

THE TREEHOUSE GROUP: CREATIVE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Great ideas from minds that don't think alike

The Toronto Idea Exchange culls innovation from the meeting of people with very little in common

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I am staring up at a colourful image of an Australian buprestid beetle mounting a beer bottle. According to lecturer Sabrina Amato, if you look closely, you can see the beetle's "copulatory organ" trying to penetrate the bottle's surface. Apparently the colour and the ridge pattern on this bottle match perfectly the patterns on the abdomen of the female. In Australia, the population of this insect dropped precipitously as the male beetles found these new, unresponsive lovers.

I know nothing about insects. I am not at an entomology lecture, but at a new kind of event designed to bring people out of their comfort zones to grapple with issues outside their field. The Toronto Idea Exchange, held March 2 at the MaRS Discovery District, brought together people from different backgrounds so they could tackle social problems from different angles. The event was organized by the Treehouse Group, a diverse collective of Toronto-area thinkers that I have been a part of since 2006.

Lawyers rubbed shoulders with fashion designers, musicians with teachers, to share their expertise in the hopes of coming up with some truly innovative ideas. Ms. Amato's stories enthrall the crowd not because of their knowledge of bugs, but because of their ignorance. What might the lives of insects teach us about human population growth or the organization of cities?

According to Frans Johansson, in his book *The Medici Effect: What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us About Innovation*, new ideas are generated at a place called "the intersection." Exemplified by the patronage of the powerful Medici family in Renaissance Florence, the intersection is a place where varied fields of study meet, where boundaries between fields of study collapse, revealing a new intellectual landscape. The members of the Treehouse Group try this every month over brunch, swapping ideas and job experiences with abandon. The Idea Exchange was an effort to expand this practice to more people.

"MaRS was created for events exactly like this," MaRS chairman John Evans says from the podium. In 2000, Dr. Evans developed MaRS as an incubator for cross-disciplinary explorations in science and business. "I'm interested in finding out where this goes today."

He bangs the gong on the front desk beside him to launch our first activity: speed-networking for ideas. The goal is to introduce new people to each other by getting them to focus on an object. Toy cars, bike lights, cameras and maps are pondered over by random pairings of people, each digging for ways they can relate to the object and, by proxy, to each other.

During one conversation, computer programmer Peter Wills, an attendee who has spent a lot of time sailing, picks up a yellow industrial flashlight in front of him. "We use these all the time - they're on every boat," he says.

"I can relate," says his network partner, property manager Richard Yee. "I use flashlights all the time, but they never work because they're always out of batteries."

From this point of departure, two people with seemingly unrelated fields become inspired by the possibilities of unlimited batteries and the ergonomics of flashlight design.

Next, we break off into small groups for the Great Magazine Mash-Up, a way of combining seemingly unrelated ideas at random. We flip open our magazines haphazardly.

"I've got an article about owls here," says Norman Rowen, director of the Pathways to Education organization in Regent Park.

"I've got something on interior design," says Michael Suddard, a student from Étienne Brûlé Secondary School.

"How about an architecture firm specializing in animal-treatment facilities?" someone says. "...Or an interior-design company that specializes in 'natural' colour palettes based on the colours of owls?"

Such musings can be transformative. A nuclear physicist wondering about the connections between astronomy and paleontology had the breakthrough notion that the dinosaurs became extinct because of an asteroid impact. The emerging fields of social-venture capital and venture philanthropy are breaking down the barriers that exist between the worlds of business and non-profit organizations.

Later, we use these magazines to cut and paste images that speak to some of the greatest problems facing the world. Cutting and pasting, it must be said, is remarkably relaxing. "I felt like I was in Grade 3 again," says Martha Garriock from Cisco Systems. "But in the best way possible."

Our collage-making slows down and it is my turn to address the crowd. My task is to teach 50 people sitting at tables how to do a drum roll based on my experience playing in jazz and rock bands before I became a science teacher. I tell everyone to hold their sticks "like a hammer, but looser." I give them a quick demo, and soon everyone is practising their double-stroke rolls and buzz rolls, creating a deafening clatter. I look over and see Dr. Evans furiously beating the magazine resting on the table in front of him.

Tim Brodhead, chief executive officer of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, takes the podium to the sound of dozens of pairs of clicking drumsticks. He talks about change, the buzzword of the current political race in the United States, and how we can guide it to achieve our goals. "The old ways of solving problems are expiring," Mr. Brodhead says. "What we need now is some creative problem-solving."

At the end of the afternoon, attendees swap business cards and continue conversations that were abruptly cut short by the ring of the gong.

Joseph Wilson is a teacher, writer and drummer (in that order). He is a founding member of the Treehouse Group. Visit <http://www.treehousegroup.org> for more info.