



COMMENTARY

Ellen Belcher: Dayton's young, restless get creative

By Ellen Belcher

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If Dayton wanted to impress somebody, it could do worse than Richard Florida.

Florida has made a name for himself — and has created a cottage industry — naming and researching the "creative class." He argues that the places that will do well economically in the future need to be courting artists, gays and geeks — that is, anybody and anything who's even a bit eclectic. An academic by training, Florida's theories are data-driven, and his book, "The Rise of the Creative Class," has won critical acclaim.

Recently, he gave an interview in which he said:

"I was just in Cincinnati and in Dayton, another city I love. They're historical centers of innovation ... from steel innovation to aluminum innovation, to electronics, to the Wright brothers, to the car. This is one of the greatest innovative and entrepreneurial centers in the world.

"They have probably one of the greatest clusters of universities in the history of the planet. They're producing phenomenal talent, but, unfortunately, that talent leaves. ...

"We (Florida's consulting group) were working with 30 community catalysts (his name for volunteers) in Greater Dayton a couple weeks ago, and I was blown away by what's happened in downtown Dayton. It's a more interesting and exciting place, filled with arts and restaurants and renovated houses and buildings."

Florida went on to say that he was taken by how the 32 people he was involved with — "black, white, young, old, Hispanic, Latino" — were so attached to the city.

You have to admit, this is not the sort of thing you hear being said about Dayton every day. That it comes from someone who has studied happening places makes it all the more notable.

Florida, who also has his criticisms of Dayton, was in town because his consulting group has been hired by the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education to lead a yearlong exercise that, in the old days, would have been called community building. In early March, almost three dozen people met for two days and came up with specific and practical ideas that would help Dayton appeal to "creative class" types.

They've conceived five projects:

- Creating an artist incubator in one of downtown's vacant buildings.
- Initiating a "pride" campaign that would include signage, billboards and kiosks, boasting about Dayton to Daytonians.
- Planning a film festival and, ideally, establishing an endowment fund for local filmmakers.



- Kicking off an annual challenge that pairs right-brain and left-brain workers, with the first event being dubbed "Walk on Water." Teams would compete to literally invent ways to walk on water.
- Organizing a "Young Creatives" summit to get young and restless professionals connected with each other and involved in community work.

Pretty darn good ideas, don't you think, for being holed up for just two days at the Cannery Art and Design Center, a downtown gallery?

Asked what she took away from the event, Beavercreek resident Theresa Gasper, who rehabs houses in Dayton's South Park neighborhood, said she liked learning that Dayton has a high "boho (short for bohemian) index." The metric reflects a community's number of artists, musicians, actors, dancers and the like per capita. A high "boho index," according to Florida, is a good predictor of an area's high-technology base.

That's an economic strength that Dayton's old guard is trying to play up, touting specifically the Air Force's research labs at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and local companies that include NCR, LexisNexis, Teradata and a legion of defense contractors.

(If Wright-Patterson's labs were private companies, if their research weren't secret and conducted behind a fence, if the base's scientists were selling their "business" and achievements in trade magazines and The Wall Street Journal, Dayton wouldn't have such a difficult time promoting itself as a technology center. After all, a community is defined in important ways by how its companies brand themselves. Wright-Patterson has a great brand, but it's best known among defense contractors and those in the Air Force. Translating the respect that Wright-Patterson's researchers command, and the intellectual synergy that exists on base and nearby, to a wider audience is a challenge.)

The people involved in the creative class initiative have set a high bar for themselves, partially borne out of frustration that Dayton isn't recognized for what it has. The group is committed to holding each other accountable for business plans and time lines that are impressive for their imagination and thoughtfulness, but wholly doable here and now.

Their spirit and energy is infectious — and nothing but good for Dayton.

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Find more online

To read Richard Florida's full interview, go to www.soapboxmedia.com.

To learn about Dayton's "creative class" initiative, go to www.daytoncreate.org.