

People

U of M taps entrepreneur and teacher to head new business incubator program

Joe, Michael Wolchock helping revitalize Main Street with Neon Factory

Gary Brownstone is the newly-appointed director of new Eureka Project. The former entrepreneur and businessman assumed the new position at the beginning of the year after spending the past five years teaching at Red River College in the College's Entrepreneur Program.

OUR LITTLE SHTEL

By



MYRON LOVE

The Eureka Program is a new venture by Smartpark Development Corporation intended to foster high-tech start-up companies in Manitoba. Smartpark, Brownstone explains, was inaugurated five

years ago at the University of Manitoba to encourage the growth of research-driven businesses.

"The idea was to cluster high-tech companies near the university with the focus on engineering, biotechnology and food sciences, information and communications technology and com-



GARY BROWNSTONE: "My role is to help young companies develop business plans and point them in the right director for funding."

Photo by Myron Love.

posites and new materials," he says.

Currently, Smartpark is home to 20 companies with about 850 employees between them. "One-third of our area has been developed," Brownstone says. "We still have 70 acres available for development."

One of the hopes for The Eureka Project is that the business incubator will lead to other companies setting up shop in the park.

A business incubator is a sheltered environment where fledgling companies can build up their businesses at minimal cost or risk. At the Eureka Project, for example, new companies have their rent heavily subsidized for the first eight months, then gradually have the rent raised to market rates. They have access to fully-furnished offices with communications technology, two board rooms and a well-appointed lobby (with furniture and artwork donated by Lyle and Anna Silverman).

"My role is to help young companies develop business plans and point them in the right direction for funding," Brownstone says. "I also arrange mentorship relationship with senior executives from existing Smartpark firms. Our hope is that after two or three years here, these start-up companies will be able to stand on their own financially and move to larger premises. Studies show that start-up companies that get a lot of support early on are three times more likely to succeed than those that don't."

Brownstone notes that there are currently eight start-up companies using the offices in the building. They include one firm doing research on the viability of airships; an engineering concern that has developed electronic sensors that can measure air quality and detect excess moisture within walls; a fellow working on 3D interactive educational websites for schools; another researcher

looking into adding soya isoflavins to foods; and a couple of software developers.

A few will have outgrown our space by the end of the year," Brownstone says. "We are always looking for new tenants."

Brownstone brings with him to his role a wealth of experience in entrepreneurial ventures. The son of Bill and Faye Brownstone, he began his working career at the Keg Restaurant chain while attending university part time. He earned a BA from the University of Manitoba in 1981 and his MBA from the University of Western Ontario in 1985.

His first post-graduate business venture was the Uncle Willy's Restaurant chain. (One location was off Kingsbury and McPhillips.) He also operated a computer software business and, for a short time, an online business in Los Angeles whose business was casting extras for movie and television shoots.

"I was commuting between Los Angeles and Winnipeg," he says. "I had a young daughter here (Rheann is now in Grade 7 at the Gray Academy of Jewish Education) and wanted to come back here permanently. I learned about the Red River College opening and applied."

A friend brought the Eureka Project and the opening for a director to his attention. "I thought this was an exciting opportunity," he says.

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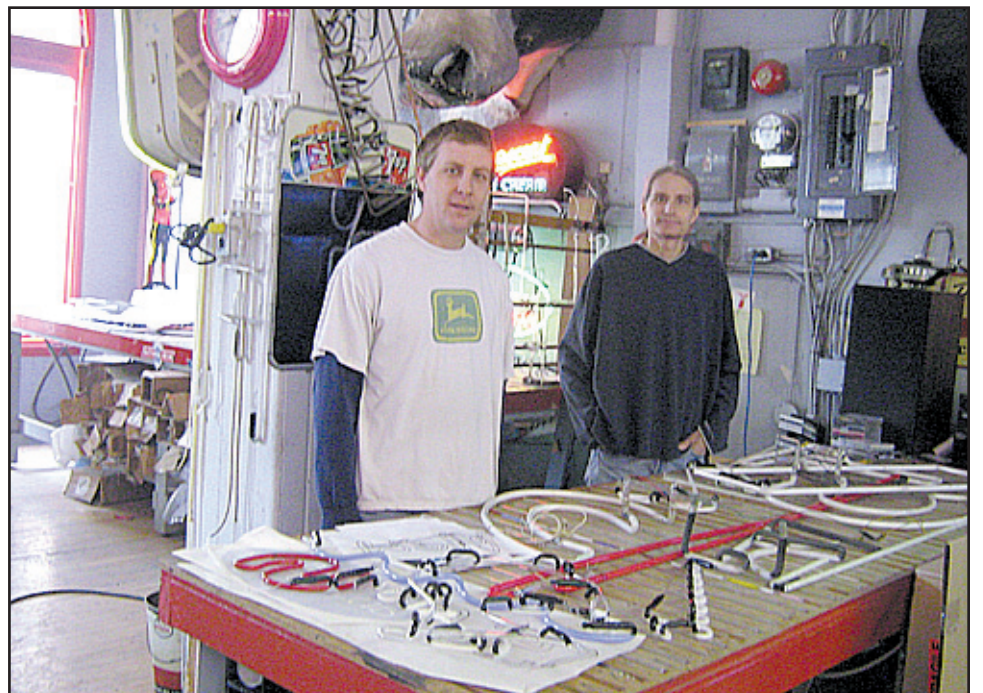
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JOE (left) and Michael Wolchock: Moving their Neon Factory to Main Street, between Logan and Alexander. Photo by Myron Love.

By moving their business into the former Monty's Furniture building on Main Street (between Logan and Alexander), Michael and Joe Wolchock are hoping to help revitalize a part of the city sorely in need of redevelopment.

"With three floors and 10,000 square feet, we will be able to expand a bit and put more of our signs on display," says older brother Michael. "We ran out of room at our current location on Princess (in the Exchange District) years ago," he says. "We stayed because the rent was so low."

The Wolchock brothers (sons of Marilyn and the late Harvey Wolchock) operate the Neon Factory. Their specialty is supplying neon signs and art pieces. The heyday of neon, Michael says, was the post-war period.

"The larger chain stores - like Safeway and Subway - used to use a lot of neon," Michael Wolchock says. "But they don't any more."

Michael started in the field 20 years ago as a young man. "I was always interested in science and advertising," he says. "I just started working

(Cont. on page 9. See "Our Little Shtetl").