Conference will give eMerging businesses the stage

May 3, 2015 / By Nancy Dahlberg

Derrick N. Ashong is introducing his social music company at eMerge Americas with hip-hop. Daniel Rodriguez is hoping his drones will lure people to his two expo booths, where he'll be showing his operating system for robotics.

Whatever the strategy, as eMerge Americas opens for a second year, chances are that behind the cool technology on display is the work of a scrappy startup.

The homegrown technology conference will feature hundreds of startups, through its Startup Showcase, its emerging technology expo areas and company booths. Universities will be showcasing student and alumni startups, and many nations will bring contingents of young companies.

Very notable is the level and talent of the companies, and they are coming from all over the world, said Xavier Gonzalez, executive director of eMerge Americas. "People should make sure they interact with these startups. South Florida startups will see that they have the support of the community, and for those coming in from all over the world, they will see the strong and growing ecosystem."

eMerge Americas' main event Monday and Tuesday at Miami Beach Convention Center aims to offer something for everyone — from big enterprise companies' tech executives and professionals, to academic and community leaders, to students and self-professed geeks. For the expected attendance of 10,000, there will be keynote speeches by HUD Secretary Julián Castro, SBA administrator Maria Contreras-Sweet, author Deepak Chopra and Jim McKelvey, co-founder of Square and LaunchCode, as well as four tracks of talks and panel discussions, a Women, Innovation and Technology Summit, exhibits, a hiring fair, fashion show and parties. NBCUniversal programs will be covering the conference, including with a special edition at 9 a.m. Monday of MSNBC's "The Rundown with José Díaz-Balart," and the Nasdaq closing bell will be rung from eMerge's expo floor.

Yet, there is palpable excitement from and about the startups, some of which will be using eMerge as a launching pad for their ventures.

Veteran entrepreneur Bernie Navarro was inspired to start a real estate crowdfunding company after seeing a panel on the topic at last year's eMerge. "I thought this is something I need for my business, and we went to work. That was the spark."

That's what tech pioneer Manny Medina, founder of eMerge Americas, likes to hear because attracting and nurturing startups is the foundation of a tech ecosystem he and other community leaders and entrepreneurs are trying to build in South Florida. Giving startups a platform to get their message out is key so they can grow. At eMerge, startups are likely to mingle with investors, corporate executives, tech experts and service providers as well as fellow startups from around the world, including Taiwan, Israel and India.

The Startup Showcase, an expo area, will feature 125 companies. To prepare, many of them took part in a full-day bootcamp and mentoring day at Venture Hive on Sunday. For a second year, showcase finalists will vie for votes in a pitching showdown at eMerge Americas. A new twist: The investor judges will have skin in the game.

"We are very excited about the lineup of judges this year, Chris Bosh among them," said Medina, who also runs Medina Capital. "This year they will really be investing, like Shark Tank."

The Showdown will have three contests: The late stage winner will receive $100,000 in investments, the early stage winner will get $50,000 and the university winner, $25,000.

Startups participating in the showcase hail from 16 countries and in industries as diverse as mobile payments, education, healthcare, real estate and entertainment, to name a few. But startups don't have to be in the showcase to get noticed; some are taking other routes.

With the help of Miami Dade College students, Navarro, an MDC trustee, will launch his startup at the college's eMerge booth. "We felt that it is a perfect fit for us to showcase what Miami Dade is doing, what we are doing, and taking it to the national stage."

Navarro also runs Benworth Capital Partners, a real estate investment firm, and he said the company gets many deals from other places that aren't approriate for Benworth's local and Latin American investors. "This platform will be a launching pad for all these deals and gives us an opportunity to expand our reach with the expertise we have."

Navarro faces growing competition in real estate crowdfunding, but thinks Fundrageous offers some key differentiators, including being a licensed lender. "Dealing with investors for so long, we know what they want and we are big into transparency. We want to make sure they feel comfortable on all levels of the platform, how the deals are handled, how the money is transferred. Also, we already have deal flow and I see some of them [competitors] struggle with that."

Fundrageous is launching Monday with three deals, and will be accepting new deals after the conference. He is also launching a $50 million capital raise. Although Navarro has started companies before, the most recent being Benworth in 2008 — "it was the height of the real estate crash; everyone thought I was crazy" — launching a tech company is a new experience.

"Now I understand what Manny [Medina] was saying about the ecosystem and making this a hub," said Navarro, who also founded and sold a mortgage company. "It's all real to me now. We have to hire attorneys and printers and marketing companies and developers and web designers and mobile app designers. That trickle-through economy is good for the entire economy."

