

Innovative alumni discuss entrepreneurial pursuits during Wave Weekend panel discussion

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The “Idea to Impact” panel featured (from left) Rob Lalka, executive director of the Albert LePage Center Entrepreneurship and Innovation and holder of the Albert R. LePage Professorship in Business, and alumni Franziska Trautmann, founder and CEO of Glass Half Full, Byron Kantrow Slosar, founder and CEO of HIVE; Matt Schwartz, co-CEO and co-founder of The Domain Companies; Rodney Sampson, chairman and CEO of Opportunity Hub; and Peter Ricchiuti, William B. Burkenroad Jr. Clinical Professorship in Equity Research at the A. B. Freeman School of Business. (Photo by Sabree Hill)

A panel of Tulane alumni entrepreneurs who have successfully launched and sustained innovative businesses shared their insights with Tulane students, faculty, staff, parents and visitors during Wave Weekend '23.

The panel discussion, titled "From Idea to Impact," took place, Friday, Oct. 20, in Dixon Hall and featured alumni Byron Kantrow Slosar, founder and CEO of HIVE; Rodney Sampson, chairman and CEO of Opportunity Hub; Matt Schwartz, co-CEO and co-founder of The Domain Companies; and Franziska Trautmann, founder and CEO of Glass Half Full. The panel was moderated by Peter Ricchiuti, William B. Burkenroad Jr. Clinical Professorship in Equity Research at the A. B. Freeman School of Business, and Rob Lalka, executive director of the Albert Lepage Center Entrepreneurship and Innovation and holder of the Albert R. Lepage Professorship in Business.

"These are some of the best alums that we have," Lalka said after he gave brief introductions of the alumni and overviews of their businesses. He prompted the panel to first discuss what they thought to be the most important trait of an entrepreneur.

Schwartz of The Domain Companies, a real estate development and investment company based in New York and New Orleans, said entrepreneurs need to be able to see opportunity and be willing to take risks, while remaining passionate about their goal.

"I think about the work that we did in New Orleans post-Katrina," he said, noting that the company was focused on affordable housing on Tulane Avenue, leading into the medical district, at the time. "It took really being passionate about the problem that we were trying to solve ... wanting to see New Orleans advance, wanting to help play a role in helping lift New Orleans out of that situation."

Similar to Schwartz, Kantrow Slosar, who leads HIVE, a virtual recruiting platform based in New York that assists young adults entering the workforce, said, "I realized that entrepreneurship is taking risks for a reward and willing to be caring more than scared."

Trautmann of Glass Half Full, a New Orleans-based company that recycles glass and uses it for coastal restoration, added that entrepreneurs also need to have "grit." "If you're not willing to actually get down and get dirty, and in our case, pick up trash

and sort it and turn it into something, then you won't get very far."

Echoing Trautmann, Sampson of Opportunity Hub, a network of community-based organizations that focuses on spurring entrepreneurship and innovation in Atlanta and New Orleans, also said grit is vital but often overlooked.

"I think one of the most unspoken parts of being an entrepreneur ... is the ability to really tap into the resilience and grit and perseverance that's required to manifest a definitive purpose," Sampson said.

As the discussion continued, Ricchiuti asked Kantrow Slosar, when starting hellohive, if he realized something was missing as students and young adults navigated their job search. Kantrow Slosar said that it's essential to treat them as "human beings" first and "not as candidates," acknowledging that their trajectory is not always linear.

"They're changing majors two and three times in college, but companies are so focused on retaining them the minute they step in, instead of acknowledging that they can change their mind when they get there, too," he said, interjecting that his career path had been "disjointed" at times.

Ricchiuti asked Schwartz if he knew there was great opportunity in coming back to New Orleans post-Katrina when very few were reluctant to.

"What we knew the city needed was really focused on affordable housing at that time," Schwartz said. "And what transpired was a total transformation of this city ... so our mindset shifted from that recovery focus to, 'How could we help throw fuel on that fire of stimulating more growth and investment in the city?'"

Rounding out the discussion, Lalka threw in a "curve ball" question about if entrepreneurs need to be rude or harsh when leading and making tough decisions.

Schwartz said that tough decisions do "come with the territory," but he remembers advice from a mentor: "He said, 'How do you read a business plan? Take the plan and turn it to the team section.'"

Sampson said there is a balance when making difficult decisions, but entrepreneurs must be "grounded as a human being" and thoughtful in how they lead. "In whatever problem you're solving, more and more now, we have to be very, very definitive, cautious, careful and wise for what wave we attach to."

Kantrow Slosar said there is a “learning curve” to leading while wanting to be liked and respected. He noted that making sure the team understands the intention behind action is important.

Trautmann said that for her, being a young entrepreneur, “I’ve always had the understanding that I’m not the person in the room who knows the most,” describing herself as a “sponge” when learning from others. “I think that’s developed a culture at Glass Half Full, which is very bottom-up and more collaborative.”

The discussion concluded with some brief questions from the audience before attendees ventured to other exciting Wave Weekend '23 events.