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Ben Merrell high-fives audience members during a hydroflight show on Monday at Sandestin. [PATTI BLAKE/THE NEWS HERALD]

## Trump: Lawyer taping 'perhaps illegal'

By Zeke Miller  
The Associated Press

BRIDGEWATER, N.J. — Donald Trump said Saturday he finds it “inconceivable” that a lawyer would tape a client, as the president weighed in after the disclosure that in the weeks before the 2016 election, his then-personal attorney secretly recorded their discussion about a potential payment for a former Playboy model’s account of having an affair with Trump.

The recording was part of a large collection of documents and electronic records seized earlier this year by federal authorities from Michael Cohen, the longtime Trump fixer.

In a tweet, Trump called such taping “totally unheard of & perhaps illegal.” He also asserted, without elaborating, in post: “The good news is that your favorite President did nothing wrong!”

See TRUMP, A6

# ‘An inflection point’

## TechFarms seeks to revitalize Panhandle economy

By Stephanie Nusbaum  
The News Herald

PANAMA CITY BEACH — Restructuring the region’s economy is a massive undertaking. To broaden Northwest Florida’s economic base beyond tourism and the military, decades’ worth of dominos must fall in alignment: Bolster the infrastructure. Attract major manufacturers. Provide the workforce they require. Train that workforce. Hook kids on math, science, engineering and technology. The list goes on.

It’s an enormous task not only to attract brilliant minds but to retain the ones living, graduating and retiring locally.

Then again, Jeff Elkins has a different take on attracting those minds.

He uses jetpacks.

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See TECHFARM, A4



Mariah Cain flies the airboard over Pompano Beach. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



Jeff Elkins looks over his latest version of underwater thruster boots on July 5 at TechFarms. [PATTI BLAKE/THE NEWS HERALD]

More photos online

See a gallery of TechFarms’ coolest projects at newsherald.com.

## The Mad Scientist

Drones you can ride, LED suits, underwater thruster boots, he’s made them

By Stephanie Nusbaum  
The News Herald

PANAMA CITY BEACH — Jeff Elkins is tough to categorize. He’s part engineer, part mechanic, part electrician with a dab of bodybuilder mixed in. You’ll usually find him hard at work on his latest invention, fine-tuning a component in SolidWorks or not-so-finely taking a hammer to it in the warehouse. He sleeps about four hours a night and mutters thing like “I work with too many jetpack companies” without a trace of irony.

“He’s the classic mad scientist,” said TechFarms CEO Steve Millaway. “Better in the lab than at Chamber meetings.”

Elkins is one of the

See ELKINS, A2



SPORTS | C1

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Bay County team captures AAU 19U national baseball championship

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# Innovation across the Panhandle

By **Stephanie Nusbaum**  
The News Herald

Northwest Florida is lined with military bases, colleges and economic development engines. This week, two outside experts weighed in on technology, innovation and TechFarms' and other business incubators' role in the Panhandle's economic growth.

Kim Wilmes is president and CEO of Florida's Great Northwest, headquartered in Niceville. The 12-county economic growth organization helps businesses relocate, start or expand in the Panhandle. The organization also is part of Northwest Florida Forward, a coalition of economic development groups focused on regional growth.

Steve Dunnivant is the dean of business, industry and technology and Tallahassee Community College. He was the former dean and one of the creators of Gulf Coast State College's Advanced Technology Center in Panama City.

## On business incubators

Wilmes: I think incubators

help kind of spark that out-of-the-box thinking, that thought where "We can just, it's never been done before." Those are the types of people who are willing to spend the time and figure out a way to make it work. Not that larger companies don't have innovative people, but you've got folks who are entrepreneurs and locals, who might have the local channels and avenues to make things happen, and the relationships. The partnerships that they can bring, as well as the innovation, they play as critical role as any of the new companies or those already doing well.

## On a well-rounded economy

Wilmes: An attraction gives the economy that immediate boost, and the entrepreneurial side gives a long-lasting and fertile business environment for growth. The startups benefit from the bigger companies, and the bigger companies also benefit from the people who have been here and the connections and the innovations that come out of the smaller

entrepreneurial group who can move faster and think differently.

I do think the entrepreneurial side is important. I don't want folks to lose sight of that. A lot of times on the economic development side, you see the competitive projects that involve people coming in from outside of the area. That's important, but it's just one part of the puzzle. Let's grow our own companies, let's help our current ones expand and let's attract the big ones for the capital investment injection.

