Digital Savant: Hackathons are changing Austin one app at a time

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If you've ever been nervous about being the least tech-savvy person in a room full of geeks, you'll know how Randy Rosens felt. On the weekend of June 1, the founder of the grass-roots organization Keep Austin Fed went to a hackathon.

Bravely.

The event, held at St. Edward's University, was called the "ATX Hackathon for Change," the local version of a White House-endorsed National Day of Civic Hacking. It was perhaps the largest Austin civic hackathon to date, an event where coders, designers and others got together to take on projects to improve the city.

At first, Rosens wasn't sure he should be there.

"I was very reticent about even going, thinking that I was someone who didn't belong with a bunch of technology folks," Rosens said. But friends and organizers from St. Edward's convinced Rosens that his deep knowledge about helping the hungry was the perfect complement to the skills other hackathon attendees would bring.

He showed up on a Friday evening. By 8 p.m. Sunday, two techies had latched onto Rosens to improve an old-school system that connects donors such as restaurants or caterers with shelters and group homes that can use their excess food. The new system built at the hackathon helped automate the process, improving Keep Austin Fed's website and

incorporating a texting tool that could mobilize volunteers who are available and geographically close to food pick-ups.

The hackers (including Rosens) are still tweaking the tools, but what was built over a weekend is now being used regularly and will likely be expanded to other cities, starting with Detroit.

"It was quite amazing," Rosens said. "Kind of a life-changing experience, really. It was the three of us pretty much locked in a room for the weekend."

Over the past year, hackathons have gained in popularity here as skilled coders and designers as well as those with little programming experience have been coming together to try to make a difference.

There are smaller, regular events of perhaps a half-dozen people at a time as well as bigger events like the one at St. Edward's, which drew more than 60 people when it began and about 75 at its conclusion. There are also hackathons put on by companies to help improve their products or to connect with techies in the hacker community. But civic hackathons are creating tools that Austinites, even non-techies, may find most useful.

David Waldron, vice president of information technology at St. Edward's, who partnered with several groups including Open Austin to have the hackathon hosted at the university, was especially pleased with the work done with Keep Austin Fed. Waldron said that the use of hackathons to improve society works well with the university's focus on social good.

"It seems to me that most of the hackathons that took place in conjunction with the National Day of Civic Hacking were very much focused around open government and the creation of applications that

make government service and data more accessible," Waldron said. "Our hackathon was a bit more focused on nonprofits. We hope to make it an annual event."

Of 19 potential projects pitched that weekend, seven were worked on involving issues such as bike sharing, providing more organized information on recycling pick-ups, making it easier to post information about lost pets online and a project from the University of Texas Food Lab to map "the greater Austin foodscape."

It's not unusual for hackathon's projects to keep being tweaked and improved long after a daylong or weekend event. One project that is ongoing with the City of Austin, for instance, is "TEC Filer," a searchable public database of money taken in or spent by political candidates or PACs.

One person who has been at the center of much of the civic hacking activity is Chip Rosenthal, who works with Open Austin, the local chapter of the national Code for America Brigade. Rosenthal has served as a liaison between the developer community and local government. He says the City Council's emerging technology and telecommunications committee in particular has been very supportive. Council member Laura Morrison, who has a background in software engineering, attended the St. Edward's event and praised the hacker community in a May "ATX Civic Tech Expo" at Austin City Hall.

In 2012, Code for America brought two fellows to Austin and made an effort to get the city more involved at that year's South by Southwest Interactive. This year, Rosenthal said, "We've built a community that is locally producing and conducting successful hack events. I think that everybody looks around at the difficulties in our government and in our society and feels overwhelmed and powerless." Hackathons, he says, are a way to get people together and bring out their best skills.

Kye Hittle, an engineer and hackathon regular who also works with Open Austin, said the pace of hackathons is what attracted him to start participating last year. "Until then I assumed the only way to get involved in local government was boring meetings, task forces, committees and perhaps running for office - all with a glacial pace of change and huge time investment," Hittle wrote in an email. "I'm of the impatient Internet generation where 'next year' is a really disheartening thing to hear. Hackathons can produce working apps and prototypes in a weekend."

A few of the projects that have come out of Austin hackathons include:

-ATX Floods (atxfloods.com), which features current flood conditions and road closures.

-prepared.ly, which can help you assess risk and prepare for natural disasters such as Texas wildfires.

-Stray Mapper (straymapper.com), a tool for finding lost pets.

-Bike Buddy (bike-buddy.open-austin.org), which connects novice bike commuters to experienced ones.

-Austin Recycles (austin-recycles.open-austin.org), a way to find out when to put recycle bins out.

But Rosenthal said much more can be done, whether help comes from a civic innovation position created by the city or from other sources of help. "I would love to see some foundation or city staff person getting more involved so I could spend more time coding and hacking myself," he said.

"That's the fun stuff."

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