

Innovation on the MS Gulf Coast

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I firmly believe that one of the keys to Mississippi's economic future is to foster a culture of entrepreneurship. A culture in which young people don't just grow up thinking about getting a job one day, but instead, maybe they dream about starting a company of their own. A culture in which we celebrate the successes of entrepreneurs, and acknowledge that failures are a part of the process. In this culture we would "lift the lid" on thinking about what we can accomplish. To build this kind of a culture it takes a team effort. I am encouraged by a recent visit I had with Stephen Whitt who is the Executive Director of The Innovation Center in Gulfport.

The Innovation Center, formerly known as the Gulf Coast Business Technology Center, was founded in 1990 and is a project of the Harrison County Development Commission. The Innovation Center is a business incubator formed for the purpose of "encouraging the development of small, start-up businesses by providing an atmosphere in which they survive and prosper." The incubator has 35 tenant residents plus virtual tenants as well in its approximately 45,000 square foot building. Whitt took the helm of the incubator in 2007 with the charge by Harrison County Development Commission Executive Director Larry Barnett to, "develop an entrepreneurial friendly culture on the Gulf Coast."

Whitt is a lifelong entrepreneur and prior to his current role, he was the director of the Bay County Small Business Incubator in Panama City, Florida. Whitt obtained his undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of North Alabama, and he is currently a doctoral candidate from the University of West Florida. A proven entrepreneur, he has started over a dozen companies in varied business sectors including amusements, waste management, food service, real estate, and oil services. He has also served as a business consultant for a number of businesses including the Borden Company, two divisions of Berkshire Hathaway, Eckerd Drugs, Wolfe Industries, CVS Pharmacy, and Lakewood Industries.

At The Incubation Center, Whitt provides "hands-on" training, consulting, and encouragement for developing entrepreneurs. Whitt aptly pointed out that while some entrepreneurs make it look easy, in reality, it's a lot of hard work. He analogized to a duck on the water. It may look calm on the surface but it's working hard underneath the water. In order to be successful, Whitt pointed to the key ingredients of thinking creatively or "out of the box." He also pointed to the ability to sell. He noted that, "if you can't sell then you need to get someone on your team that can." He also encourages entrepreneurs to train themselves and to learn from each other. He recommends that novice entrepreneurs seek out mentors to help them in their journey. Whitt described to me his own learning process as a business owner, and how much he learned from each venture and continues to learn about being a successful entrepreneur.

I always like to get a fresh perspective on Mississippi and its opportunities for advancement. Based on his tenure at The Incubation Center over the last three years, Whitt is bullish on the opportunities for the state. He pointed to the success of communities like Huntsville, Alabama (his hometown) and Austin, Texas who have successfully built cultures of entrepreneurship. Whitt noted, "these communities amassed what entrepreneurs need and now they flock to these areas." He pointed out that Mississippi is already one of the top states in terms of percentage of people who own small

businesses. According to Whitt, “I believe two major opportunities are to introduce entrepreneurship more in our high schools and to work with the state colleges and universities to coordinate more opportunities for internships with start-up companies.”

Leaders like Larry Barnett and Stephen Whitt who have a vision for growing their communities and fostering economic development through entrepreneurship, are a positive sign for Mississippi and its prospects for growth. I look forward to seeing the companies that incubate out of The Innovation Center in the next few years and how leaders like Barnett and Whitt help build a dynamic culture of entrepreneurship on the Gulf Coast.

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