## On training the workforce

Dunnivant: It's really a question of culture. It's building that expectation from the K-12 system of tolerance for risk of failure and focusing on the skills and values that create these tech cultures we see in Boulder, Colorado, or Austin, Texas. It takes many, many years to get there, but some great folks from Pensacola to Tallahassee are working on this to really lift up that whole region. And the region is really the best

perspective for that.

Wilmes: You're always going to have those types of kids who will move and change be more adaptable to the future of where business is going, and you wanna keep them here. We need to keep those brilliant minds here. Labor is so important. Any economic developer, the first question is, 'Prove to me that you have the labor and you have the pipeline that's gonna help my company grow and innovate in the future. You've gotta keep those kids here, and give the environment and the tools and the access to other entrepreneurs across the region an enticing reason to stay here. Places like TechFarms, its capital fund, that can help make those things happen.

## On the region's resources

Dunnivant: There's a great ecosystem here, too, that's connected to TechFarms. We've got the college's innovation center downtown, we've got Domi Station. ... There's some great assets,

and TechFarms is part of that ecosystem, and Steve (Millaway, TechFarms founder and CEO) is a wonderful steward of it. He's trying to put together the optimal pieces to really start tech-centered business in the Panhandle.

Wilmes: As far as incubators, there's the Co:Lab out in Pensacola, then there's the Business Innovation Center in Panama City, then you've got Steve and TechFarms, then you've got Venture Hive, out in Fort Walton Beach, and they really support veterans. Those guys have all come together through the help of Northwest Florida Forward, so there are ways they can leverage together, plan together, do things regionally for entrepreneurs. Just knowing there's other entrepreneurs and others who are struggling and making it and how they've been able to solve some of their issues, it's been a great convener for pulling and growing the entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem in Northwest Florida. TechFarms has really been a driver for that, as well as the others.

## ELKINS

From Page A1

team members at TechFarms, a technology and business incubator in Panama City Beach. Among a mentor list that includes entrepreneurs, professors, college deans, and even the former commanding officer of Naval Support Activity Panama City, Elkins is the one of the ones who makes things happen — the one with just enough electrical, mechanical and software experience to turn an idea into a prototype.

"He's an inventor extraordinaire," Millaway said.

Elkins began among the legions of America's garage tinkerers, people with energy, ideas and know-how. Armed with little more than an associate's degree in electronics and a knack for building things, he ventured out from his work as a VCR mechanic and hit a home run out of the gate in the field of prosthetics, earning a million dollar grant from the National Institute of Health.

From there, it was more prosthetics, then a portable ice shanty, and a dog training collar. It launched into the world of sci-fi after a trip to St. Thomas in 2012.

"I saw somebody on a flyboard, and I told my wife, 'I'm gonna do this for the rest of my life.'"

He meant it. In the six years since, Elkins has become one of the world's leading experts in what he fondly calls "transportainment" — products that might not have practical use for the average person but drop jaws everywhere they go.

The flyboard looks like a water-powered snowboard, with the rider's feet securely strapped in and two jets of water propelling him into the air. His height is limited only by the 70-foot hose attaching him to a jet ski, which



Jeff Elkins, left, stands for a photo with Tech Farms CEO Steve Millaway on July 5 at TechFarms. (PATTI BLAKE/THE NEWS HERALD)

supplies the board's thrust.

As soon as he returned home, he found the closest supplier, Power Up Watersports in Fort Walton Beach, and started practicing. Co-owner Ben Merrell showed him the ropes — well, the hoses — and a partnership was born. Merrell also had recently discovered hydroflight and made himself something of an expert — by 2013, he was the third-ranked flyboarder in the world.

"After we met, Jeff reached out to me and said, 'I could build you a light suit,'" Merrell said. "So we started getting involved in trying to do shows and selling light suits early on, and that really kicked off."

Like many of his inventions, the success of those waterproof, impact-proof LED light suits was partially powered by YouTube.

"The average person does their market research first," Millaway said. "They go out there and say, 'What might sell?' They're trying to find a problem to solve. With Jeff, he says, 'Hey, I wanna do this. It's cool.' He doesn't care if there's a market yet. He does it, puts it out on YouTube, everybody see it, and the market comes to him."

After the LED suits — "We called it the Tron suit," Elkins

said — went viral, an investor indeed did come forward.

It was SeaWorld.

"I got a call from SeaWorld, and they're like, 'How would you like to build all the LED suits for a big show that we're putting on in San Diego?' And I'm like 'OK.' We'd been trying to shop it around for a long time, and this is how they found it right here — on YouTube."

Elkins and his wife, Dawn, built the suits and the props, complete with 300 watts of LEDs streaming from each rider's feet. In partnership with Merrell, the suits and stunts combined to form Cirque Electrique, an aquatic, acrobatic show now playing several times weekly at the park.

