

Roxanne Quimby, Angus King advocate risk at Camden Juice conference



Kea Tesseyman of Kinetic Energy Alive rips through the problems facing young people, revealing the words "future" and "change," at the Juice Conference in Camden on Nov. 4, 2011.

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By Matt Wickenheiser
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CAMDEN, Maine — For three young men from Lincolnville, it was buying an old school bus, painting it chartreuse and road-tripping across the United States, producing a Web TV show on the way and helping out youth groups to boot.

For former Gov. Angus King, it was starting a business that focused on energy conservation and financing it with \$6.5 million in loans.

For Kerem Durdag, a native of Pakistan and serial entrepreneur in Maine, it was learning to swim as an adult in Scarborough, jumping confidently into the pool and sinking to the bottom.

Three different stories — all about risk.

Risk and its importance to the creative economy is the theme of the third Juice conference, which started here Friday and runs through Saturday, drawing entrepreneurs, artists, policymakers and others to the midcoast.

“In hard times, if you don’t take risks, you’ll fail,” said Amber Heffner, president of Midcoast Magnet, which runs the conference with support from the Maine Development Foundation, the Maine Arts Council, the Maine Technology Institute and Bangor Savings Bank.



Dance Instructor Kea Tesseyman's students join her onstage at the Juice conference in Camden on Nov. 4, 2011.

A series of keynote presentations was planned for both days, with speakers ranging from former gubernatorial candidate Eliot Cutler to businesswoman Roxanne Quimby, Good Will-Hinckley's Glenn Cummings to artist Kea Tesseyman. A series of breakout sessions was planned for the conference as well and entrepreneurs will participate in a business plan pitch contest with up to \$150,000 up for grabs.

Quimby was the last person to speak on Friday, and she let people know she wouldn't be talking about her often-controversial national park proposal but rather about her earlier days as the entrepreneur who co-founded Burt's Bees.

Evaluating risk and reward as an entrepreneur boils down to identifying your acceptable downside, or worst-case scenario, and comparing it to the likelihood of success in an unknown future, Quimby said.

When she and her boyfriend (whom she later married) came to Maine, they lived in a cabin on 30 acres with few amenities and a yearly budget of about \$3,000.

"That was really the acceptable downside — basically being broke and knowing that was as bad as it gets," said Quimby.

That allowed her to take risks, knowing that she wouldn't likely wind up worse than that, and those risks grew to be the Burt's Bees venture.

Seth Brown, Corey McLean and Tyler Dunham, creators of the Love The Bus road trip and Web show, said they had found themselves thinking of what do after their summer jobs ended and settled on the road trip project to harness their love of filmmaking, entrepreneurship and adventure.

"Why not? It's something we constantly ask ourselves," said Brown.

King began with a quote from Abraham Lincoln that framed why risk is a must: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present."

And he assured the audience that mistakes are part of the process.

"Did you ever stop and think there's a multimillion-dollar industry that puts erasers on pencils? That means it's OK to make mistakes — people expect you to make mistakes," said King. "Risk is the only thing that allows you to get anywhere."

He spoke about how in the late 1980s, the business he was working for was closing down. It focused on hydropower, and that sector was having problems. In a board meeting, he talked about the idea of focusing on energy conservation rather than generation. Soon after he was out of a job but was allowed to take his conservation business idea with him.

"I didn't invent energy conservation. Creativity is not the invention of something that's absolutely new in the world — nothing is new in the world. Everything's happened before," said King. "Creativity is putting things together in a way people haven't thought of before."

He developed that idea and borrowed \$6.5 million to grow the company, which was the risk action to match the creativity. He sold it in 1994 for a tidy sum. Then he looked at running for governor as an independent.

It was another risk, but one that was successful.

“Winning is good. Trying is important,” he said.

He left his audience with one thought to allow their companies to embrace risk to be creative.

“You’ve got to create an atmosphere in your team of comfort and safety, where people in the group aren’t afraid to ask a stupid question, to have a stupid idea,” said King. “What you want is to wring the last ounce of creativity out of your group, the last ounce of wisdom.”

Kerem Durdag, CEO of Biovation LLC in Boothbay, shared lessons that were less from his business experience and more from his life.

In trying to make swim lessons work for him, he learned that “in the leap is divine wisdom.”

And he advised folks to “live for passion.” Illustrating this, he showed clips from the Turkish national soccer team’s games from a few years ago in which they came back from deficits to win. Yelling on the stage, giving the play-by-plays, translating the Turkish announcer’s calls, Durdag paced the stage, unbuttoning his collared shirt to reveal the red-and-white Turkish soccer jersey underneath.

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