From the Buffalo Business First:
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Focus: Startups

# Java script: Buffalo OpenCoffee Club

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Apr 1, 2016, 6:00am EDT

"The Tuesday morning meetings will be all-open for all geeks in Buffalo. There'll be coffee for cheap, likely some pastries and then breakfast sandwiches can be purchased."

Those are the opening lines of an email sent May 21, 2010, from Steve Poland to a small group of individuals interested in talking about startup companies and technology trends.

That initially disparate group, which was known as the Buffalo OpenCoffee Club, would eventually form a network that became a powerful and lasting force in Buffalo's entrepreneurial renaissance.

The group has been responsible for populating startup facilities such as Z80 Labs and CoworkBuffalo and for becoming the initial many local companies including Argyle Technolo



JIM COURTNEY
Original members of the Buffalo OpenCoffee Club reconvene at Panaro's restaurant, the place where it all started in 2010. Clockwise from left, Steve Poland, managing director of Z80 Labs; Michael Canzoneri, co-founder of Argyle Technology Group; Dan Magnuszewski, co-founder and CTO of ACV Auctions; and Nicholas Barone, co-founder of Helm Design & UX.

and ACV Auctions.

It was also the organizing entity behind many well-populated events to come, including the Buffalo versions of Startup Weekend and Startup Grind. In that way, the OpenCoffee network has carved a unique legacy in Western New York as a small group of relatively young professionals who have changed the city by simply acting on the things they were talking about.

The Buffalo OpenCoffee Club met every Tuesday for several years, starting at Panaro's restaurant on Delaware Avenue before moving to the downtown Spot Coffee.

Following is the story of the group told by Poland, the organizer, who came back to his hometown a decade ago seeking to engage with like-minded techies and is now managing director of Z80 Labs; Dan Magnuszewski, who became the first managing director of Z80 and is now co-founder of ACV Auctions; and Nicholas Barone, a user experience expert who co-founded Helm Design.

Poland: I moved back home in October 2006. I was running my own SEO business and started working at Synacor. Home has the family and friends and the underdog mentality that really makes you appreciate this city when you leave. You can make changes in this city as opposed to kind of getting lost in a bigger city. At the time, the whole Web 2.0 shift was happening and by 2010 I was thinking that we really needed to get organized. I wanted to meet other people who were thinking about this shift in technology and startups that was happening. So I put together this Google group (an email list that has since grown to more than 500 members) and this little coffee meeting to talk about what was happening.

Barone: I've always thought of the design side of things as being underserved locally, and being a contractor and a freelancer at the time, I was more just looking to meet people who were interested in the space. There wasn't really a thought of work coming out of it. But then you started to realize there was an actual opportunity here, that we had everyone in the room to do whatever we needed to. We just needed capital and ideas.

Magnuszewski: For a lot of people involved, they used to think they were the only ones who were interested in this stuff, whether it was building software or building companies. The meetings really broke down a lot of those silos that people were into, and it offered hope to some people that maybe we can have an interesting ecosystem of tech creators.

Poland: So we eventually got to the point where 20 to 25 people would show up, and we got so organized and there were so many meetups happening that a shift kind of happened. It was like once we organized and were able to find each other, people could go off into their own niches. Then stuff started happening.

Magnuszewski: The goal of OpenCoffee became more than just getting people together so they could share ideas. Those initial people started going out and creating, and the other effect was really putting on events where you could draw in new people.

Barone: The whole thing was that if you want to do something, just start doing it.

**Editor's note:** *A year after OpenCoffee began, a cascade of startup facilities and events started taking shape in Buffalo. An early co-working facility, Main Washington Exchange, was formed in 2011 and would pre-date the founding of CoworkBuffalo, which eventually settled into fashionable digs at 653 Main St. Z80 Labs was co-founded by Jordan Levy and Ronald Schreiber, with about $5 million in capital from the state to make early-stage investments. It opened in 2012. Startup Weekend Buffalo debuted the same year.*

Magnuszewski: One of the real tipping points was that first Startup Weekend (held in those days at Medaille College). I don't know if people were just impressed by the sheer number of people who came out or the sense of community that we had. I remember one guy I knew who had moved from Toronto but lived in Buffalo for a while saying, "I became a Buffalonian today." It became clear there was a lot of momentum; it was really an inflection point.

Barone: By the time Z80 came around, it was like, "OK, there's actually going to

be funding," which is what people complained about for the longest time. So we'll look at that or when the mayor comes to Startup Weekend (which is now held about once a year at the d!g space in the Thomas R. Beecher Jr. Innovation Center) that it has become politically valuable to be seen at this thing. This whole thing started with four or five people sitting at an Italian restaurant that doesn't even do breakfast. Every place has somebody who's trying to build something, but if the community isn't there, ultimately it will fail. We've built a community that's working together; it's not just a lone wolf that wants to make something happen.

Magnuszewski: From the beginning, the people who showed up were the doers. They were willing not just to complain but to do something about it. I remember people saying, "It would be nice if we had this." And I would say, "OK, go do it. You don't need permission to do things." So action was always the main thing. Getting everybody together was the first step, gaining that awareness and building that community. The beauty of it is starting companies and other initiatives, that all happens organically if you get everyone together and stir the right ingredients into the pot.

Poland: Business and jobs in the future are going to be technology- and engineering-related, and the majority of new jobs out there come from new businesses. These are the reasons you need to have a startup ecosystem that is supported and supportive. A small group of people can have a huge impact on a region. If you want to change the world, or change your world, just start doing it. I sent out an email to 10 guys and we started getting together weekly. Then it started to snowball.

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