"We built these costumes, and they said 'Well, we want you to build some other costumes, and what we want to do is we wanna jump on the LEDs on a trampoline, and then we wanna jump in saltwater.' And I said 'Well, you're crazy. You can't do that to LEDs, it's not possible.' And they said, 'Well we found out that if it's possible, you're the guy to do it.'"

Turns out, he was the guy to do it — along with his wife. They built 50 customs for SeaWorld, and the next year expanded into jet skis.

Meanwhile, the suits were catching on elsewhere.

"There was a hydroflight comp in Pahrump over by Las Vegas, and we had I think 13 flyers out, and every one of them had our suits on, and to see that was the most incredible feeling," Dawn Elkins said. "All of my hard work was right there in front of my eyes, and everybody was just lovin' it."

Meanwhile, Jeff was already on to new products.

Next up, the airboard, an eight-propeller, vertical takeoff and landing aircraft — essentially a hoverboard.

"It's technically a multi-copter," Elkins said. "It took me a year to build; maybe six months of that year I was actively working on it. I think we spent about \$20,000 getting it off the ground."

A big part of getting it off the ground was a petite person, Mariah Cain. The two met when Cain, also an accomplished flyboarder, was looking to buy one of Elkins' LED suits. Also in the shop was the airboard, still in early testing and resembling little more than a metal platform with ski poles attached.

"Jeff said, 'You wanna try this thing?'" Cain said. "And I said, 'Yeah!' So I kind of got on it and tried it and was lighter than the other pilot, so I started flying. I call it my dragon because I sort of got on and we kind of connected and did a lot of awesome things that nobody had ever done."

After several more months of low-level flights and hundreds of hours of adjustments, Elkins turned to his old standby, YouTube, to debut her soaring 100 feet over Lake Merial.

That video of the airboard — still lovingly referred to by Elkins as "that stupid thing" for its lack of practical application — has been viewed more than 70 million times since.

Then, Elkins turned to thruster boots, a hands-free, propeller-powered footboard that sends the rider gliding through the water at

speeds up to 8 miles per hour.

"Most of what's out there right now are pullers, so basically what they do is they pull you along underwater and you hold onto them," Elkins said. "So moving it down to the feet, now all of the sudden, I've got the control that I want. I've got foot control, so I can go reverse, stop, forward, super-fast crazy boost."

He applied for a patent last year and recently received it — completely clean, a feat almost unheard of in the world of inventing, Elkins said.

The first thruster boots will be commercially produced in 2019, he said. The testing process will be long — there's great danger in their application at depth — but Elkins is confident the reward ultimately will greatly outweigh the risk.

"Everything has a certain element of danger, and that's one of the things we're very, very concerned about," he said. "But thruster boots is so worth it. I've done it 20 times, and every time, the only thing that's going through your mind is, 'I can't believe I'm doing this, I can't believe I'm doing this, I can't believe I'm doing this.'"

That excitement is a recurring theme in the lives of Elkins and those around him — his career is about passion, not riches.

"Money's never been the big thing," Merrell said. "Obviously you wanna make it, don't get me wrong, but we wanna do something cool, and we wanna have fun doing it, and everything we make is, I think, pretty cool. Is it cool? Jeff will make it."

As for Elkins, he still spends a lot of time pinching myself. "Who gets to do this?" he said. "It's insane."

"That's what Edison did. If somebody asked 'Can you do this?' he would say yes and then he would figure it out. And that's ... why not? If somebody says you can't do something, that's even better."

PANAMA CITY

## NEWS HERALD

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# TECHFARM

From Page A1

It's a typical afternoon at TechFarms, a business and technology incubator in Panama City Beach. An entrepreneur is at one of the computers, designing new parts to be 3D-printed. Another is working up a cybersecurity training program. Two tables over, an engineer is designing new agriculture technology informally labeled "the farmbots."

What Elkins is doing is likewise atypical. He's surrounded in electronics — wires, batteries, antennas, microprocessors — outfitting a mannequin in an LED wetsuit. When complete, it will be one of the costumes in Cirque Electrique, an aquatic acrobatic show currently playing at SeaWorld San Diego. By the end of the night, the suits will have been through a full acrobatic routine, dozens of bounces on a trampoline, a round of backflips on a jet ski and a plunge into saltwater — all while putting off a dazzling spectrum of choreographed LED lighting.

It's part of what TechFarms founder and CEO Steve Millaway calls the "gee whiz factor" — eye-catching inventions that draw both investors and entrepreneurs to the incubator.

