

The Commerce of Diversity

In this issue of Advancing Anchorage Magazine, the Anchorage Chamber will explore the steps members of the business community are taking to ensure the city moves to be the No. 1 place to live, work and play in a two part series entitled “The Commerce of Diversity.” In January, we will look at more emerging cultures that are changing Anchorage’s economic landscape.

One Anchorage, One Economy

As a young city entering its centennial in 2015, Anchorage’s nearly 300,000 residents know this is a community where you can live close to work, enjoy vast economic opportunities and have a plethora of options for entertainment and outdoor activities. However, to grow and develop Anchorage’s economy into the future, we need a greater understanding of what comprises our economy today.

Resources, jobs, adventure and discovery are all interwoven with the fabric of

the city’s cultural and social backgrounds, and over the last twenty years, Anchorage has become an urban melting pot. But could it be more?

Live. Work. Play., a grassroots effort put forward by the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation’s (AEDC) board of directors, is focusing on just that – sustainable community improvement and engagement for the people living in Anchorage, with a hefty goal: to make Anchorage the No. 1 city in America to live, work and play by 2025.

“In 2008, the available workforce in Anchorage was tight,” said Bill Popp, president and CEO of AEDC. “Many of our investors were finding it difficult to hire skilled, qualified and experienced workers in the city. Because of this, many businesses were looking outside of Anchorage to hire young professionals in the Lower 48 and bring them up to Alaska.”





Victoria Green, Department of Veteran Affairs, has frosty fun at New Sagaya's City Market.

The challenge for these businesses, Popp said, was dispelling the “cold and dark” myth of Alaska. As a recruiting tool, AEDC partnered with the Alaska Channel and a handful of businesses in Anchorage to create a video showcasing why Anchorage is such a great place to live, work and play.

“That video is where the seed for the Live. Work. Play. grassroots initiative was planted,” he said.

Six areas of focus were developed as a starting point for Live. Work. Play. action phases: housing, education, community safety, creative place making, big wild trails and workplace well-being. To date, representatives from 58 private,

nonprofit and public sectors have signed on to participate in the project.

The Three T's

One group involved in Live. Work. Play. is a collection of government and business leaders called “One Anchorage, One Economy,” which is an effort to build a more robust economy by promoting inclusivity—the commerce of diversity.

“Anchorage has one economy and it’s becoming more and more diverse every year,” said Andrew Halcro, president of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce. “The new companies that are joining the Anchorage Chamber are small businesses, many of whom represent the emerging

cultures comprising Anchorage’s new economy.”

Halcro points to all three of the Anchorage Chamber’s priorities on how to grow the local economy: advocacy, education and networking. “An economy grows stronger when constructive dialogue, understanding and input is exchanged between our emerging cultures, nonprofits and business owners.”

According to Richard Florida, American economist and social scientist at the University of Toronto, America’s “Creative Class” (today’s younger workforce demographic) will be the leading force of growth in the future economy, expected to grow by more than 10 million



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Shalem Mathew and Mitch Kitter, partners and owners of Trefl.Punkt Studios shopping local at New Sagaya.

jobs in the next decade. This Creative Class includes almost 40 percent of the current population.

For a city to attract the Creative Class, Florida argues, it must possess “the three ‘T’s’: Talent (a highly talented/educated/skilled population), Tolerance (a diverse community, which respects human and economic rights), and Technology (the technological infrastructure necessary to fuel an entrepreneurial culture).

With Anchorage’s unemployment rate at a low 4.7 percent, many Anchorage Chamber members have found themselves looking outside for talent.

In a January keynote address during the 2013 AEDC Annual Economic Forecast

Luncheon, Florida stated that members of the Creative Class value meritocracy, diversity and individuality, and look for these characteristics when they relocate to a city.

One piece of Anchorage’s changing economic puzzle being examined by One Anchorage, One Economy is the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) community, and for good reason.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the number of GLBT households in Alaska grew by about 57 percent over the last decade to nearly 1,900 with a majority living in Anchorage. The Williams Institute estimated Alaska’s GLBT adult population in 2012 to be roughly 25,000

individuals, or 3.5 percent of the state’s total population.

