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A day of ideas, connections

Charlotte BarCamp 5 was a day of knowledge transfer, networking and brainstorming.

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Posted: Sunday, Apr. 24, 2011

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Michael J. Solender for Neighbors of the City. His column is called 'neighborhoods'



Desiree Kane and Scott Lundgren at Charlotte BarCamp. Michael J. Solender photo

Not even the vengeance of a powerful spring thunderstorm could keep several hundred self-proclaimed technology geeks from descending on NoDa's Area 15 last Saturday, as the allure of BarCamp 5 was just too great.

BarCamp is an entire day of knowledge transfer, networking and brainstorming. The one-day "un-conference" offers a tremendous opportunity for technology-minded people, entrepreneurs, educators, social media types, designers, angel investors and the just plain curious to get together and exchange ideas.

People from across the Charlotte region and beyond convened for the event at the hip, cooperative community space, where participants pitched topics for discussion and then selected those which they were most interested in hearing more about.

The format and concept extends back to northern California, circa 2005, where the first BarCamp, a participatory, open-style workshop, was held. The term's origins are in reference to a programming slang term "foobar" which is often used as a placeholder name by programmers when writing code.

The initial morning kickoff section featured a brief welcome and process overview by event organizers who were able to arrange for free breakfast, lunch and swag bags for participants through a number of local sponsors.

Presenters made close to two dozen 30-second pitches for the morning sessions, each 45 minutes long. The top vote-getters after the pitches were assigned break-out rooms to conduct their sessions.

A broad variety of topics included: The Charlotte Chamber of Commerce soliciting input on what the chamber can do for small businesses; an educator from Discovery Place speaking about education in virtual space; a facilitated discussion of leveraging the technology community in Charlotte; and micro-financing for startup companies.

It wasn't all technology focused, as one management tool more than 200 years old received a great deal of attention. One of the more popular sessions was offered and led by Charlotte City Council member, Warren Cooksey, who presented a discussion on the U.S. Constitution.

When the voting was over, 10 of the sessions were selected, and participants went to rooms corresponding with the sessions that most interested them. The morning sessions were followed by lunch and networking. The process then started all over again for afternoon sessions, with new pitches and more choices to make.

Last week's BarCamp was the fifth in Charlotte since the event was first held here in the summer of 2009. Justin Ruckman, co-founder of CLTBlog and The PPL, was one of the original organizers of BarCamp that year.

"The diversity of topics offered reflects how prevalent and mainstream technology has become in every aspect of our lives," said Ruckman.

Jim Van Fleet, one of BarCamp 5's organizers, echoed those thoughts.

"It is the community that defines what the event is," said Van Fleet, chief technical officer of OtherScreen, a sports-related startup company.

"I've attended BarCamps at many locations across the country and find Charlotte to be one of the largest and most diverse. There is a large group of social media and online marketing people that compliment the purely technical participants that are at the core of BarCamp. The most important thing for people to realize about BarCamp is, it is all about creating community and connections."

Daphne O'Keefe is a web developer. BarCamp 5 was her first experience with the concept. "I came to expose myself to new ideas and technologies that I might not otherwise be aware of," said O'Keefe. "We are at a kind of nexus of real and virtual space with online social media; I actually enjoy meeting in real physical space and having the opportunity for true geek bonding."

I found the discussions quite spirited and informative. Divergent viewpoints were hotly debated in Cooksey's constitutional discussion, though participants were respectful and tolerant of differing opinions.

The most popular talks were given the larger rooms, and participants were encouraged to use Twitter and "tweet" real-time about their experiences, allowing for those not there to follow along online. Communications strategist and PPL co-founder Desiree Kane served as a volunteer organizer for BarCamp 5.

"We want people to have fun here," said Kane. These events are open to the entire community and it is a great way for people to learn about technology trends and some of the latest thinking in this arena. The community space offered up by Area 15 is truly welcoming."

One look around at the vast number of participants who eagerly gave up their Saturday to be in attendance confirmed that BarCamp is a community experience that has arrived in a big way in the Queen City.

Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte based freelance writer. Email him at michaelsolender@gmail.com

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