endowments** and **The Pittsburgh Foundation** to the CREATE Lab at Carnegie Mellon University's Robotics Institute helped to develop technology resulting in Speck, the air-quality monitor for home use that spinout company Airviz Inc. is rolling out and marketing. The foundations also are purchasing 1,000 Specks to be distributed to schools and public libraries. [Grant Oliphant](#), who became CEO of the Heinz Endowments last summer and previously led The Pittsburgh Foundation, talked about the foundations' role.*

### **How much did the Heinz Endowments contribute toward the development of the air-quality monitor?**

About \$550,000 for this project.

### **Why were the foundations interested in funding this?**

The issue in Pittsburgh that is compelling for us is we have a really urgent need to improve our air quality faster than we are. The American Lung Association ranked it among the 10 most polluted regions in the country for small particulate pollution. That's obviously bad for public health and incredibly bad for economic development. It becomes much more complicated to build a knowledge-based economy when you appear on a ranking like that. We don't want to be there, and we all need to do something about moving off that list.

### **What's special about this technology?**

One of the challenges has been helping individuals, households or schools understand their exposure and what the challenges of small particulate pollution mean to them. If you stand up high on a clear day, you can often see the haze, but at street level, you don't think about it and what it does to your lungs and heart. What Speck does is democratize the knowledge about what's in the air. Traditional air monitors are exceedingly costly, and we wanted to see how that technology could be made less expensive and more available to people in communities.

That's how we became involved, and once the technology was developed, we took the step with The Pittsburgh Foundation of buying a bunch of Specks and making them available to individuals.

### **Anything similar in the works?**

Coming out of the same lab, there's this thing called the Breathe Cam. That technology allows individuals to see what's happening with the air quality in their area. They can do it online and monitor in real time what the inputs are, if plants are putting out pollution. We're really excited about this because it allows people to deduce their own relevant information from it and to contribute to the database for everyone else.

### **Infosys, the Bangalore, India-based IT company, just invested \$2 million in Airviz. Any comments on that?**

The product needed our support to be innovated and then brought to scale, but we've probably taken it as far as we realistically could. The opportunity now is that the for-profit community will take it and you'll see these units become much more broadly available.

Patty Tascarella covers accounting, banking, finance, legal, marketing and advertising and foundations. Contact her at [ptascarella@bizjournals.com](mailto:ptascarella@bizjournals.com) or 412-208-3832. .