Testing nonprofit waters with Chicago Ideas Week

CARLA K. JOHNSON - Associated Press - Associated Press

There are TED talks, Davos and Renaissance Weekends, all for innovators and world leaders to share creative ideas and make lucrative connections. And now there's a big-shoulders version of the grand-meeting-of-elite-minds concept: Chicago Ideas Week.

The weeklong program of panel discussions, speakers and demonstrations, which opened Monday, was the brainchild of Groupon co-founder Brad Keywell, who regards Chicago Ideas Week as a startup, albeit one that will never be publicly traded on Wall Street.

The Chicago-based entrepreneur was briefly a billionaire after Groupon Inc.'s IPO last year. But with tech stocks falling after Facebook's recent disappointing initial public offering, Keywell is now back to millionaire status, and promoting and savoring a project that won't be judged by the market.

Keywell hatched Chicago Ideas Week as a nonprofit last year with his business partner Eric Lefkofsky as co-founder and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel as a co-chair. Keywell meant to fill a void in his adopted hometown.

"We're in the heart of the world of startups and innovation, but something has been missing," Keywell told The Associated Press in a phone interview. That something was "a platform for world-class ideas," similar to the annual TED conference in California or the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, but more accessible to the general public. Instead of invitation-only events and tickets costing thousands of dollars, everyone is welcome for a small fee for each event.

It's "Davos for the everyman," as Ideas Week executive director Jessica Malkin has called it.

"We created something in Chicago where you can participate for $15," Keywell said. "It's not exclusive. It's inclusive."

On Tuesday evening, few seats remained empty at Chicago's Oriental Theatre for what was billed as a "megatalk" with AOL co-founder Steve Case and others about "disruptive innovation." They discussed a "sharing economy," immigrant entrepreneurs, Internet security versus convenience and the transformative promise of mobile telephone technology.

"As a nation, I think, we need to make sure we remain in ... an attacker mentality, really challenging the status quo," Case said. "We need to make sure we understand what got us here, which was entrepreneurship, and we (must) double

down as a nation to make sure we preserve our lead in what clearly is a much more competitive world."

Other panel topics during the week include design as a competitive advantage, rebooting the brain and change as the constant.

Attendance is up so far in the event's second year, with other big-name speakers including retired Gen. Colin Powell, author Deepak Chopra, journalist Tom Brokaw, designer Diane von Furstenberg, model Elle Macpherson and actor Edward Norton. So far, 19,000 tickets have been sold, with 1,500 to 2,000 tickets selling a day, organizers said Tuesday.

"On Day One, I set it up as a nonprofit. I made a pledge to never make a penny off it," Keywell said. "No one can question the motives. The motives are to have something that provides intellectual stimulation and provocation."

This year, there are 30 talks, 100 "labs" or demonstrations, 235 speakers and the capacity for 28,000 attendees. Receptions after events are meant for people to network with speakers and with one another, Keywell said. The event has branched out into Twitter by asking for suggestions on how Chicago could get illegal guns off the streets. Tweeted answers are collected under the tag (hash) WhatIfChicago.

"The people attracted to Chicago Ideas Week are a wide expanse of ages," Keywell said. "We attract people who are doing or have a strong interest in doing. They're people who want to start something, join something or create something."

Keywell said the project could become like the 92nd Street Y in New York, a nonprofit that hosts cultural events in person and through digital media.

Posing a question on Twitter might indicate a new direction for Chicago Ideas Week. "We are actively in the process of determining what Chicago Ideas 365 looks like." That's what interests Keywell most now, he said: "What's it going to look like in the future?"

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