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Bard Center: 10 years of education, incubation

Denver Business Journal - by [Doug McPherson](#) Special to the Business Journal

When business owner Scott Thomas learned about a local business plan competition last year, he saw it as the perfect opportunity to revisit his own plan -- which he described as "back-of-napkin at best."

Thomas, a traffic engineer and owner of Denver's Apex Design PC, an engineering firm that specializes in transportation systems, said his company was still in the early stages of growth and needed to refocus on how to best serve clients.

"We hadn't really crafted a way to carry out our vision," Thomas said.

He didn't know it then, but getting help with that plan would be one of the best moves he could have made.

Yes, he ended up winning the competition. But what's more, his revenue skyrocketed 300 percent and now he's looking to add staff. He credits the business plan competition.

"We had the opportunity to present to ... and openly seek advice from some of Colorado's business leaders," Thomas said.

The best advice he said he got: "Don't to try to grow too fast. Focus on what you do and do it really well. The rest will follow."

A business was revived, Thomas said, thanks mostly to the organization that held the competition, the Richard H. and Pamela S. Bard Center for Entrepreneurship, which is part of the University of Colorado at Denver.

The center, housed in the historic Masonic building on the 16th Street Mall, celebrated its 10th anniversary in December.

Gupta started center

The example of Thomas' success is precisely what the center's founder, Yash Gupta, had in mind when he hatched the idea in 1993. Gupta, who was the dean of the college of business and administration at the University of Colorado-Denver then, got an itch to improve business education in a way that would serve the community, change lives and stabilize Colorado's



Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal

From left, owner Scott Thomas, CEO Jason Osaki and owner Nate Algoe of Apex Design PC. Thomas won a business-plan competition sponsored by the Bard Center.

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wobbly economy.

So he gathered a few business leaders for breakfast at the restaurant in the Westin Tabor Center. The meeting kicked off a four-year journey to create the center.

Gupta said he remembers lots of arm-twisting to get board members and money for the center. "I bet some arms are still sore," Gupta said with a laugh. "We were ruthless."

He also remembers meeting in the home of Richard Bard (a financier and early supporter), eating sandwiches and scribbling on flip charts.

The leaders, one of whom was future Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, began with location in mind.

"We started by looking at Denver and Colorado, and what they needed," Gupta said. "We knew the economy had been up and down, but we also knew we had a highly educated population, and we wanted a way to keep them here to build a more sustainable community."

When Gupta talks of the benefits of entrepreneurship, his voice hits a sacred tone. "Business education is the best hope to improve the human condition."

And he uses Thomas as an example. "There's a multiplier effect when entrepreneurs do well. When he [Thomas] won the business plan competition, he improved his life and his children's lives -- they'll be better educated and may even become entrepreneurs themselves, and his employees have jobs and the economy improves."

Gupta, who today is dean of the Carey Business School at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, is quick to praise Bard for his support. "There are two kinds of donors: one that just gives you money and tells you to go away, and the other who gives you the money, then shares the wisdom and support to get the job done." He describes Bard as the latter.

Bard called the center "a unique opportunity" for him and his wife, Pam, to focus their community involvement, and said the center "has arguably hit best-in-the-world status."

"It might be difficult to measure best-in-the-world ... but it's a uniquely successful program in Colorado ... and many of the 3,000 students and would-be entrepreneurs who've taken classes or earned certificates have said the center changed their lives. This is what makes us most proud."

Bard said he knows of 35 companies that have been started by the center's graduates.

The center offers graduate-level courses in bioscience, business consulting, legal and ethical issues, and marketing, among others, and a certification in entrepreneurship.

Catherine Kunst, the new executive director who began her duties in December, said one of her priorities is to increase funding "so that new startup companies can work on developing and marketing their products and services without worrying about rent."

This spring, the center will unveil a series of courses in bioscience, an area Kunst said is a

"major new emphasis."

"There are already more than 400 bioscience companies with more than 16,000 employees in Colorado ... so there's a strong need for additional talented individuals with both scientific and business expertise."

Gupta said he's pleased with the center's progress.

"It's a big deal, common people doing uncommon things," Gupta said. "We may even be training the next Bill Gates. That's the thing with this kind of education -- you don't even know how big it is."

"There are people who dream at night when they're asleep, and there are those who dream during the day -- they're the most dangerous kind of dreamers: entrepreneurs."

As for Thomas, his dreams are coming true.

"The Bard Center drives the entrepreneurial spirit and I'm proud to be part of it," Thomas said.

Details

Bard Center for Entrepreneurship

Address: 535 16th St., Suite 300, Denver

Phone: 303-620-4050

Web site: thunder1.cudenver.edu/bard/index.htm

Incubator: Nine companies maximum; there are six companies there right now.

To apply: The incubator is open to Bard Center alumni and include: (1) certificate holders, (2) graduates of the 11-month MBA program and (3) participants in the Bard Center business plan competition. Applicants submit business plans or executive summaries to determine if incubation is a good fit.

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