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Business panel shares stories, advice for local entrepreneurs



The panelists in action: Carlton Jones, Mike Schneider, City Council member Stephen Joost, Tony Sleiman and Jim Bleech; Paul Maington (standing) served as moderator.

Aspiring and new business owners heard from some of their established entrepreneurial peers on the challenges and successes of becoming successful in their crafts during the Entrepreneurial Success Fair and Forum held at Beaver Street Enterprises Friday.

The five-person panel featured Carlton Jones, president and CEO of The Renaissance Group; Mike Schneider, owner of The Loop Pizza and Grill along with Bistro Aix; City Council member Stephen Joost, chief financial officer of Firehouse Subs; Tony Sleiman, president of Sleiman Enterprises; and Jim Bleech, CEO of Parliament Building Products. In addition to talking about their business success, the panelists told personal stories about their past while helping attendees look to the future.

Some of the biggest challenges they each faced when starting their businesses still hold true today, they agreed, including finding the right people of character and values that mesh well with the business owner's ideals, the dilemma of securing capital, building relationships and the total commitment and sacrifice needed to see through their endeavors.

The commitment level was one each touched on specifically.

"Don't be afraid to sacrifice," said Joost. "Don't let other people define you ... If it was easy, everyone would do it."

Schneider noted the parallel of being an entrepreneur with the task of parenting.



Jones and Schneider talk to attending entrepreneurs following their discussion panel.



Sellers and Ellen Leroy-Reed at their booth for Breaking Ground Contracting.

"You have to approach it (new business) like a newborn baby," he said. "It's going to overwhelm you at times."

For attendees, the message of commitment and perseverance rang true with what they're trying to accomplish.

"I thought the overall message was good," said Earlene Malpress, district leader with Primerica Financial Services. "It's about never giving up, never quitting and being in place for the right market."

For the panelists, it was an opportunity to try to help through encouragement and advice.

"I get a lot out of coming in and talking with small business owners," said Joost, who referenced the Chinese proverb regarding teaching a man to fish versus giving it to him.

While Landing and strip mall owner Sleiman sees the issues facing small business owners every day, speaking to them in a forum was a different experience.

"It's a great thing to be able to get back out and try to help small businesses grow," said Sleiman. "I enjoy speaking to them ... I love small businesses."

For Jones, the opportunity to speak on small business was an opportunity in itself.

"I'm still learning myself," said Jones. "Networking events like these are great ... Of all the people I meet today, I am guessing I end up doing business with one."

It was their tales of success that Jackie Perry, Beaver Street Enterprises executive director, hoped would convey a positive message to other budding business owners, something she believed the event accomplished.

"They really do know what they're doing," said Perry, of the panel. "We wanted them to come in and share their message while showing others that you can still pursue your dream."

In addition to the panel discussion, the morning affair included a business fair featuring booths and networking opportunities for the more than 70 who attended.

For more information on Beaver Street Enterprises, go to bsecenter.net.

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