It’s Showtime

For thirty years, many of the best events in Anchorage have been produced with the help of one man, Darl Schaaff. As the owner of Art Services North, Schaaff has had a heavy influence on some of Anchorage’s most celebrated yearly extravaganzas. From the city’s Fourth of July celebration to the Alaska Pacific University annual fundraiser, Schaaff is considered one of Anchorage’s favorite sons. He is also arguably the best in his field. He is also one of many gay business owners in Anchorage.



Phyllis Rhodes (left) and Victoria Green try on threads at Kaladi Bros. Coffee

Schaaff believes the commerce of diversity is critical and believes Anchorage has already become a more welcoming and encouraging place for the GLBT community to live, regardless of the equal rights initiative that was voted down on last year's municipal ballot.

"The recent loss of Prop One was more about a vocal minority on the wrong side of history than a city of repression," he said. "Business in Anchorage has worked because we include our best, encourage the new, and support our ongoing business community. My faith in this community assures me that we will continue to grow and evolve because we genuinely care about all of the people."

According to the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, there are an estimated 1.4 million (NGLCC) busi-

ness owners in the U.S. with a consumer impact of more than \$800 billion in 2010.

"Ten years ago, the GLBT business community did not have a national voice," Justin Nelson, president and co-founder of the NGLCC based in Washington D.C. said. "As a community, we had strong local chambers, but we weren't working together. In just ten years, our community has really come together and realized that we are stronger when we unite our voices."

The NGLCC has fostered relationships with more than 140 global corporations, including companies in Alaska's business hub, like Wells Fargo, Verizon and Chevron, through the NGLCC Supplier Diversity Initiative.

"Our work with the federal government has been truly trailblazing," said Nelson.

"We work closely with the Department of Labor, Department of Commerce, and the U.S. Small Business Administration. Last year, we hosted the first-ever LGBT Federal Procurement Fair at the Department of Commerce."

In July, at the annual NGLCC Conference in Dallas, Texas, more than 600 business professionals, suppliers, chamber executives and corporate leaders, converged to do business with each other, gather best practice tools, and showcase the recent trends that commerce is more diversified than ever.

According to Nelson, the organization uses a variety of programs to reach GLBT business owners where they live, work and play. One program offers access to more than 140 corporate partner procurement and supply chains. Through this benefit,

the opportunities to enrich leadership and executive business development skills through education, scholarship and mentoring programs, are growing.

One Anchorage, One Economy

“The GLBT population is an important part of our community and an important contributor to our economy, present and future,” said Glenn Cravez, a local Anchorage attorney and member of One Anchorage, One Economy.

Cravez said the feeling has been building over the last year, as business leaders recognized that the defeat of last year’s ballot proposition on equal rights unfairly dragged the business community into the debate.

“Some of the opposition to the ballot initiative was based on threats that if passed, the new laws would be ‘bad for business,’” Cravez said. “This simply wasn’t true,” he added. One Anchorage, One Economy’s goal is to reframe the focus on where it needs to be, the positive economic impacts of inclusivity.

More and more local Anchorage’s businesses are seeing economic returns from partnering with GLBT events. This past June, thousands of Anchorage residents partook in the annual PrideFest Week with numerous events held throughout Anchorage. The week culminated with a celebration at the Delaney Park Strip, showcasing more than 70 local allied businesses, such as Humpy’s Great Alaskan Alehouse, Kaladi Brothers Coffee, Wells Fargo and Alaska Airlines. These Anchorage Chamber members came out to show their support for the GLBT community and their contribution to the economy.

Behind the Numbers

Anchorage’s Mary Elizabeth Rider of Rider Consulting, is co-editor of the Grrlzlist, a virtual women’s community in Southcentral Alaska comprised of more than 1,600 subscribers and contributors.

Rider has been compiling her own data that shows not only who the GLBT business owners and consumers are in



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Anchorage, but where they shop, what health providers they trust and what business are GLBT friendly. Her data collection from Grrlzlist is extensive and exclusive.

She said its important for the GLBT community to feel inclusive within its community, but that there’s a long road ahead. “We’re just finding our economic voice in a lot of ways,” Rider said. “We have to start by looking at our own tolerance within the community.”

