

# NURTURING ENTREPRENEUR



2013 Access for Entrepreneurs participants.

**P**erhaps one of Kansas City's most famed entrepreneurs put it best. "The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing," said cartoonist Walt Disney. And over the past year, the KC Chamber has heeded that advice, following the strong example set by the likes of Disney, Joyce Hall, Ewing Marion Kauffman, James Stowers, and so many others who prove entrepreneurship is home-grown in Kansas City.

In 2011, the KC Chamber launched the Big 5 goal of making Kansas City "America's Most Entrepreneurial City," and since then there's been no looking back. This Big 5 effort is, in a sense, a startup itself. The vision: to gain global recognition for KC as a premier

location for launching and expanding innovative, high-growth companies. It means creating America's most comprehensive and effective entrepreneurial ecosystem, and that necessitates systemic change for this community.

"This is a long-term, cultural investment that is tied to our identity as a community," said Peter deSilva, champion of this Big 5 initiative and president and chief operating officer at UMB Bank. "It's one thing to declare our region's belief in this vision - but you have to back it up. We are creating a national and global identity for entrepreneurship."

That's being accomplished in a variety of ways. The

# S IN GREATER KANSAS CITY

KC Chamber served as a sounding board in the crafting of federal legislation, known now as the Startup Act 3.0 and has been an active advocate for its passage. Introduced by a bipartisan group including U.S. Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS), the bill would improve the environment for entrepreneurs by creating new businesses, expanding existing companies, and creating jobs. Startups create an average of 3 million jobs annually, according to the Kauffman Foundation. They create products and services that change the way we live and work. Laws and regulations impact the chances a startup will be successful. Startup Act 3.0 aims to create pro-growth policies.

In January 2013, the KC Chamber launched Access for Entrepreneurs. The year-long program connects high potential entrepreneurs with corporate, civic, and entrepreneurial leaders in the community. Participants receive advice, assistance, and connections to help build their businesses. CEOs tap into the energy and ideas of Kansas City's most dynamic entrepreneurs. The idea came out of the chamber's Small Business Council Emerging Business Subcommittee as the group worked to position the KC Chamber and its resources in the most productive way to contribute to entrepreneurs and the entire community.

"Local entrepreneurs are poised for big success and we believe that giving startups access to top Chamber leaders will accelerate their growth," said Cameron Cushman, with the Kauffman Foundation. "We want the corporate community to be ready to celebrate that success and prove it can be done here in Kansas City."

Serving as convener is a natural fit for the chamber.

"This is about cross-pollination," said Jack Hayhow, subcommittee chair and chief executive officer at Opus. "Big companies don't have access to startup ideas. Entrepreneurs don't have access to that kind of counsel. The KC Chamber can help, and is uniquely positioned to engage and connect senior leaders and startups."

The 13 entrepreneurs of the inaugural class are ready to serve as the example.

"This is a great opportunity to meet some of Kansas City's leading CEOs and founders and hear their stories of success," said Jessica Bishop, of Klink Mobile Inc. "I hope to gain further insights and knowledge of the Kansas City leadership community and also the resources available to entrepreneurs. Learning from others is great and making new friends, mentors, colleagues, and community leaders is always a plus."

"There are some entrepreneurs who can operate in a vacuum, but, for the most part, you need other people," said entrepreneur Jeremy Eccles, of Rade|Eccles. "By doing things like this, the KC Chamber helps us connect with the larger community. The Access for Entrepreneurs program offers relationships with business leaders, a chance to meet other entrepreneurs, and a way to grow my business as a result of those connections. This kind of program shows important change and I'm excited for what's to come."

While Access for Entrepreneurs targets just one group of entrepreneurs, there are hundreds more in the Kansas City community. Events like the iKC Innovation Conference, in collaboration with the KC Chamber and Think Big Partners, allow for wider inclusion, and a means to advance the growth of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

"Now more than ever, we have to continue the dialogues that have been started between entrepreneurs and innovators, the large companies and small companies, and the established thought leaders and the emerging thought disruptors to build the future of Kansas City," said Herb Sih, managing partner at Think Big Partners.

With approximately 60 media impressions over the past year, some of them national headlines, it's clear this Big 5 initiative and other supporting efforts, are taking local entrepreneurs to the next level. Look out, Walt. Kansas City's illustrating success. ▾