

GUEST

PUBLISHER'S MESSAGE

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TEDX AND MICRO-ORGANIZING MONMOUTH COUNTY

The annual TEDxNavesink event is a coming-together of what triCity is all about: a progressive, forward-thinking mindset in the eastern side of Monmouth County. What TEDxNavesink co-founder Brian Smiga called 'the country shore.'

"We call it that because we can't bring ourselves to say 'suburbs,'" said Smiga, rejecting that conformity [or the image of it] right out.

Definitely this paper's kind of guy.

TEDxNavesink is part of the TEDx family of conferences. An offshoot of TED Talks, these are independently run and locally focused events. TEDxNavesink first hit this area in September of last year, where it sold out the Brookdale Community College Performing Arts Center. Last weekend's TEDx at Red Bank's Two River Theater sold out six weeks in advance.

And this year's TEDx revealed a rising trend in our region: micro-organizing. Small groups of individuals, an artist here, a small business there, banding together to create change. Taken together, that becomes a large and powerful organic force to help transform our region.

Micro-organizing might not make huge headlines. And maybe once the immediate mission is accomplished, that's it, job done.

But once you get a taste for organizing and creating change where you live, you're basically hooked. Even better for the region, micro-organizing snowballs into other things, connecting like-minded local movers and shakers and emboldening them to do more.

Take what's happening up in Atlantic Highlands, a town this newspaper has long spotlighted for its potential and progressive community. As demonstrated at TEDxNavesink, the town has nurtured a surge in community action and creative connection. Very quietly and very efficiently, fueled by cookies and homegrown greens.

A standout example of this was TEDxNavesink Curator Gail Woods' presentation of the "Happy for Goals" short film. Shot by Atlantic Highlands filmmaker Mike Boylan, the short film was a fundraising effort generated by kids in town to buy some soccer goals for the Atlantic Highlands Elementary School.

"We parents could have just written a check for the money," Woods said. "But we decided to give the kids a chance to raise the money themselves, and over cookies at the Flaky Tart they came up with the idea to make a movie."

The film was screened at the AJ Dillon Gallery, made the cash required, and the goals were bought. The story itself might not command headlines. Unless you know what to look for.

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This isn't just a canny bit of fundraising and solid parental guidance. It's creative organizations and people coming together. And better still, coming together to improve their community.

Another Atlantic Highlands speaker, Laurie Brekke, established a learning garden at the Atlantic Highlands Elementary School with Hope Hanlon. The two transformed the learning experience of kids there, and founded GoSprouts.org as well as learning gardens in two more area schools.

This is a good sign not just for our northernmost triCity town. Bringing these speakers south to share their stories encourages their efforts. We get a glimpse of those efforts, a glimpse that will inspire like-minded potential micro-organizers in other parts of the region.

TEDxNavesink has already proven that it generates change in our area, not just talk. Take the connection made between Asbury Park's Second Life Bikes and A&E's crowdfunding site at last year's TEDxNavesink. The founder of the RocketHub crowdfunding site was a speaker as was Second Life Bike's Kerri Martin, and that connection led to Second Life Bike acceptance into A&E's crowdfunding program.

11-year-old America Rice proved the ongoing power of those connections. At TEDxNavesink she shared her experience working at Second Life Bikes, as well as her growing role of spokesperson for the bike shop on places like NBC's Today Show, CBS Evening News, and others. Obviously, this is how we develop future community leaders.

Also along these lines, 16 year-old John Shammass was the only returnee speaker from last year. The web developer, freelancer, and high school student has been

recruited by Smiga to work on elements of this year's TEDxNavesink and other projects after his intro to the conference last year.

This newspaper jumped all over the original announcement of the establishment of an annual TEDx conference in Monmouth County. We're glad we did. Not only have the first two years of the event both sold out, but videos of last year's talks were viewed over 75,000 times on YouTube. We expect the same for this year.

Audiences might come for the fun stuff like rapper and scholar Baba Brinkman's presentation linking Chaucer and Byrror to Eminem and Rakim. But it's the local regular Joes creating change that stays who will help transform our region in the long run.

We want people to get out of their seats and into micro-organizational efforts of their own. TEDxNavesink 2014 was a petri dish. A revelation of micro-organization in the triCity coverage area. Something small-scale now, but sure to grow and take on its own transformative power.

TEDxNavesink is giving in these micro-organizing efforts the springboard for growth, putting together people and organizations to speed up that change-making process.

A few passionate citizens getting involved in their schools, their towns. Artists and artistic institutions coming together to change their community.

These things grow. Consider this your advance sneak peek.

