

Nick Gorga

SUPPORTS INDEPENDENT SMALL BUSINESSES THROUGH HATCH DETROIT

You might recall the causality dilemma that asks the question, “Which came first: the chicken or the egg?” (Sorry chicken, but most scientists agree that the egg did, indeed, come first.) But it was also a question that Nick Gorga, a hiring partner at business law firm Honigman Miller Schwartz and Cohn, asked when he was first starting Hatch Detroit, an annual contest he founded in 2011 that supports independent retail businesses in the city.

“Will there be people moving down and then we build retail? Or, do we build retail on the hope of people coming down?” asks Gorga, who moved back to Michigan from Chicago in 2008 to make a positive impact in his home state.

Gorga, of course, banked on the latter. After five years and five winning businesses awarded with \$50,000 grants and up to \$100,000 in free services to open their brick-and-mortar retail stores in Detroit, Highland Park or Hamtramck, the city has seen a surge of enthusiasm from people who want to live, work and play here.

But fastened to Gorga’s success is also his dedication to making sure Hatch Detroit fulfills the needs of Detroit residents. Prior to launching the platform, he spent nearly a year and a half in the city’s neighborhoods talking to residents and figuring out what was needed to best impact entrepreneurship and foster more density and retail options for the neighborhoods.

“I founded Hatch on the idea that we wanted to be able to shine a spotlight on the amazing retail ideas that we saw popping up in Detroit and be able to do it in a way that would draw attention to business owners, entrepreneurs who may not have a voice or audience yet, and to show people that there was really cool stuff going on in Detroit,” Gorga says. “(We wanted to) make it so public that other businesses that didn’t win would have a huge

leg up in getting their own funding. Our goal wasn’t to launch one business a year, it was to launch 10.”

Gorga and his Hatch Detroit team, which now includes Executive Director Vittoria Katanski, Chief Marketing Officer Ashley Hennen, plus a 15-member board of directors and sponsorship from big names like Comerica Bank, Detroit Lions and Strategic Staffing Solutions, receive about 200 to 300 valid submissions each year. Gorga and staff members read through each application and narrow it down to a top 25. “There are some arguments,” Gorga quips. “But we fight pretty hard, and we do our work.”

From there, they gather about 30 well-known community leaders who get to meet and mingle with the 25 contestants and at the end provide a ranking of their top 10 in order. “We then take that, combined with our ranking, and we narrow it down ... to a top 10 that we think reflects the best business ideas in the city, but also reflects the diversity of the city.”

So far, Hatch Detroit has helped launch businesses like Hugh, La Feria, Batch Brewing and Sister Pie, the brainchild of the energetic dancing machine and head baker Lisa Ludwinski. “It takes a whole lot of courage and guts to start a business. You open yourself to being vulnerable in so many ways,” says Ludwinski, who was the 2014 Hatch Detroit contest winner. “What’s cool about doing it in Detroit is that so many new resources are popping up all the time to support entrepreneurs who are taking the leap of faith.”

This year’s winner, Live Cycle Delight, is the city’s first contemporary cycle studio owned by Amina Daniels that will offer indoor cycling classes, outdoor meet-up rides, a hydration station and more. “The (Hatch Detroit) contest is a true competition that forces you to be creative, resilient by rising to the occasion, and to do


more to get the votes you need,” she says.

Daniels plans to launch the business to the Detroit market in early 2016 and says she’s ecstatic to work with Gorga as a mentor over the next year. “(Nick’s) enthusiasm, drive and knowledge continue to inspire me,” Daniels says.

But as Gorga mentioned earlier, even entrepreneurs who make it to the top 10 are winners. Just take a look at previous top 10 Hatch alumni like Detroit Institute of Bagels in Corktown, Busted Bra Shop in Midtown and Detroit Vegan Soul in West Village, which all have permanent storefronts in the city. And as much as he applauds the exploding interest in areas like Midtown, downtown and Corktown, he’s also reaching out to longstanding independent retail businesses in areas like Livernois’ Avenue of Fashion through a partnership with the Detroit Lions called the Neighborhood Initiative.

“We just want to be a mouthpiece for the needs of those residents, and we want to facilitate getting them what they want and need,” Gorga says. “We don’t dictate terms. We don’t say, ‘This is what you need.’ We facilitate.”

A number of Hatch Detroit’s alumni businesses have opened up in those neighborhoods, as well, prompting Gorga to see that the three areas of Hatch – the contest, the alumni businesses and the Neighborhood Initiative – are blurring together into one great venture that will continue to grow and adapt in response to the city’s needs.

“We don’t pretend at Hatch that we can cure all of the ordeals in the city,” he says. “(In Detroit), you have this perfect intersection of need and loyalty, desire and hope. It makes something like this – this little thing we do – possible. And it’s a testament to the fact that no one here, no matter what’s happened, has ever taken (his or her) eye off the ball. ... We love this city. What can we do to make it better?”  — Audrey LaForest

