

R.A.V.E. Warrior Honoree



Sean Williams

Advocates, Promotes and Supports Area Entrepreneurs

Congratulations to Sean Williams

2020 R.A.V.E. (Recognizing Awarding Valuing Entrepreneuris) Warrior!

The Warrior Award recognizes an individual's contribution to advocate, promote, and support area entrepreneurship as well as increase awareness of the value entrepreneurs play in building our local economy. The recipient of this award works tirelessly, devoting countless hours of his/her own time to not only raise awareness of entrepreneurialism but help those who need it.

What is your experience with starting a business?

I grew up with a father who was, and continues to be, a small business owner who encouraged me and my brother our whole lives (from selling pricing guides at trade shows when we were tweens to selling trading cards out of his store as teenagers). My mother pivoted her professional career into a thriving consultancy, so I really came by it, honestly. Entrepreneur was a common word in our house that I definitely took for granted.

After college, I started my own production company in Los Angeles and found some success and traction, which then grew to a new production company called Foot in the Door Entertainment with my good friend, Brandon Sonnier, who was a director, and his writing partner, Brandon Margolis. We saw the problem of there not being a bridge between film school and the real world for screenwriting students, so we set out to solve that problem.

From there, my career took a surprisingly natural turn as I started to get traction on the writing front in comic books, and my wife got a job in Minnesota. I wrote comics professionally for three years after we moved here, which was its own kind of business, before partnering to start Comicker Press – a comic book publishing company with the goal of being the most creator-friendly publisher. We then zeroed in on being “diversity focused” after our first batch of books when we realized those were the stories and creators we had gravitated toward in the first place.

Most recently, I helped my wife and mother-in-law start their mobile yarn store, YarnMobile, that serves our entire region (when there isn't a pandemic going on).

So I've seen the full spectrum of small business – from hustling in Hollywood with just a cell phone and an email address, to starting several retail storefronts, to working with international manufacturers and having a small warehouse to call home.

Why did you want to start your own business?

Part of it is seeing a need, and seeing that no one else is addressing it. I'm all about solving problems, and in the most efficient way possible (and as quickly as possible). Taking the reins and just doing it has always been my nature, which lends itself to starting businesses.

The other through-line in my careers has been helping others – all of my businesses are about helping others achieve their dreams and goals. It hasn't been the most profitable approach to business, but for me it's the most satisfying.

What is your background in working with entrepreneurial groups like E1, Collider, etc.

I got plugged into the "entrepreneurial ecosystem" in southeast Minnesota when I moved my office for Comicker out of my house and into the Launch Coworking Space in Austin. I did this for a number of reasons, primarily for productivity and for my own mental health (working from home is hard, as many folks are now realizing), but it ended up opening me up to endless opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise. I first got introduced to Natalie Siderius of DEED, then Jamie Sundsbak at Collider, then Mark Thein at SBDC... and each introduction led to more opportunities.

When my predecessor retired, and I ended up "inheriting" the space and got the job working for the Development Corporation of Austin and Austin Community Growth Ventures, I was already tapped into the ecosystem. I attended the last meeting of the first iteration of E1 under Neela Mollgaard, who now runs LaunchMN for DEED, and then helped shape the second iteration last year as the network started to grow to what it is today.

Being part of the ecosystem, first as an entrepreneur, has given me a bit of a unique perspective and definitely influences my approach to what we do going forward.

What is your advice for individuals wanting to start a business?

My first bit of advice is that you can learn to do whatever it is you want to do – nobody is born knowing how to do what they end up doing; everyone has to learn it. Business is the same way. This is why I put together my "Small Business Starter Kit" workshop for the Mower CEO program (which is for high schoolers). There are certain basics of business that can be overwhelming if you don't know it, but they become easy once translated into a checklist. If a high schooler can learn to do it, you can too!

All the resources you need are already out there, but finding them is overwhelming, and as the saying goes, "you don't know what you don't know." You just can't be afraid to make mistakes or learn.

What benefits do entrepreneurs have today compared to 10 years ago?

The depth and breadth of the ecosystem in southeast Minnesota is the single greatest benefit to entrepreneurs that I've seen, and it didn't exist when we moved here almost ten years ago. All the stakeholders, from RAEDI to Collider to DMC to E1 to SBDC to Winona State to ACGV and beyond, are all here to help entrepreneurs – and if they can't, they'll refer you to someone who can. We're working to make it easier to get tapped into that ecosystem (expect an announcement soon!), especially for traditionally underserved businesses and minority business owners. In the meantime, feel free to shoot me or anyone at any of these organizations an email, and we'll help however we can!

Congratulations, Sean, and thanks for all you do to serve the entrepreneurial community!