"We're looking to reach an audience and trying to get people interested in this kind of stuff," Millaway said. "We can't find enough entrepreneurs. We just can't. It's like that all over the country. There's just not enough."

Millaway founded TechFarms in 2005 to help solve that problem. He hopes to draw out people like Elkins — tinkering hobbyists taking things apart and putting them back together in cramped garage workshops. As incentive, TechFarms provides a place to work, learn and collaborate, with the ultimate goal of establishing private-sector technology as a stronghold of the region's economy.

Millaway has his own "gee whiz" story. After graduating from Bay High School, he earned a degree in electrical engineering. Like many of today's graduates, he didn't feel like Northwest Florida had anything to offer him, so he headed west to Tucson, Arizona, and immersed himself in the world of semiconductors. He's designed or co-designed 15 or 20 semiconductor chips, most notably the USB 2.0 chip, used in 500 million-plus computers, scanners and other office staples.

Elkins will tell you Millaway even invented the internet — he didn't, but his name rightly belongs in the credits. In 1999, Millaway's company Gain Communications developed the country's first two-way broadband wireless Internet access service, the precursor to WiFi.

After paving his own path to success, Millaway came back to the Panhandle, not only because it's his home but because he sees its potential and how to coax it into reality.

"There's a big movement," he said. "It's all the way to Pensacola — Florida's Great Northwest, Northwest Florida Forward, the Triumph funds, all of this is connected together to help build out the ecosystem in Northwest Florida to get more high-paying jobs, and it's all aimed about getting a third sector. We have tourism, we have military, we need a high-paying third sector, and for us it's obvious it's private-sector tech. That's where it's at."

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Technology's appeal is easy to defend. The jobs pay well and bringing that to a region means more people stay and gravitate to there. More people with more income means more development, breaking a stagnant cycle



Ben Merrell navigates a flip during a hydroflight show on Monday at Sandestin. [PATTI BLAKE/THE NEWS HERALD]

and replacing it with one of growth.

"We don't wanna mess up the whole thing with tourism," Millaway said. "Tourism is here to stay, but those aren't high-paying jobs."

Another benefit of technology is simply that it's cool — and that's where Elkins comes in.

The LED suits, recently featured in Chicago's July 3 fireworks display, are just the latest project on an extensive list.

A few years ago, he could be spotted up and down the Emerald Coast working out the kinks and drawing crowds as he soared above and through the water on a flyboard, essentially a water-powered snowboard that can soar up to 70 feet over the Gulf.

He's also made — for fun — an amphibious remote-controlled car, a plasma cannon and the airboard, a battery-powered, human-operated multicopter — essentially a drone that you can fly on.

It all stemmed from an associate's degree in electronics and a career as a VCR mechanic.

Elkins didn't need TechFarms — he garnered several patents and made a name for himself before its doors ever opened. But the business offers Elkins and other budding entrepreneurs an ideal environment: the latest equipment, 24-hour access and a network of scientific minds off which to bounce ideas.

"He's got all the ideas and energy; we've just gotta give him the environment to do it," Millaway said.

TechFarms offers him a place to create, 24 hours a day, and the tools to do it. In return, Elkins offers 38 years of MacGyver-type expertise.

"Other people sit around for months and months and design," Millaway said. "Jeff will just build it. There's not a lot of people that have electronics background, mechanical background and some software development. That's three very difficult fields all in one. Jeff is not an expert at any one, but he's good at all of them. So Jeff can build stuff that it takes

other people years. It's a real advantage to have someone here like that."

Also on TechFarms' mentor team is Len Eichler, a growth acceleration specialist with the state's Small Business Development Center. The SBDC, funded by the federal Small Business Administration and the state, provides free consulting services for those looking to start a business. Eichler offers that expertise to TechFarms.

"I've got a doctorate business degree," he said, "and I've been doing this off and on for 20-some years. I've taught at the college level. I've taught an MBA program. I've worked at a bank, at a college, in economic development."

He sees huge benefits in technology, but his focus is on strategy.

"A lot of people are enamored with the grand plan and huge overall strategy," he said. "We say it's great to have big dreams, but you've gotta have the steps to get there, and that's what we do. Being able to finance, being able to successfully meet market each step of the way. Maybe at some point it'll be that great company you envisioned but before that there are steps, benchmarks to be made along the way."

Millaway and Elkins have also been through those steps plenty of times — bringing more real-world knowledge to beginning entrepreneurs.

"Starting a company is a huge responsibility," Elkins said. "You've gotta hire people, you've got legal, you've got insurance, just headache after headache."

