By Charlee Beasor

SUCCESSFUL 'SWIMS'

Columbus Start-Ups Thrive in Fish Tank

The Fish Tank co-working space is leading to a variety of business community collaborations.

Call it fate. Or being in the right place at the right time.

The founders of ThickStat assert they would be doing something else today instead of running a promising technology start-up in Columbus if it wasn't for the city's co-working space, the Fish Tank.

Cindy Frey, president of the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce (which created and operates the Fish Tank), might say there is more of a "by design" element to the ThickStat story.

Co-founders Ganesh Gandhieswaran and Gopinath Jaganmohan discovered their mutual interest in starting a business after Jaganmohan's experience working at the Fish Tank and his floating the idea to Frey of striking out on his own.

Gandhieswaran, ThickStat's president, explains: "Gopi came to me because he was going to move from Columbus to St. Louis. … He was mentioning the chamber of commerce and the Fish Tank and how he got a lot of insights. Gopi told me, 'I'm kind of interested in starting a business.' I said, 'That's exactly what I'm also planning.' "

Frey then connected them to retired banker Charlie Farber, who was a member of SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), which also operates out of the chamber's office space. Farber became the team's financial advisor and connected them with venture capitalists.

The ThickStat team came together in the fall of 2016. They're launching their products this year: applications that work with natural language processing and artificial intelligence (think of interacting with your smart phone the same way you'd interact with Amazon Echo or Google Home devices, offering diagnostic services, deep data queries and even a library application).

"It's a small place; there are a lot of connections and the chamber of commerce is like a center point for all the things we have. That's the story. We're really lucky," Gandhieswaran asserts.

"I might have spoken to different people about starting a company. I had no clue Gopi was going to start something like this. It was the right people connected at the right time. You need that community to make it happen, to bring people together. That happened in Columbus for me. We are still going to work here."

Catching lightning in a bottle

Frey knows a company origin like ThickStat's is special.

"That (success) would not have happened if (Jaganmohan) hadn't been working in the Fish Tank. He wouldn't be on anybody's radar (for starting a business). If one business like that gets started in our community, it will have been worth it," she asserts.

Small business owner Rebecca Reeck previously would work at inconvenient locations without secure WIFI or printing capabilities – amenities (among others) that are available at the Fish Tank.

Local art and architecture organization Landmark Columbus brought together 1,000 people for a 2016 symposium.

While Frey notes that it's not typical of a chamber of commerce to run a space like the Fish Tank, it's one more way the chamber can provide valuable services to the business community.

A low-cost solution for entrepreneurs to develop start-ups and further their businesses was desperately needed in Columbus. Frey highlights why: The population is growing and unemployment is low. Office space, distribution and manufacturing facilities are full – and as demand is high, supply is costly.

Richard McCoy acknowledges the cost savings his organization can realize by working out of a space like the Fish Tank. McCoy is director of Landmark Columbus, created in 2015 to celebrate and protect the artistic and architectural heritage of the city.

"We began using (the Fish Tank) shortly after it opened and we didn't need (to rent a separate) office space," he states.

McCoy, Brooke Hawkins and Anne Surak were meeting in the Fish Tank in late May in preparation for the upcoming Exhibit Columbus, which will see 18 art installations placed around the city's downtown district in August.

When asked where the group would be meeting if not for the Fish Tank, McCoy acknowledges the Speak Easy collaborative space in Indianapolis as a probable destination.

The team held a symposium in the fall of 2016 in coordination with Exhibit Columbus and hosted 1,000 people – all while working out of the Fish Tank.

"The value of this space means we have been able to work on and create this project here. We didn't have an office and we had 1,000 people here. We took over this room for three days and wouldn't have been able to pull this off (without the Fish Tank)," Hawkins relates.

Surak adds, "A lot of cultural organizations struggle (with working space)."

Erin Hawkins, director of marketing for the Columbus Area Visitors Center, was joining the Landmark Columbus team for a meeting and acknowledges she's frequently at the Fish Tank for such gatherings. If she can't find someone she's looking for in town, she'll often pop her head in as it's possible they're at the co-work location.

"It's important to us that we have a one-stop shop for entrepreneurs and people with ideas can grow them into full-fledged businesses. We think it's easier to have all of those services under one roof," Frey says.

Not cashin' in

Frey asserts the goal of the Fish Tank isn't financial gain for the

chamber (monthly membership fees run $100 for full use and less expensive options are offered for limited time in the space). If the needs outgrow the chamber's resources, she envisions someone in the community starting their own co-working space as a for-profit business.

About 15 to 20 members utilize the Fish Tank, she offers. The idea for its name and tagline – "where good ideas swim around" – and the impetus behind its creation is collaboration.

Frey was inspired by watching the world from her own version of a fishbowl – three sides of her office contain windows and it is located at the corner of 5th and Franklin streets in downtown Columbus. (Her Twitter handle – @fromafishbowl – is even inspired by the feeling.)

"In Columbus, we really value collaboration. Being physically close is important. That's what's valuable about a place like the Fish Tank: being able to bump into people and maybe bump into people who have different perspectives and disciplines and having your ideas collide with others in a 'fish tank,' " Frey notes.

Community and collaboration

The chamber piloted the Fish Tank for a year before it launched at the Franklin Street location in the summer of 2015.

About $50,000 was raised to renovate an unused conference room in the rear of the office building and the funds went toward upgraded wireless capabilities, a key card security system for 24/7 member access, signage and new furniture.

"We have a real attitude about this space being here. It's really about supporting the start-ups and the business growth. That really aligns well with our mission," Frey adds.

Keith Weedman, principal of consulting and speaking firm Level 3 By Design, is unabashed about the opportunities he's been afforded through having access to the Fish Tank.

"It's a great opportunity to have a place to go between appointments with wireless access. I was already a SCORE member. It's been great to work and grow a business," Weedman offers. "I used to do a lot of business in coffee shops, but the privacy is better here and it's a great value add. You can almost always find a space for a conference, there's AV assistance; this is a conducive atmosphere for business."

Rebecca Reeck, president of REAL Time Consulting, in Columbus, joined the Fish Tank in the winter of 2016. Prior to that, she said she did business at a local coffee shop or Starbucks. Sometimes she would park in the Kroger parking lot to work. Reeck had been

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considering starting her own co-working space when the Fish Tank was recommended to her by another business owner.

"Having the working space, that's huge," she says.

Growth on the horizon

Frey is upbeat about Columbus' economic and business development potential and sees the Fish Tank as just one more way for the chamber to foster development.

"In our community, with the technical talent that's here and the global companies that are recruiting engineers and MBAs from all over the world, we have a real hotbed of intellectual capital," she maintains. "We had a ranking last year that we were in the top 15 in the country for start-ups per capita. We also have more mechanical engineers per capita than even Detroit; we have 29 per 1,000 and Detroit has 12 per 1,000. I think we are ripe."

Frey acknowledges several of the entrepreneurs that started as members of the Fish Tank have moved on. But that's not a bad thing.

"If someone builds up enough of a clientele and enough of a steady revenue stream to go rent something, that's a win-win," she asserts. "We're making a contribution to the economic welfare of our city."

RESOURCES: Cindy Frey, Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce, at www.columbusareachamber.com | Ganesh Gandhieswaran, ThickStat, at www.thickstat.io | Richard McCoy, Brooke Hawkins and Anne Surak, Landmark Columbus, at www.landmarkcolumbus.org | Keith Weedman, Level 3 By Design, at www.level3bydesign.com