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Boise Young Professionals hear from Idaho's finest at Lounging Series

BY ERIN RYAN - eryan@idahostatesman.com

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Too often, public speaking involves a podium, a canned spiel and polite, ambivalent applause. Even if speakers are dynamic, they are usually too far away from their audience to make a personal connection, let alone a difference.

In answer to this tired formula, Boise Young Professionals (an arm of the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce) kicked off a monthly event just before the new year that puts influential people and their potential successors face-to-face.

Named for its unconventional setting, the "Lounging Series" invites BYP members to Lush in Downtown Boise for a casual drink and Q&A session with the likes of Steve Appleton, Linda Copple Trout and Cecil Andrus.

The venerable former governor christened the series Dec. 6, starting with a brief history of his political career and then fielding questions concerning military patterns, property taxes, the two-party system, the mortgage crisis, early childhood education, mass transit, faith, alternative energy, his mother, his wife, chukar hunting, the future of the Treasure Valley and the state of the nation.

"I'm here to tell you that you are the future and you are responsible for the future," Andrus said to attendees. "We're going to hand you a legacy that is not as good as it should be, but I have every confidence in the world that you'll put your shoulder to the wheel."

That challenge is what BYP is all about. The organization was created to engage up-and-coming leaders, to give them reasons to stay and cultivate a stronger, more vibrant community. The Lounging Series is a way to send that message, and founders Ben Quintana and Jason Crawforth hope it will inspire the next generation.

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BYP LOUNGING SERIES

The BYP Lounging Series takes place every First Thursday from 5:30-7 p.m. at Lush, 760 W. Main St., Boise. Events are limited to BYP members and cost \$10, which includes a free beverage and appetizers. For more information, call BYP headquarters at 472-5258.

Podcasts of each session are hosted on the BYP Web site for members who can't make it or anyone interested in listening to the thoughts and insights of community leaders. Sponsors of 2008 programming include Washington Trust Bank, University of Idaho, Hawley Troxell Ennis & Hawley and the Idaho Statesman.

The upcoming schedule is:

May 1: Steve Hanks, former CEO, Washington Group International

June 5: Tim White, Ph.D., president, University of Idaho

July 3: Cathy Silak, CEO, Idaho Community Foundation

"I've learned over the years that the three most important things are what you know, who you know and, as Wayne Gretzky says, where's the puck going to be? What's in the future? What's going to be happening in the next 10 years?" Crawford said. "We're the next generation who will be taking over, and it's important for us to get together and share ideas."

Crawford could be the poster boy for BYP. At 37, he is juggling interests in seven companies, including Lush, both Piehole restaurants in Boise and property management/development companies from here to Garden Valley. He always has been driven, but a class he took his senior year at the University of Idaho shaped his life, professionally and personally. It involved a series with community leaders throughout the region, a few of whom affected him deeply.

"Gary Michael (former CEO of Albertsons) changed my life in the course of a couple hours of conversation. I changed my degree because of him, and it changed my future having access to those individuals, even for a short time," he said, adding that Michael will speak at the Lounging Series in September.

"What I learned from that class has carried through my entire life. I got to talk to people who stand on the top of the mountain, who have the ability, the job to look out into the future."

Linda Copple Trout is one of those people. The former chief justice of the Idaho Supreme Court does a lot of volunteer public speaking, but the Lounging Series was her introduction to such an unstructured format and unusual setting. When she saw that Andrus had committed to the project and learned more about its reach, she agreed to appear in February.

"It was terrific," she said. "It was a good-sized group of young professionals who are really engaged in their communities and their lives. It was a wonderful, very heartening experience."

Attendees asked her about her education, career path, impartiality and important decisions during her tenure. They were thoughtful and current with their questions, and Copple Trout was pleased to see so many young eyes looking ahead.

"There are lots of very capable professionals young and old who just pass under the radar. It's very sad that we get jaded and forget that they are a huge portion of the population," she said.

BYP chairman Steven Guadagno said that even though the numbers are there, it still can be difficult to harness all that talent and energy. That's why he helped found BYP in 2006, and of all the events the organization has put on so far, the Lounging Series is one of his favorites.

"There are not too many places where you have this kind of exposure to industry leaders, decision makers and legendary political figures in Idaho history," he said. "They come in on such a high level, but when you peel it back, they really come in with an interest in making a difference right here."

Despite being retired, Andrus still is very interested in local affairs, especially as they concern young people. He talked about his own children and grandchildren, the weight they will carry and their responsibility to heave it high.

"You and your generation and your peer group have got to take off the blinders and get in the nitty-gritty of making change. You've got to get involved ... Quit your whining and crying and get to work," he said.

Aug. 7: Mi-Ai Parrish, publisher, Idaho Statesman

Sept. 4: Gary Michael, former CEO, Albertsons

Oct. 2: Sandra Bruce, CEO, Saint Alphonsus

Nov. 6: TBD

Dec. 4: Trey McIntyre, founder, Trey McIntyre Project

His conversation with BYP members in December was a mix of this "pouring gasoline on the fire" and addressing current events. He encouraged them to look outside their professional bubbles to greater civic goals, whether that means attending school board meetings or running for governor. When asked if the experience was valuable for him, he said it was an opportunity to invest in something not just beneficial, but essential.

"You either make your future or your future is handed to you. The more I learn, the more I want to be able to step in and influence what's going to happen," Crawford said. "We have the ability to influence more than we think we do."

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