

Cool Fargo Moments

LONG-TERM, HIGH-TOUCH APPROACH GENERATES ENTREPRENEURIAL ENERGY IN FM

Lights, laughter and music spilled out of the open 2nd-floor windows of Ecce Art Gallery on a crisp April evening, bathing Broadway with gypsy jazz.

It was the launch party for “The Abettor’s Letters,” a web-based interactive game for learning French created by Fargo startup Beach Interactive, and John Machacek was just leaving. He paused in the US Bank Plaza to look back and watch dozens of grooving people, their shadows dancing in front the “The Abettor’s Letters” projected onto an interior wall.

“I remember looking up at Ecce and they had the windows open. Here’s a band playing, there were people and lights, and you could see their video game up on a wall so everyone could see a live demo,” said Machacek, the EDC’s senior vice president, finance and entrepreneurial development. “It was just one of those cool, downtown Fargo moments.”

It also was one of hundreds of moments the EDC has helped make possible in the past few years. These moments are the result of long-range thinking and personal attention that support Fargo’s hopping entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Machacek helped Beach Interactive co-founder Kyle Weik when Weik was creating Fargo Game Makers, a group for aspiring game developers. Weik and his partner, Sarah English, had a launch party vision but limited funds to make it happen. Machacek reached out to his contacts; \$10 and \$20 donations started coming in. The EDC threw in about \$100 and Eide Bailly covered costs over what others pitched in.

The social media that resulted that evening gave Beach Interactive much-needed exposure and boosted Fargo Moorhead’s image across the country.

Supporting entrepreneurship has been our focus at the EDC for a long time, but Jim Gartin wanted a more a hands-on, individualized approach when he became president in 2012. He made Machacek his frontman.

The philosophy we’ve put into practice is best summarized in a 2015 Kauffman Foundation report: “If local governments wish to encourage entrepreneurship, it requires that those officials connect to entrepreneurs at the individual level and to entrepreneurs’ networks at the local level, a lengthy and time-intensive process.”

In other words, it takes one-on-one attention from someone who cares about people and their ideas.

If it’s happening in Fargo-Moorhead and has something to do with nurturing new ideas, chances are the GFMEDC has had a hand in it at some point. Probably at several points.

Our work has covered everything from hardware/software development to video game programming, entrepreneurship competition sponsorships to student scholarships, and Startup Weekends to networking events. We also are a strong supporter of Emerging Prairie and its initiatives like the Prairie Den and 1 Million Cups.

Some people can develop their ideas to the point where we help them access programs like Innovate ND, tax credits for creating jobs and employee training. But often what’s needed is time over a cup of coffee, a sympathetic ear or an open contact list.



DEAR JOHN LETTERS: John Machacek keeps emailed and handwritten thank-you notes he's received from entrepreneurs, groups and students taped or wedged into the edges of a whiteboard in his office.

John – you do great work. You are a HIGHLY trusted source in our community because you continually get (stuff) done. We appreciate it! – Greg

Greg Tehven, co-founder of Emerging Prairie, a Fargo-based, entrepreneurship-focused non-profit

Johnny Mach & the entire EDC, Thank you all so much for your constant support of The Abettor's Letters. We are so fortunate to have an org. like you in Fargo... We are forever grateful. Your humble servants – Sarah, Kyle and McCal

Sarah English, Kyle Weik and McCal Joy Johnson of Beach Interactive, an educational video game company

Johnny Mach & the EDC – Thank you to the moon and back for helping us bring the CODE documentary to Fargo. You have done so much for Girl Develop It over the last year and we can't thank you enough. – Shannon Wiedman & Megan Beck

Fargo chapter of Girl Develop It, a national nonprofit that provides women opportunities to learn web and software development

Having John Machacek in our corner, who is here to help us if we need it, is just another way the Fargo/Moorhead community is here to support us and I just want to say thank you. – Kari

Kari Peterson, president and co-founder of Sky Blue Technology, a Fargo start-up that helps companies leverage technology to improve customer experiences

STARTUP WEEKEND: A 54-hour event where developers, designers and other startup enthusiasts form teams to turn ideas into potential startups.

HACK-A-THON: An event that brings computer programming enthusiasts together to collaborate.

You never know where a new introduction or conversation is going to lead, Machacek says.

Take the first person he met at a start-up convention in Cincinnati in 2013, an employee at Clifton Labs, a computer engineering and software development firm. When he saw "Fargo" on Machacek's nametag, the guy exclaimed, "You're from Fargo? Our owner just moved there yesterday."

The owner was Blaine Booher, who had formed a partnership with Fargo's IDA Corp., a digital radio network connectivity and customized equipment tracking company.

Machacek invited Booher and his wife to lunch, then connected them to Greg Tehven from Emerging Prairie. Tehven invited them to a social gathering, and Booher wound up joining the 2014 Startup Weekend planning committee.

Booher also entered his own idea, Hack Fargo, and won the competition. The hack-a-thon initiative brings together programmers to work on new ways to put publicly available data to good use. Since then Clifton Labs has added 11 full-time and four part-time jobs in Fargo, and the Booher's have organized multiple hack-a-thons.

Our efforts don't always generate such concrete results so quickly. Usually, it's a more incremental process of nurturing contacts, connecting people and providing lots of information.

So the man known as "Johnny Mach" in certain circles keeps his door, his ears and his mind open. Little by little, handshake by handshake, and cuppa joe by cuppa joe, the entrepreneurial culture in Fargo Moorhead deepens, and those "cool Fargo moments" keep coming.