



What's the Big Idea?

AMAZING IDEAS SPRING FROM EUGENE, AND WE NEED MORE OF THEM
by Amy Schneider

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

Let's produce ideas instead of timber. That's something FertiLab Thinkubator mentor Shane Johnson says could help transition Eugene and Springfield from resource-based communities to hubs of business and idea production.

"There are a lot of people with ideas here," Johnson says. "Culturally, getting the momentum to grow beyond Lane County is difficult. We're an understated town, so even though there's success here, it's not visible and there aren't a lot of models."

Johnson envisions a Eugene where people can start a business and thrive, where ideas flourish and have potential to gain traction outside the county.

We're not entirely there yet, but local business incubators and accelerators are nourishing and encouraging ideas in all stages of development, growing from within and spreading outward. Eugene has its fair share of success stories — think running shoes and a swoosh — but now it's time to look forward.

Johnson says Eugene and Springfield need more diversity, greater hustle, interested investors and more visible success stories for ideas to truly grow. "Mid-sized cities that don't transfer to a culture of entrepreneurship will stagnate. We need a visible big win," he says.

So check out these five success stories from Eugene and the University of Oregon — all featured ideas started small, then garnered attention on a national or international scale — and remind yourself that Eugene does have a lot to be proud of.

The Innovator

There's a scene from "The Princess and the Pea" unfolding in west Eugene. Stacks of mattresses in all colors and shades take up ample floor space, forming a sizeable pile. But the magic castle these mattresses are stored in is St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County's mattress recycling facility. The facility processes at least 35,000 mattresses per year.

It turns out there's money in old mattresses — metal, wood and foam can all be salvaged — and St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County, an affiliate of the National Council of the U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul, is using that money to help people. Now, other nonprofits around the country want to learn how St. Vinnie's does it.

Sue Palmer, a former reporter for *The Register-Guard*, manages the Cascade Alliance, a program created by St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County to help other nonprofits pick up St. Vinnie's knack for taking would-be trash out of the waste stream, a process that includes harvesting old mattresses, selling used books online and setting up

successful thrift stores. Palmer says Lane County's St. Vinnie's created its business model out of necessity in the 1980s, when timber jobs disappeared.

"Terry McDonald, who's been the executive director of St. Vincent de Paul [of Lane County] for many years, saw this great need in the community for affordable housing, low-cost goods and emergency services," Palmer says. "Everybody here rolled up their sleeves and said, 'What can we do?'"

And so they entered the waste stream, literally. St. Vincent de Paul sent trailers to transfer sites and intercepted people on their way to landfills, asking for their furniture, clothes and mattresses.

"There are lots of nonprofits that tap donations to fund their stores, but we added that extra level of tapping those waste facilities as well," Palmer says, adding that St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County has trailers at transfer sites ranging from Portland to San Jose, California. The nonprofit uses funds from these acquisitions to help more than 84,000 people every year by providing support services for veteran families, affordable housing and safe spaces for families in crisis.

It's easy to see why a nonprofit might want to engage in this business, but how? That's a question that Palmer and the Cascade Alliance help to answer.

With assistance from a \$2.1 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Cascade Alliance has helped a handful of nonprofits — United Teen Equality Center in Massachusetts, Greater Bridgeport Community Enterprises in Connecticut and The Mustard Seed of Central Florida in Orlando — to set up mattress recycling facilities of their own.

Not every area of the country is suitable for mattress recycling, Palmer says. Lane County wants to keep its landfill accepting waste as long as possible, she explains, and mattresses cause problems for trash compaction when they defy compression with their springy nature. The county pays St. Vinnie's \$6 per mattress to pick the mattresses up and keep them out of the waste stream, and it's this "tipping fee" that makes the whole mattress recycling operation viable.



SUE PALMER