Co-working spaces nurture growing entrepreneurs

Editor’s note: The following is part of the Business Matters special section.

Walking room was hard to come by in New Leaf, a space on the third floor of the State College Municipal Building, on Jan. 14. It was Hacky Hour night, combined with a New Year’s member mixer for the space.

Held from 5:30 to 8 p.m. Thursdays, the weekly Hacky Hour draws everyone from amateur developers to the founders of local tech companies. West Arete President Scott Woods came up the concept for Hacky Hour — a time for people interested in technology to get together and learn from each other. His company develops custom software.

“We’ve always invested time helping people to learn how to program or helping entrepreneurs and startups get off the ground, so we’re actually on the path to become a B Corp. in 2016,” Woods said. “The work we did with New Leaf was tied in.”

Woods supported New Leaf’s founders when they searched for spaces in the community.

“All time I went in to visit, I’d meet the most incredible people in there,” he said.

So, he became a part of it.

“For years we had the State College Ruby Group, but most people didn’t know about it,” Woods said. “We came up with Hacky Hour to get programmers together to learn and share things they’re working on. We’ve grown by teaching programming, which can also help us learn more. What matters is getting sharp people together and creating new things from different cultural, personal and professional backgrounds.”

The Thursday evening meetings, he said, have been the inspiration for projects and the connection some people have needed to land a job.

Other co-working spaces in town like co.space and The Make Space also offer unique opportunities.

cospace
Changemakers live in the co.space house, located off East College Avenue in the Highlands neighborhood, to form a group of people interested in making positive change in their community.

Co-founders Christian Baum and Spud Marshall, who also founded New Leaf, have lived in the co.space house with dozens of other students and young professionals.

“To date, people get this confused, because ‘changemaker’ is still a new term,” Baum said. “I’m happy about that, until people tarnish it. No one knew what co-working meant. People think we’re sustainability focused, no. They think we’re entrepreneur focused, no. When we started, we found leaders of Thon, of Penn State, of the community.”

It has similarities to New Leaf and The Make Space, but people live in co.space — 20 to be exact — every year. The home opened to changemakers in 2014.

Those who want to join have to apply and be selected.

“If a student comes to us and aspires to have a million dollar business, that’s great, but how can we take that and see the social purpose in it?” Baum said. “Rather than make a lot of money, maybe you can provide a lot of jobs, stability. It can be anyone, too. They don’t have to create a company. We have guys, we have girls, designers, leaders, a real wide range of people. If we didn’t have diversity, it would be a pretty cut and dry thing.”

Co.space members get a journal when they join, a tool that helps them focus on their personal, professional and project journeys.

“We try to look at the road with them in little segments in the house, so when they do leave, people have learned to identify what they want and need in life and how to take the resources around them to accomplish it,” Baum said.

Several entrepreneurs have been through the house, but so too have people with backgrounds in sociology, engineering and abilities advocating. It’s a purposefully mixed group.

“There are usually one or two tech people, one or two art, so it really is a lot of people with different backgrounds,” Baum said. “Spud and I are there to help them with whatever they’re doing. It’s them identifying what’s next and us pulling those resources together for them.”

GreenTowers co-founders Dustin Betz and Jared Yarnall-Schane have lived in the house. So too has SmartPurse founder Nicole Kelner.

Co.space has been so successful that Baum says about 70 groups of people from other cities are interested in the concept.

“Your happiness is way more important than anything else,” Baum said. “You’ve also got to be willing to try, pivot, fail and if you’re not getting anywhere it’s OK to move onto something else. You can always go back and try to do it again.”

The co.space, he hopes, also changes some people’s perspective of success.

“The way the tech industry can rub me the wrong way is with the expectation that it needs to be Apple or Google or this huge thing,” Baum said. “That doesn’t mean the people who did those things are happy or that they’re worth anything. You might get a big investment, but whoever gave it to you then might own most of your company, and you might be lucky to walk away with a dollar.”

“The thought that you’re somehow not successful unless you’re big is wrong,” he added. “A very small fraction of people ever get there. You could have 10 employees, do incredible things and be happy without the billion dollar company. How entrepreneurship got labeled with that is frustrating.”

The Make Space

It is open to all, though not everyone would fit.

If there is something The Make Space member John Stitzinger could add, it would be the size of the space.

It would be nice, Stitzinger said, to have more room in the cozy workshop, if only to give a startup or two a 10-by-15 foot space all their own. Even without that added luxury, The Make Space gives everyone with a creative bone in their body a chance to innovate.

The space has 3-D printers, a laser cutter and computers. It has drills, hammers and every tool you could want to create something.

“We have many tools that have been loaned to us — a circular saw, hand tools, all the basics in electronics — everything,” Stitzinger said. “If you want to make something mechanically, electronically, you have the resources you need right here. We’re ambitious and want to cover everything people could want.”

It is run by volunteers, some of which organize free classes on technologies, and is used as a meeting space for clubs like the Technology, Philosophy and Society Group.

“We get whole mix of people, a great mix from our tech community,” Stitzinger said. “When you get so many people together, they start thinking outside the box and can do great things.”

The Make Space is a tucked-away haven for those interested in building and collaborating things. It’s a hidden gem at 141 S. Fraser St. for creative people, whether they’re young amateur craftsmen or retired professionals.
It’s less of an unintended secret than it was during 2011, the year InnoBlue founded it.

Maker’s Week, an event in September, drew new faces.

“We partnered with the library and Discovery Space,” Stitzinger said. “We got to share with a lot of people what we do and to show them what a cool resource our community has.”

**New Leaf**

There’s a sort of stereotype that comes with co-working spaces, according to New Leaf Executive Director Galen Bernard.

“At times when someone hears ‘co-working space,’ there’s an assumption that we are exclusively technology,” he said. “Part of our message has been that we are actually here to serve a diverse population. The ultimate idea is to help people.”

Flashback about a year ago in New Leaf’s third-floor space in the State College Municipal Building.

The temperature dropped into the single digits when about 30 people showed up for New Leaf’s five-year anniversary celebration.

Several people stood, while about 30 more sat at tables, waiting for a piece of dessert.

Those in the room included a Penn State Small Business Development Center consultant Linda Feltman, marketing major Victoria Babb and two accountants who just finished a day at work.

Bernard was in a meeting room nearby, describing who uses New Leaf.

“I came here in May and saw a desire among so many students, young adults, older generations and local, key community members to do work that mattered to them — meaningful work, meaningful learning — but they were looking for the how,” Bernard said. “New Leaf does things to better equip and connect people seeking to create positive change in the community.”

Businesses including the Centre Daily Times have held meetings at New Leaf — a space that is a continually growing hub of opportunity to get work done, have meetings, meet strangers, build your network and collaborate no matter your background.

“Inspire, equip, connect,” said New Leaf Chairman Todd Erdley.

There are some spaces of New Leaf that tech people have found particularly helpful.

“One of our newer features that I think tech people like is our ‘ideation room,’” Bernard said. “It’s designed to take through the steps of ideating something. It’s a process used by Apple and Google, and a lot of people have found it really valuable.”

New Leaf has already been the venue where some local startups have been brainstormed.

“A lot of people don’t know OrderUp was started here,” Bernard said. “They ran out of here for several years.”

Still, New Leaf, like the other co-working spaces in town, could be for anyone.

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