

Entrepreneurs share highs, lows, and giving back at Conference



By Brock Weir

It's not easy staying both resilient and ahead of the curve in today's rapidly changing business landscape, but many local companies in York Region have done just that – finding their own unique ways to stay relevant, profitable and involved.

Entrepreneurs from across York Region heard the success stories of three of these companies at the recent YRBiz Series, held at The Mansion on November 15 in a seminar lead by Bruce Buchan of Aurora's Clean River Recycling, Sean Stephens of Treefrog Interactive, and David Rae of AIC (Allied International Credit).

All three business owners have experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, and had similar war stories of how to get back on track and back in the game.

"You get lucky sometimes," said Mr. Rae, relating back to an earlier presentation made by Frank Stronach, founder of Magna International.

Mr. Rae was speaking of the leap of "blind faith" and hope he took starting out his business and not being able to sleep in those early days thinking about not being able to make payroll.

"One thing I learned coming out of that was the importance of cash flow management," he said. "To this day, I still get a cash flow report on what is happening with our businesses around the globe, so I know how much money is in every bank account, I know what our receivables look like and I know how much money is going in. I learned that lesson by almost going out of business."

Mr. Buchan also underscored the importance of payroll management, but also the importance of being able to give back to the community. It is "very easy to write a cheque" but another thing altogether getting employees engaged in their community.

While they do this through community tree planting, engagement is also something they have had to address at a high level in the workplace – himself.

"That was one of those things I learned a very valuable lesson and that was one of the basics back to Forrest Gump playing ping pong – never take your eye off the ball!" he said. "That was when my back was up against the wall and it was a valuable lesson for me."

For Mr. Buchan, re-cycling and environmental sustainability are two principles that are not going away anytime soon. There was a time, however, when people just didn't know how to get a handle on it. That's where they came in. He expressed his "pride" in what his team has developed right in Aurora to leave their mark on the environment.

While he said Canadians are never ones to toot their own horns, two things everyone can agree with are hockey and coffee.

The company works with Tim Hortons, an iconic Canadian brand, and also partnered with the NHL on their Winter Classic Legacy Program.

“It's this kind of experience of working with top companies that has allowed us over the years to gain the attention of organizations,” he said. “What is really fascinating about this industry is if I was selling investment products, we wouldn't get a lot of call-backs. When you're talking about sustainability, the doors open wide. There isn't a door we haven't been able to get through.”

That being said, as an entrepreneur, he still considers himself a risk taker, but, with success, he's now a risk taker with a pretty good arsenal of tools at his disposal and he's putting them to good use.

“When you are successful, we do have the privilege like many others here of supporting the community,” he said. “The one I take the most pride in is Project Nest Box, which started with [local environmentalist] David Tomlinson,” he said. “It's a very creative way to tie philanthropy to business, making the boxes, getting them to the schools, where they put them all together, set them up, record [the bird] data and they are actually learning about many of the different areas of business.”