

Terry Whipple, the Economic Development Director for Juneau County, was the keynote speaker at our Economic Development Summit in January 2008. Terry is also the founder of the Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club model for rural economic development. This weekend, I watched the video of his keynote presentation.

Terry talked about the importance of taking creativity and developing it into commercial applications. He described entrepreneurship and innovation as a journey, a journey exploring an idea.

Culture and Attitude

He told a story to describe a cultural difference between the Midwest and the East and West Coasts. He posed the question, “Look at the culture we live in right now; does it really fit with exploring ideas?”

Terry described, “In the Midwest, we fear failure with everything we’ve got, because communities are very hard on people who fail. In the Midwest, because failure is such an embarrassment, when we step out to explore that idea, and it doesn’t work, we start to fail...and we don’t reach out, we don’t tell anybody because its an embarrassment. We hunker down and we just keep trudging away at it by ourselves, until we are finally so humiliated and so distraught that we say, ‘I’ll never do that again.’ That is absolutely devastating to an entrepreneurial culture.”

And then he contrasted it to the entrepreneurial culture on the East and West Coasts. “They yell to everybody out there, ‘Hey, I’m failing. Hey, I need some help here.’ And everybody jumps in there. The first thing they say is, ‘Dude, you’re awesome. At least you tried; you’re cool.’” That’s a very different cultural attitude.

Tapping into Networks

And, more importantly, Terry continued describing the direct support and tapping into networks on the Coasts, “And, by the way, my mom knows this one person who knows the CEO of this company. My friend is doing this, and they really match up good with your product. Hey, my uncle works at this one company, and he can get you in.”

The idea of bringing people together in a community to motivate each other and learn from each other (after all we learn best from our peers) was at the root of his starting the model for Inventors and Entrepreneurs Clubs.

The immediate network of the club itself can be a great resource. Somebody knows about patents, or sales, or website design, or engineering, or any other business topic. Or they know somebody else who can prove the right resource. Somebody knows somebody who knows somebody.

Encouraging Signs

I remember a few years ago Mike Robinson and Jeff Pieterick of North Prairie Productions tried to build a biodiesel facility here in Evansville. The project fell through due to commodity prices and market forces as we entered the global recession. But I was awed by their entrepreneurial vision and their passion. There was no failure in their effort. And I still hold out hope for the companion project; Evansville is the right location for a Wisconsin soybean crushing facility.

I am heartened by a number of storefronts recently filled – entrepreneurs willing to take a chance. You can't win if you don't play. And I am especially impressed at cross-promotional efforts among them. Several of the downtown retailers refer customers to other downtown shops. A couple months ago Ace Hardware was grilling outside The Artful Gourmet – what a win-win for both businesses! And we've had a successful Art Crawl the last few years with a number of downtown businesses opening their storefronts as temporary art galleries. This spring's upcoming Art Crawl will be Friday, April 26.

I am excited by the Southern Wisconsin Agricultural Group having big dreams. SWAG has acquired a 200-plus acre site on the east side of Evansville. They are exploring the development of an agricultural discovery and learning center. Their plans are ambitious, but an entrepreneurial culture supports dreams.

I am excited at the City's creating a new Community Development Director position and hiring Nicole Sidoff. The position allows us to provide better service by bringing planning and zoning in-house. And it allows a dedicated emphasis on economic development. During her first month, Nicole spent much of her time meeting with our many businesses. This relationship building will help to learn the needs and concerns of our businesses and help to work with them going forward.

And, of course, I have to put in a plug for our own Evansville Area Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club. The I&E Club has been meeting monthly since late 2008; and Terry Whipple was their kick-off guest speaker. They meet the second Wednesday each month at 6:30 pm at Creekside Place (next is tonight, March 13). They are open to all area inventors, artists, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and anyone with an idea. And the I&E Club brings that grassroots, supporting culture to our local entrepreneurs.