

Testing nonprofit waters with Chicago Ideas Week

October 10 2012, by Carla K. Johnson

(AP)—There are TED talks, Renaissance Weekends and Davos, all for innovators and world leaders to share creative ideas and make lucrative connections. Now there's a version of the grand-meeting-of-elite-minds concept that's open to all: Chicago Ideas Week.

The weeklong program of panel discussions, speakers and demonstrations, which opened Monday, was the brainchild of Groupon co-founder Brad Keywell, who hatched Chicago Ideas Week as a nonprofit last year with his business partner Eric Lefkofsky as co-founder and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel as a co-chair.

"We're in the heart of the world of startups and innovation, but something has been missing," Keywell told The Associated Press in a phone interview. That something was "a platform for world-class ideas," similar to the annual [TED conference](#) in California or the [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos, Switzerland, but more accessible to the general public. Instead of invitation-only events and tickets costing thousands of dollars, everyone is welcome for a small fee for each event.

It's "Davos for the everyman," as Ideas Week executive director Jessica Malkin has called it.

"We created something in Chicago where you can participate for \$15," Keywell said. "It's not exclusive. It's inclusive."

On Tuesday evening, few seats remained empty at Chicago's Oriental

Theatre for what was billed as a "megatalk" with AOL co-founder Steve Case and others about "disruptive innovation." They discussed a "sharing economy," immigrant entrepreneurs, Internet security versus convenience and the transformative promise of mobile telephone technology.

"As a nation, I think, we need to make sure we remain in ... an attacker mentality, really challenging the status quo," Case said. "We need to make sure we understand what got us here, which was entrepreneurship, and we (must) double down as a nation to make sure we preserve our lead in what clearly is a much more competitive world."

Other panel topics during the week include design as a competitive advantage, rebooting the brain and change as the constant.

Attendance is up so far in the event's second year, with other big-name speakers including retired Gen. Colin Powell, author Deepak Chopra, journalist Tom Brokaw, designer Diane von Furstenberg, model Elle Macpherson and actor Edward Norton. So far, 19,000 tickets have been sold, with 1,500 to 2,000 tickets selling a day, organizers said Tuesday.

This year, there are 30 talks, 100 "labs" or demonstrations, 235 speakers and the capacity for 28,000 attendees. Receptions after events are meant for people to network with speakers and with one another, Keywell said. The event has branched out into Twitter by asking for suggestions on how Chicago could get illegal guns off the streets. Tweeted answers are collected under the tag (hash) WhatIfChicago.

"The people attracted to Chicago Ideas Week are a wide expanse of ages," Keywell said. "We attract people who are doing or have a strong interest in doing. They're people who want to start something, join something or create something."

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Citation: Testing nonprofit waters with Chicago Ideas Week (2012, October 10) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-10-nonprofit-chicago-ideas-week.html>

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