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Entrepreneurs Build Creative Communities at NM's Startup Weekends

By *Finance New Mexico*

Steven Eiserling is an idea machine. Ever since he was a teenager, Eiserling has turned ideas into businesses — even during his 20-year career in information technology. Now the Chicago transplant studies business information systems at New Mexico State University and participates in entrepreneurial events. In Las Cruces' Startup Weekend Oct. 24 to 26, he and his team pitched an application to link nonprofit organizations to volunteers through an online portal.

At last year's Startup Weekend, Eiserling led a Las Cruces team that proposed a real-time parking app to help motorists find vacant spots in large commercial lots, and that team formed a company — ParaPhin — that's developing the project.



Eiserling's team didn't win this year's event prizes, including legal and business development services, but working with young innovators made the whole exercise worthwhile, he said. Even teams that don't secure financing or other prizes at the marathon weekend events benefit from the experience by working with potential collaborators, mentors and investors to create a business that can bring commercially viable products or services to market on a tight deadline.

Creative Impulses

What began in Colorado in 2007 as a project to create a startup company in one weekend has become a Seattle-based global movement inspired by growing interest in entrepreneurial training. Four New Mexico cities host events this fall.

Last year, Santa Fe was the first New Mexico city to host a Startup Weekend in conjunction with Global Entrepreneurship Week. The second Santa Fe Startup Weekend was Sept. 19 at

the Santa Fe Business Incubator, but the incubator keeps the energy going during this year's Global Entrepreneurship Week, which officially runs Nov. 17 to 23.

SFBI hosts a GrowthWheel workshop from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Nov. 17; this seminar allows owners of startups and evolving businesses to exchange ideas about normal developmental challenges. A Three City Roundtable at 1 p.m. Nov. 18 enables entrepreneurs in Philadelphia, Fairbanks and Santa Fe to confer by Skype about the challenges they share and the potential solutions. And on Nov. 19, from 5 to 7 p.m., scientists from Los Alamos National Laboratory will join startup owners in a Eureka Effect event in hopes the five-minute brainstorming sessions trigger viable ideas.

"It speaks well of New Mexico that there's this much energy," said Eric Renz-Whitmore, community manager at New Mexico Tech Council and an organizer of statewide Startup Weekends, including Santa Fe's inaugural event in 2013. "Millennials are looking for freedom of choice, and nothing offers more freedom than running your own business or working with a small group to start a business."

Ideas Beget Innovation

Startup Weekends are cauldrons of creativity, where entrepreneurial impulses can be prudently indulged: The stakes are minimal and the potential payoffs great. Weekends begin with project pitches Friday night, followed by a vote for the most feasible ideas. Teams form around surviving projects and polish their plans for a final Sunday night pitch to judges with expertise in technology and business.

More than a third of Startup Weekend projects evolve into companies, regardless of how they fare with event judges. And each event creates momentum for the next, with two more Startup Weekends planned in Farmington and Albuquerque around Global Entrepreneurship Week and more events planned at SFBI.

Startup Weekends are among the many tools business support organizations use to spark imagination and innovation.

The San Juan College Enterprise Center hosts its second Four Corners Startup Weekend Nov. 14-16 at the Quality Center for Business at San Juan College. "We're looking for ways to educate and support people interested in developing a business concept, product or service," explained Judy Castleberry, director of the enterprise center.

The event is open to Four Corners-area students and entrepreneurs. Admission is \$75 for the general public and \$25 for area college students; the price includes all meals. Visit www.fourcorners.startupweekend.org or contact Judy Castleberry at (505) 566-3699 or castleberryj@sanjuancollege.edu to register or get more information.

Startup Weekend Albuquerque is Nov. 21-23 at Central New Mexico Community College's Stemulus Center, 20 First Plaza Center N.W. Cost is \$75 to \$99. Albuquerque's Startup

Weekend represents the conclusion of more than 20 events taking place from Nov. 17-23 as part of Global Entrepreneurship Week.

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