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Eureka Casinos \$1 Million Covid Prize: 'You Win Some, You Learn Some'

By [Marjorie Preston](#) Tue, May 25, 2021

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As the pandemic eases and businesses reopen, Eureka Casinos is working to ensure the industry is prepared for the next unforeseen challenge. One way, said COO Andre Carrier (l.), is through a \$1 million innovation prize.



Around this time in 2020, Andre Carrier was working more, worrying more and logging more on-the-job hours than in any other year—despite the fact that his company's business was, for the most part, at a standstill.

As chief operating officer of [Eureka Casinos](#), a Nevada-based, employee-owned gaming company, Carrier recalls that he was “more consumed with how to better operate a drive-through food pantry than anything else.”

At the time, “We had zero revenue,” he told *GGB News*. “We were trying to find a way to provide essential services and some compensation for our employees. We were trying to make sure we were managing our treasury correctly, because workers were still getting 100 percent benefits.”

Sometimes, he said, “That feels like 10 years ago. And at others, it feels like 10 minutes ago. That's the schizophrenia of the current moment.”

Though Eureka casino were closed from mid-March to early June, the company’s “employee-owners” were anything but idle. They connected through virtual meetings and Facebook forums. They rotated volunteer shifts at the food pantry, so they could see each other in person.

“I did more video communication with our employees than I’d ever done before,” said Carrier, “and that sharing, the messaging back and forth, had a lot to do with keeping our energy up and keeping our hopeful nature.”

The company also set up a vaccine center at its Rising Star Sports Ranch in Mesquite, and, like a number of other gaming companies, offered “a carrot” to workers to encourage them to get in line. Staffers got \$100 on vaccination, and an additional \$100 when 75 percent of the workforce at their property was vaccinated.

All for One



Founded by Ted and Doris Lee, Eureka Casinos operates eponymous resorts in Las Vegas and Mesquite, Nevada as well as the Brook in Seabrook, New Hampshire.

In 2015, the Lee family sold the company to the employees, making it Nevada’s first 100 percent employee-owned gaming firm. Eureka made the *Fortune* list of Top 100 Best Medium Workplaces in 2018 and 2019 and has been named a Great Place to Work-Certified company.

Eureka is “a hopeful group as a company,” Carrier said. And starting at the bottom of the Covid shutdown, “we focused our efforts on being a part of the answer.”

That’s not just a feel-good philosophy for Carrier and his partner, Eureka Chairman and President Greg Lee. Through the [Ted and Doris Lee Family Foundation](#), they backed up their

talk with some serious investment: a million-dollar innovation prize offered through the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Business School.

The Lee Prize for Innovation and Entrepreneurship was offered for products and services that could keep the travel and tourism industries intact and functional during a health crisis like Covid-19 and in the more safety-conscious environment created by the outbreak.

“We really consumed ourselves with uncovering those innovations, and right now, we’re really consumed with getting those products to market,” said Carrier. “They’re going to have a profound effect—and it was another way of keeping ourselves busy and active during the shutdown.”

Safeguarding the Future

The prize committee looked at more than 250 submissions from 32 states and nine countries. Among the winners was Purlin LLC, creator of a single-use, fully biodegradable bedsheet that’s used once, shipped back to the manufacturer and recycled into new sheets in a closed-loop system.

“That’s up and operational and being adopted by many of the major hotel chains,” said Carrier. “In addition to safety and sanitation, the water savings from that product has an even bigger impact.” According to Purlin’s website, a 100-room hotel uses 400,000 gallons of water annually to launder cotton-based sheets and another 900,000 gallons of water to replace damaged inventory. Switching to Purlin sheets reduces that usage to approximately 32,000 gallons of water per year.

Another winning innovation was created by Promethium, “a remarkable company that uses a photocatalytic process that’s been successful in the lab in capturing and killing the coronavirus,” said Carrier. “Hotel air filtration is going to be holy grail of the next decade, and to capture and kill viruses like this is attainable.”

He said the system will be market-ready “within the next 12 to 24 months.” Should Covid infections return on a large scale or a similar health crisis comes along, “the next time around will very different,” said Carrier.

Other winners include:

- GoodWRX, an app-based work scheduling software that simplifies job-sharing
- Hotel Data Cloud, a global hotel content distribution database that gives hotels control over listings on any booking channel
- Maidbot, cleaning robots that also provide key data to management

‘A Starting Point for Recovery’

When the awards were announced, Leith Martin, executive director of [UNLV’s Troesh Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation](#), hailed the innovators, saying, “Covid-19 has created a

difficult situation for everyone around the world. The Lee Prize has created a starting point for recovery, especially for the hospitality, tourism and entertainment industries.”

At this transitional moment, as United States casinos move from reduced capacities, Plexiglas barriers and mask mandates to near-normal, Carrier is optimistic, but not caught up in the jubilation.

“An essential part of managing the future successfully is learning from what just occurred. We’ve taken some heavy financial losses, and we’ve lost men and women that we worked with. It’s naive to think that this can’t happen again, and the next time, we better show we were better prepared.

“This is the time to do after-action reports,” he said, “and these may be the most important after-action reports that we’ve ever done. When difficult things happen in your personal life or in business, you win some and you learn some.”

Marjorie Preston is managing editor of *Global Gaming Business*. She is a writer, editor, author and expat Pennsylvanian who now considers herself a New Jerseyan. Based on Brigantine Island north of Atlantic City, Preston has been writing about the gaming industry since 2007, when she joined the staff of *Global Gaming Business* as managing editor of *Casino Connection*.

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