Rider said that while the business community is doing the best it can, many who support the GLBT community are reluctant to show public support, fearing a backlash. “In a lot of ways, we’re invisible, not fully integrated,” she said. “We provide valuable services and generate millions of dollars to the local economy, but there’s

still a gap. Over the course of time, all of our efforts will come together, but we have to gain a little more traction first.

Attracting and Retaining

Mitch Kitter and Shalem Mathew of Treft.Punkt Studio are young, innovative and widely sought after wedding photographers in Anchorage. Both have traveled the world to photograph weddings and experienced a wide scope of economic inclusivity.

“As a gay business owner, sometimes there can be a reluctance to open yourself up to a community that isn’t outspoken in its inclusion of all backgrounds. This creates unnecessary economic barriers,” Kitter said. Many large businesses in Anchorage have already stated their support of GLBT employees.

Kitter and Mathew believe that in order for Anchorage to continue to attract and retain qualified professionals, the trend towards more inclusivity bodes well. “When people feel accepted in their community, they are more likely to support that community with their dollars.”

Victoria Green works for the Department of Veteran Affairs. She moved to Alaska in 1998 and lived in Bethel for four years. She was activated with the Alaska Air National Guard for a tour at Eielson Air Force Base and spent a year up in Fairbanks. At the end of her tour, she moved to Anchorage and has been here ever since.

Green was recently appointed as the as the program manager to the Alaska veteran’s Affairs Agency of an LGBT Special Emphasis Program, a collaborative effort with local community members to ensure all local veterans feel welcome, are treated with dignity and have economic opportunities. Her involvement with the One Anchorage, One Economy initiative is to help promote to the business community the economic benefits of inclusion and workplace equality.

“This initiative is an exciting one and one that I believe could be successful by encouraging cooperation with the business community and by organizing



Photo © Frank Flavin

Darl Schaaff (left) and Phyllis Rhodes examine the catch of the day at City Market

our community to come together,” Green said.

An Inclusive Economic Power

Another voice to the One Anchorage, One Economy initiative and the understanding of the relation between the GLBT community and the local economy is Phyllis Rhodes, executive director of Identity, Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides programs supporting equality for the GLBT community and its allies.

“Equal and economic rights go hand in hand,” Rhodes said. A resident of Anchorage since 1967, Rhodes noted that while tolerance and economic opportunities have increased over the years, there is still work to do.

“Thanks to our many allies, our voice is being heard in every aspect—in businesses, in organizations and in government services. It is important for the members of the GLBT community to take advantage of every opportunity to engage in dialogue about how we truly become One

Anchorage, One Economy.”

Rhodes said in order to grow the commerce of diversity in Anchorage, more businesses, especially the younger generation, need to take the lead.

At this year’s PrideFest Conference, held on Oct. 12 and hosted by Identity, Inc., the focus will be on Alaska’s next generation of business and community leaders with educational workshops and national speakers themed around entrepreneurship and economic opportunities. Helping deliver the message will be repre-



sentatives from the NGLCC.

For the first time, the conference will give attendants from across the state deliverable tools and information on how they can better develop their business or community into an inclusive economic power. The conference organizers expect record attendance this year.

When you consider the shifting demographics of Anchorage, the greying of the work force and the diverse cultures that are following, the more it becomes evident that we must become One Anchorage,

One Economy. With Anchorage already boasting three of the five most diverse population tracks in the country, beginning to understand the local consumer trends of emerging cultures will be critical, both socially and economically.

“No one entity or organization is going to make Anchorage the number one city in America to Live Work and Play,” Popp said. “We need to work together to make Anchorage the best city in America.”

GET INVOLVED

The One Anchorage, One Economy committee is asking for your feedback in the area of cultural diversity and economic opportunities by emailing jj@anchoragechamber.org.

Identity, Inc. PrideFest Conference will be held all day on Saturday, Oct. 12 at the University of Alaska Anchorage. For a list of conference seminars, visit Alaskapride.org. Justin Nelson, president and co-founder of the NGLCC, U.S. will be discussing the commerce of diversity at a special “Make it Monday” forum, held at noon on Oct. 14 at the Dena’ina Center. RSVP before Oct. 11 at Anchoragechamber.org.