TechFarms brings it all into one location. The first tenant was A-list Accounting, and not by chance. Millaway knew budding entrepreneurs would need that kind of practical help — along with Elkins' mechanical expertise, Eichler's business expertise and the combined knowledge and connections of the business' other mentors.

"We want people on the outside to know about TechFarms, that we're here to help them, and make dreams come true, whether it's like Jeff and they wanna be an innovator and build something and hope one day something happens with it, or they have an idea

that they've researched, they just need mentoring, they need a place," Millaway said. "It's low-cost to be here. We have a fiber connection to the internet and all of these experts in the field to help them. So it's really a unique opportunity for somebody that has an idea but doesn't know how to get started."

TechFarms hears about two pitches a week, ideas brought in from across the street at Naval Support Activity Panama City or from as far as Germany. Not all are feasible. Some run immediately into patent issues. Others are so complicated, they would take decades to be realized.

"We want something that can hit the market, you know, in a couple years and grow jobs," Millaway said. "That's what we're trying to do."

Several companies already have found success through TechFarms. Elkins Entertainment continues to soar. Hive Technologies, which studies apiary environments to combat colony collapse disorder, is another graduate of the incubator. So is Mine Survival Inc., which has seen tremendous success since its founders walked through the doors of TechFarms.

"Our first client, Mine Survival, those were some guys who worked at the Navy base on underwater rebreather technology," Millaway said. "They had this idea to make a vest, a wearable garment, with a rebreather built in that you could use above water, for example in mining applications — anywhere there's a toxic environment. We told them day one: You need to file a patent for this, and they actually were already working on that and they ended up getting the patent. And so now they're the only company who can put a rebreather in a wearable garment. So they were able to get \$2 million because of that. They can go out and say, 'Look, we have the basic patent,' and the barrier for entry for the competitor is pretty high."

That barrier of entry is appealing to investors — along with a detailed road map and a high chance of return on that investment.

"Cool doesn't matter to investors," Elkins said.

## WANT TO GO?

**What:** Hydroflight, featuring Ben Merrell on the flyboard  
**When:** 6:30 p.m. (standard) and 8:30 p.m. (LED show)  
**Where:** Baytowne Wharf in Sandestin  
**Cost:** Free

## HAVE AN IDEA?

Do you have the region's next great idea or invention? Contact TechFarms at 850-233-0058 or techfarms.com.

"Every time I invent something, I think it's the coolest thing in the world, and we go out and fly it around, and people go, 'You made something cool, this is amazing, I never thought I'd see this in my lifetime!' But you know what? Tell them to write a check. Watch their face change. They wanna see a company that's up and running and has the potential to make money, and they wanna get their investment back, and for entrepreneurs, that's the hardest pill to swallow, I think."

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Finding that sweet spot — where the technology is ready and the right investor is interested — is TechFarms' goal. In addition to the incubator, Millaway recently began TechFarms Capital, seeking regional investors to fund the ideas coming out of the tri-state area.

The "brain power" in the area makes this the right place, Eichler said.

"The part that I see that's, I think, so encouraging is that when you take a look at the programs that are at Tyn-dall, and the Navy research lab, and you add to that Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field and the defense contractors and all the other people working on technology between Tampa and Pensacola, there's just a tremendous amount of brain power. Just an immense amount of people with tech skills and knowledge and background and connections."

Several other factors are working in the Panhandle's favor. Universities are bolstering their technology and engineering offerings. K-12 schools are emphasizing STEM and manufacturing courses. Triumph Gulf Coast, created in the wake of the 2010 BP oil spill, has millions at its disposal with the sole purpose of helping the region's economy recover and diversify.

The Bay County Economic Development Alliance for years has sought to bring in major manufacturers, netting international aerospace giant GKN in 2017.

"The part I think really needs to be buoyed up is all of these people who have these master degrees in electronics and engineering and Ph.D's in mechanical engineering and all that, for them, they work their day job and they go home," Eichler said. "If we can just get them for an hour or two to work on a project and get them interested in trying to share, that's kind of the emphasis of TechFarms. It's sort of like a central hub for people to come together. You'll have the same thing over in Pensacola and Fort Walton Beach. Each one of those has its hubs. Then you link those hubs, and that becomes an economic ecosystem. And that's really the long-term goal of how this becomes successful."

That ecosystem is what Millaway hopes will keep Bay County growing and keep its brilliant minds from leaving.

"We're sort of at ... do you know what an inflection point is? We're sort of at that point now. We've got this Advanced Technology Center at the college that's helping bring big companies like GKN here, and there's a dozen other companies right now in the pipeline to come here because of that. Advanced manufacturing is huge in this area. Everything is going in our direction right now, and we need to keep the momentum going."