For about a year, Abhinav Gautam and his co-founders were working in stealth mode, creating a platform to mine healthcare data. Now, eMerge will be their venue of choice to tell the world about Carevoyance.

Carevoyance, which already has revenue-paying customers, is a software-as-a-service platform for healthcare companies to understand, mine and surface key information for market research and customer acquisition, said Gautam, a physician who also co-founded specialty electronic health records company Nexus Clinical in Miami.

"Carevoyance takes market intelligence and combines it with your company's proprietary data in our powerful mapping, analytics and reporting tools. We solve the problem of a lack of information and insight about healthcare providers by building a deep view into provider organizations, individuals and their relationships. We help you make faster, more accurate business-critical decisions," he added.

Anatoly Geyfman, Gautam's co-founder and the CEO of Carevoyance, will speak at eMerge about big data. Carevoyance will also participate in the Startup Showcase.

"The product we created is validation that we hope will allow us to rapidly scale up and raise a large [Series] A round of financing," said Gautam. "We have a lot of hard work ahead of us ... We are trying to become the next big tech story to come out of this area. That's the goal."

Daniel Rodriguez, founder of Animusoft, also has a big goal: to create and sell an operating system for the exploding world of robotics and drones.

Rodriguez, a software expert, had been working at South Florida tech companies and in his off time started researching drones and robotics, long before they were the hot sectors they are today. In 2007, he launched a social network for robotics, which quickly gained traction validating for him the high interest, and in 2011 he experimented with selling robotic hardware, turning his 1,700-square-foot condo into a shipping center churning out hundreds of orders a week. But all of that was to learn about the customers, what they were buying and what the pain points were in the fast-growing industry.

By the end of 2011 he untangled himself from his components-selling business, left his full-time senior software architect position at Acceller, and started Animusoft as a consulting company, all the while with the goal of building an operating system for robots and drones. In 2014, the bootstrapped Animusoft had grown to nearly a million in revenue; "We said, 'why don't we put out heads down and start building?' " said Rodriguez, who had brought on Jorge Puignau and later Steven McKean as co-founders of the now 16-employee company.

Why is an operating system needed? A hospital, for example, may have six or seven robots from several different manufacturers, and the challenge is managing them efficiently and making them work together. And from a developer perspective, you can have hundreds of people working on one piece — software to make a robot go up, down or to talk to a particular brand of sensor, for instance — or you can write the software once and have people develop on top. "Our aspiration is to be the Android for robotics," said Rodriguez.

Monday and Tuesday at eMerge Americas, Animusoft will be unveiling its operating system, called Alive, and launching it into private beta with 16 vetted companies as its first customers. Oh, and Animusoft's two exhibit spaces will have some booth babes, too: Drones — quadcopters, 3D-printed planes, farming drones — as well as demos of virtual reality simulation that is part of Alive's platform.

Derrick Ashong, a musician/entrepreneur and media personality, is bringing a different kind of reality for his eMerge splash — hip-hop from the streets of Brazil, Colombia and Jamaica. Ashong recently founded amp.it, a social network that rewards fans for sharing the music they love. "We built a platform where the people decide what artists to feature, their artistry, their passion, their story, their struggle," said the Ghana-born entrepreneur. This helps new artists identify and work with their best fans to break through.

Ashong, known as DNA, will be hosting the grand finale of amp.it's first global contest, Take Back the Mic: the World Cup of Hip Hop, at an eMerge Americas party at the New World Center, with DJ Maseo of the Grammy-winning band De La Soul doing the spinning. The event will feature screenings from digital episodes of Take Back the Mic's first season and live performances by the finalists O Comboio from Brazil, Crew Peligrosos from Colombia and Italee from Jamaica, who were chosen by fans on amp.it. Then fans can vote for the winner.

Ashong, a self described "hip-hop head," said the team chose to start with that genre because it is "a type of music that with a beat and your own poetry, you can make it happen." The team is at work on Season 2 of Take Back the Mic, and eventually amp.it will feature all kinds of competitions.

Amp.it's team of 10 in Miami and Buenos Aires come from Google, HBO, the NFL, the NBA and Amazon, Ashong said, and a Silicon Valley investor recently jumped aboard.

Ashong applauds eMerge giving amp.it the New World stage to amplify the work of global creatives: "We want people to see Miami not only as a city of the future — it's already happening."