

New face of business

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Steven Vogt is passionate about Rochester and says it is a great place for young professionals to live.

To naysayers who claim the local economy cannot offer what twentysomethings want, the new president of Rochester Young Professionals offers this piece of evidence: He recently landed a job through connections he made in RYP. And it was not the first time. Vogt has landed four jobs through RYP networking.

"In Rochester you aren't a number. You can actually make a name for yourself," he said. "I get a lot of bang for my buck."

After a decade in existence, RYP and other young professional groups in the area are showing signs of maturity. In the early 2000s, scheduled events involved happy hours and social mixers. Attending was a must for new college grads who wanted to meet their peers.

Some of the earliest groups are gone-Rochester Area Twenty-Somethings, Rendezvous Rochester and Transitions among them. The ones that remain or have since sprung up have more clearly defined goals.

Today, under Vogt's leadership, RYP is beefing up professional development while maintaining the social and volunteer aspects that were the group's foundation. The board has doubled from five to 10 members, and the group is using a new website and other social media tools. Among those RYP wants to reach are local college students unfamiliar with

Rochester's post-graduation professional scene.

"There's a gap in the city between the youth and being a young professional," said Oz Tozan, an event promoter and RYP's online networking chairman. "Students don't know there's an outlet."

Vogt estimates 3,000 people are RYP members.

Though a midsize city with thousands of companies, Rochester's business community is tightly knit and cooperative. Connections are easy to make, young leaders say-and they are using that to their advantage.

"There are a lot of companies in Rochester that people don't know about," said Susan Peter, a recruiter with Technisource Inc. and an RYP board member.

The organization enables her to expose people to companies other than the familiar big names, she said.

"A lot of business owners and professionals in the area are approachable," said RYP board member Felicia Lombard.

She and Robert Speciale, who lead RYP's professional development committee, are working with local companies as they plan a business expo for the spring. They also are building a schedule of how-to workshops for young professionals. Coming are talks in October on setting goals and in November on how to network at holiday parties.

"I think the theme here is everybody is looking for opportunities," said Speciale, a financial rep with Northwestern Mutual Financial Network and an RYP board member. "It's such an all-encompassing group. We're all about connecting with other groups."

Lombard agreed. She recently landed a job as an art teacher in the city through an RYP connection she made last March.

Connecting

A growing connectedness among young professional groups is evident in the revival of ROC City Coalition this year. For a brief time starting in 2005, the umbrella group rallied enthusiastic twentysomething organizations to collaborate on spreading the word about Rochester. Launched by Paetec Holding Corp. chairman and CEO Arunas Chesonis and led by Jeremy Cooney, it took a hiatus when Cooney left for law school in Albany in 2007. Now he is back, degree in hand, job acquired and more determined than ever to develop a unified voice for young professionals in Rochester.

A recent mixer in Cooney's High Falls loft brought out 30 representatives of 18 organizations-a phenomenal turnout for an event meant to test interest, he said, and evidence that Rochester's young professionals scene is maturing.

"We didn't have 18 groups at the peak of ROC City," Cooney said.

When he was away, a host of young leadership groups formed in Rochester to take up the causes of non-profits in the arts and human services.

The guest list was a who's who of young leaders, some of whom had never met, including RYP's Vogt, Jennifer Galvez Caton of Geva Theatre Center, James Paulino II of Ward Greenberg Heller & Reidy LLP and the Monroe County Bar Association young lawyers division, Claudia Burcke of Greater Rochester Enterprise Inc. and the Junior League of Rochester, and Kerry McGlone Falwell of Rochester City Ballet and RPOrocs.

They are the new face of Rochester business, said Vogt and Cooney, who met in their early 20s during RYP events. Some are transplants-Caton hails from San Francisco, Falwell from Texas-while others are putting down

roots in their hometown. They know what is out there, and they want to bring it to Rochester.

"That's what's important, to be at the table," Cooney said. "How is this area going to develop itself in 10 to 15 years? I want to be in a much more vibrant business community 15 years from now than we have now. I hope that my peers can be part of that decision-making process now."

Cities that create downtown destinations for young people, sometimes called lifestyle centers, are reaping the benefits. The Center City development in Charlotte, N.C., features shops, restaurants, bars, residential units and sports venues that have brought renewed vitality downtown.

"Over the years Rochester has been deemed kind of an old man's club. It was always the old money that kind of ruled the town," Vogt said. "Now there are so many choices for young people to live. The region needs to listen to us if it wants to survive."

Today's 25-year-old singles are tomorrow's married-with-children segment—a demographic Rochester pulls well, Vogt said. Finding ways to make twentysomethings part of the decisions that shape the region's future will strengthen their involvement as they settle down.

Nightlife and cultural amenities, while important, are only part of the story, said Ellen Rosen, vice president for marketing, communications and membership at the Rochester Business Alliance Inc.

"The biggest issue that we see is the creation of jobs, not just a job but a career path for people. People want to move to a community where they think they have a job path. They want to know there are lots of opportunities here in their field. We have been working to create those kinds of careers that will allow us to compete," she said.

When it recently formed a membership committee, the RBA sought a young professional member. The alliance also partners with young professional groups on events.

"They are our future work force," Rosen said. "We need to take the time to engage with them and see what their visions are for the future."

Brain gain

When a 2005 study by economist Richard Deitz of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York pointed out a dwindling population of young people in Upstate New York, the business community took notice. Considered alongside Rochester's standing as a college town with a ready source of educated graduates every year, the data brought the point home, Cooney said.

Indeed, since 2006, the region's 25-to-34 demographic has shrunk. From 2006 to 2009, the age group lost an estimated 5,214 people, or 4.4 percent, according to the Census Bureau. Still, combined with the 35-to-44 demographic, those residents number nearly a quarter-million and make up one-quarter of the population of the Rochester metro area.

In the last two months, Cooney has helped a half-dozen people in the 25-to-34 age range move to Rochester. They came from Albany; Potsdam; Portland, Maine; and Morgantown, W.Va.

"They're choosing to come to Rochester earlier," Cooney said. "They're not just going to New York City or going to Charlotte or going to Atlanta and staying as long as they can and getting married and coming back."

Cooney, who grew up in the city and attended the School of the Arts, said he had a job offer in Albany and was pursuing opportunities in New York City and Atlanta. He knows he could pay off his student loans faster in a higher-paying market. But on a visit home, it "just felt right" to move back, he said. Among other things, he noticed the increased momentum among

young professional groups here.

"Why not? What's the wait?" he recalled thinking. "It's got everything I want right now. ... I'm thrilled to be here."

Cooney estimates ROC City Coalition has 10,000 affiliate members. In the next six months, he is planning a follow-up to a 2007 survey with a community profile of young professionals, asking why they leave or stay in Rochester, the industries they work in and the challenges they face living here. The data will help the group set its agenda.

Cooney also intends to connect Rochester's young professionals with We Live NY, a statewide initiative funded through the Empire State Development Corp. Several programs will provide money for grant projects and the formation of professional groups. The funds already are approved and disbursed to ESDC.

Young professionals who want to start networking organizations or launch initiatives related to young businesspeople in the state can apply through ROC City Coalition for funds to cover startup costs, such as a license for Constant Contact e-mail marketing, a Web developer and seed money for publications. Funds will be allocated after December.

"There is nothing, nothing like the energy in Rochester," Cooney said. "And if Rochester can serve as a model for the North Country and Central New York and the Southern Tier, hey, let's do it. It'll make New York State's environment more young-professional-friendly and get more people to stay upstate."