

Shared Jewish heritage connects entrepreneurs

As Boulder Startup Week comes to a close Sunday, local and national entrepreneurs hope to make lasting connections and grow business, all while rubbing elbows at niche networking events.

For the Jewish community, one networking event was a chance to forge cultural and religious connections. The Boulder Jewish Community Center and members of Boulder Startup Week hosted Jews, Brews and Startup Gurus, an invitation to sip drinks and talk about innovation.

Jonathan Lev, executive director of the JCC, said Boulder's Jewish community is different from others around the country because of its young, tech-savvy demographic and particular entrepreneurial spirit.

"I feel that the Jewish community here is on the cusp — it's its Bar Mitzvah," he said, referencing the Jewish coming-of-age ritual. "There's a lot of energy here, and it's becoming what we call 'Boulder Jewish.' It's creative, entrepreneurial, spiritual."



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The energy and ideas circulating around Boulder's Jewish community mirror the excitement and innovation of many startup companies, Lev said.

Because of the passionate similarities, the partnership between Jews and Brews and the second annual Startup Week as a no-brainer, he said.

As networkers squeezed into the crowded Tahona Tequila Bistro for the networking event Thursday, Card Gnome co-founder Joel Wishkovsky worked the room to talk up his greeting card company.

For Wishkovsky, networking events such as Jews and Brews are first and foremost about business. But when new companies search for attention and funding, forging an extra connection

like a shared Jewish heritage could mean the difference between a new investor and a missed opportunity to grow business.

Business deals are not made through a shared Jewish background alone, but "it's one more introduction you can make," he said. "It's like the Hebrew word *shidduch*, or a connection, a match."

Joel Gratz, who is part of the Chance of Weather startup, has his eye primarily on growing a web-based business that will identify when the weather will be ideal for certain outdoor activities such as mountain biking or skiing.

While Gratz sees his Jewish identity as secondary to his business identity, events such as Jews and Brews add an important undercurrent to the networking process, he said.

"It's not an exclusive club by any means. It's just nice to know I have another connection to people that isn't strictly business-related," he said. "These are people I see around town all the time. It's nice to think, 'oh, maybe they're also having a Rosh Hashanah event.'"

The "startup spirit" is not

limited to new, small businesses, Lev said. The JCC, for example, is planning to expand to a brand-new location off of Arapahoe Avenue and Cherryvale Road. Members are raising money to build on six acres of land there, and networking is one way to get the word out about the project and the new building's features.

Scott Peppet, a member of the JCC's capital campaign, said Boulder's young, plugged-in entrepreneurs are growing the same way JCC is growing. In the past four months, the JCC mailing list has increased by 800 names because of word-of-mouth and events such as happy hour meet-ups, he said.

Yet the Jewish community in Boulder still sees themselves as entrepreneurs first and Jewish second, he said.

"There's a casual connection between us, but a very real connection," he said, looking around at networkers crowding the bar. "You send out an e-mail saying, 'let's talk, let's have a drink,' and that's where it really starts."

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