

30 Years MIAMI TODAY

WEEK OF THURSDAY, JUNE 5, 2014

SERVING SOUTH FLORIDA'S MOST IMPORTANT AUDIENCE

Rising leaders building support scaffolding for tech growth

By Nina Lincoff

On the heels of Miami's first annual eMerge Techweek, which wrapped up in early May, there's no denying that the technology industry in Greater Miami is going through Renaissance.

But supporting that boom and helping to ensure that it doesn't go the way of the late-'90s tech trend are local players from across all industries. By providing the legal, financial and civic scaffolding for Miami's tech sector, these local leaders are showing that the area's current tech boom is being built to last.

Jaret Davis, co-managing shareholder of Greenberg Traurig Miami, has been involved with the tech scene in South Florida for over two decades, which is astonishing considering that he was still in college at the University of Miami in the late '90s. But Mr. Davis got his start in tech like so many others in the industry – early.

At the University of Miami, where Mr. Davis completed his undergraduate and law degrees, business was his primary discipline, but he always maintained an interest (and a minor) in computers.

“Part of it was for the geek factor. I enjoyed doing code, enjoyed being able to solve problems and I enjoyed everything about computers,” Mr. Davis said. “But the other part of it was that although it was the late '90s... the web was just coming out, and seeing it develop was exciting.”

While Mr. Davis now advises tech startups and entrepreneurs, often start-



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Attorney Jaret Davis has been active in the tech scene since his days as a University of Miami student.

ing with a two-hour sit-down where he goes over business plans and so forth with his clients, he can claim tech cred. At one point, his Star Wars website was one of the top ranked sites on the internet, he said.

Now, his clients are from primarily two different industries. “My clients right now are life sciences and biotech or IT. It's right there about at 70%. 70% of my client base is comprised of those companies and that's my practice right there,” Mr. Davis said.

A tech endeavor can start with a great idea, but business and legal support are necessary to take that great idea and develop it into a company with longevity. That's where Mr. Davis comes in, and why Xavier Gonzalez, executive director of eMerge Americas, nominated

him.

For Mr. Davis, now is the time for tech to take hold in Miami, and events like eMerge just serve to bring the bubbling tech sector in the area to a boil.

“It's analogous with Art Basel. There was always a strong arts community in Miami, and Art Basel acted as a catalyst to explode the value,” Mr. Davis said. “Now, there's always been pockets of tech innovation in Miami, and the key was to bring them all together.”

Following eMerge, where those pockets did get a chance to coalesce along with many others from around Latin and North America, there is a need to capitalize on the momentum created in those first weeks of this May.

“What I am seeing in South Florida is incredible in terms of tech innova-

tion. It goes across multiple sectors. We're seeing pioneers in infrastructure, cyber security and certainly social media," Mr. Davis said. "The entrepreneurship is there, the innovation is there. What we need now is the capital."

Where Mr. Davis can help provide business and legal support, Susan Amat, founder of Venture Hive, can help provide a home and a competitive environment where startups from around the world can grow and learn from one another in a Miami-based startup accelerator and incubator.

"Susan Amat comes to mind immediately," said Melissa Medina, vice president of strategic engagement for the Technology Foundation of the Americas and president of the Medina Family Foundation. "She is at the forefront of the tech movement in Miami. She runs Venture Hive and she just announced that Microsoft will have their first ever Innovation Center in the US based out of her offices," Ms. Medina said.

Venture Hive, however, didn't come about without institutional support. The startup accelerator is able to provide an environment for different ideas, entrepreneurs and innovations because it itself received support from different organizations.

The incubator wouldn't be where it is today – providing tech education in places as far flung as Nairobi and being included in tech leadership with organizations like the World Bank and US State Department – without the help of local government. Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, City of Miami Commissioner Marc Sarnoff, the Miami Downtown Development Authority and the Miami World Center were all instrumental to Venture Hive's success, Ms. Amat said.

"When the World Bank and the US State Department and USAID are flying in startups from different parts of the world to Miami for training and mentorship, that speaks volumes and has been really amazing for us," Ms. Amat said. "Miami is a place, not just a place you go for fun. Going and having a week here is the equivalent of being in [Silicon] Valley. It's been very exciting, getting to meet awesome entrepreneurs all over the world."

"The fact that the Miami DDA and Mayor Gimenez thought that this would be a worthwhile thing to start, there are very few places in the country where they're like, 'you know what, let's try it.' That speaks to innovation of this place," Ms. Amat said. "Every day in Venture Hive is exciting, because we

have awesome people taking on big world challenges, and when they get investment, when they get offers to purchased... It's amazing."

Getting into the Venture Hive family is the hard part. Though one of the main rules to stay is simple. "Don't be a jerk," Ms. Amat said.

While the spirit of innovation is going around the Greater Miami area, moving forward and maturing as an industry takes leaders who show up when they say they will, deliver what they say they will and behave professionally and ethically. One of the biggest faults of a startup can be promising something too big and falling short, Ms. Amat said.

As Miami's tech sector continues to develop, growing past those faults will be the sign of a mature, world-class industry. Companies like Snapscore, RawShorts, Soccer Without Limits (SWOL), Criptext and Hair Construction are all leading the charge, Ms. Amat said.

For those that follow, they've got the advantage of institutional support, whether it's from business and law, accelerator and incubator programs or local government. With that foundation, reaching skywards should be all the easier.

