

Netpreneur tech boosters are out of money, not ideas

BY TANIA ANDERSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

At the end of 2002, it looked like Netpreneur was doomed to become yet another of the many casualties of the region's tattered tech economy.

Funding for the program, a popular networking and educational group for people running and working in early-stage technology companies, came from businessman Mario Morino, who founded it in 1997, and had planned it end.

Morino had invested \$8 million to get Netpreneur off the ground and running for about five years. The idea of Netpreneur was simple: to get a young tech community's members talking to each other. He started the program with the intention of funding it for a few years and then handing it off to the tech community.

For several months, Mary MacPherson, Netpreneur's former executive director, tried to find other sources of funding for the program, but was unsuccessful while in the midst of a falling tech economy.

But a little more than a year later, the Washington-area tech community, which included workers in Northern Virginia, suburban Maryland and the District, has taken over the program and is continuing its legacy of networking events and a Web site rich with business resources.

What once was an operation that required about \$1.8 million a year to run with eight full-time people, is now completely funded not with money, but through people's donation of time and resources.

The program is even operating in an underground fashion, spreading word of its

events and other resources through e-mails, word of mouth and its Web site.

'ALIVE AND WELL'?

Don Britton, founder, chief executive and president of Network Alliance (www.networkalliance.com), an information technology services firm based in Reston, and Larry Robertson, founder and principal of Lighthouse Consulting (www.lighthouse-consulting.com), an Arlington-based advisory services firm, have been spearheading the continuation of Netpreneur (<http://netpreneur.org>) since January 2003.

They legally transferred Netpreneur from the Morino Institute, a nonprofit organization that created it and other Internet-related programs, to a free-standing organization last December. Britton and Robertson are now working on establishing Netpreneur as a 501(c)3.

Even though Netpreneur's staff was disassembled, its Reston-based office shut down and headlines screamed the end of the program without Morino's money, Britton and Robertson insist that Netpreneur never died.

"We've always been alive and well," says Britton, who worked as an intern for Morino in 1995. "Everything has always been going on that we've done in the past — maybe not in the same way as people remember it."

The demand is still there. A recent event that featured a day in the life of a venture capitalist drew 270 techies. Britton and Robertson say that more than 8,000 people use Netpreneur services. Morino and MacPherson are still involved with the program, serving as advisers.

NOT THE SAME

The group's famed Coffee and Dough-Nets, which drew large crowds to eat doughnuts, sip coffee and listen to a discussion, often led by Morino, will be put on hold temporarily. At its peak, Coffee and Dough-Nets drew 600 people and was held at 7:30 a.m.

Britton says Netpreneur consumers are now interested in non-morning, smaller events that have narrower topics. Some say the event couldn't be coordinated through the region's different tech councils.

Netpreneur also is doing away with its News Center, an e-mail newsletter with news tidbits about the tech community. Britton says no one has volunteered to take over that part of the program.

Today's Netpreneur is offering some resources to fledgling businesses, such as an online exchange with other entrepreneurs as

well as an online database of other tech companies in the region. And Britton is working on launching a new Netpreneur Web site that will include more tools for making it less dependent on a team of organizers.

There is no intention to charge people to attend Netpreneur events or use its online resources.

TRUE TO ITS MISSION

"Donations come in the form of people's time and brain power, but also people are contributing software, development time, hosting services, venues for our events," Britton says. "We've got a lot of partners in the community."

MacPherson says she thinks the capital-free model could work.

"It's one of these things under the radar because it's so organic and there's not a lot of promotion," says MacPherson, who is now senior vice president of marketing at Blackboard, a Washington-based education software company.

After Morino's financial support of Netpreneur ended, MacPherson and her staff explored several options to keep it going. The regional tech councils and several other business groups were considered, but no one group wanted to take on the whole of Netpreneur. MacPherson says she could not find a single patron to provide the funding.

"As we dug more into it, I felt we couldn't really replicate what we had," she says. "If you're able to do it without funding, you can create programs and activities that are true to your mission."

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Britton



Robertson

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MARY
MACPHERSON
Netpreneur's
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