

Mention “networking” and people tend to think of cocktail parties and schmoozing. But truly successful social networks—clusters of people learning from each other—are born from the creation, spread and refinement of ideas. Silicon Valley and even Wall Street started as social networks.

Fordham, in partnership with the New York City Economic Development Corporation, is engaged in an innovative program to incubate a social network that combines young business and social entrepreneurs with experienced mentors in industry, the arts and education. It is called NYC Venture Fellows, and the first class of fellows—23 founders of startup companies and nonprofit organizations—completed a yearlong program in December. A second class begins in January 2012.

“It’s a one-year program, but it’s not one year,” said Stephen Freedman, Ph.D., provost of the University. “This is about building long-term mentoring and peer relationships, and creating

Fordham and the New York City Economic Development Corporation Link Rising-Star Entrepreneurs with Mentors

By Steve Lohr
Photos by Kathryn Gamble

the environment for multigenerational learning and peer learning where so much of the value is.”

While the city has several programs to nurture new companies, the focus of the NYC Venture Fellows program is to help promising young entrepreneurs turn their ventures into sizable, thriving enterprises. Those that make it—“gazelles,” to students of entrepreneurship—are the leading job generators in today’s economy. So

a program for aspiring gazelles made a lot of sense for the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC), whose principal role is to stimulate job growth.

Freedman, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, speaks of the program, fittingly, as “an ecosystem” for young entrepreneurs from varied fields to get fresh perspectives on their work and their opportunities. And while they express it in different ways, the administrators, mentors and fellows all see the program as an evolving work in progress.

“It has great possibilities, but the program itself is a startup venture,” said program mentor Joseph P. Parkes, S.J., JES ’68, a Fordham trustee and the president of Cristo Rey New York High School in East Harlem.

Like many startups, NYC Venture Fellows changed shape even before it was up and running. In the EDC’s July 2009 request for proposals from prospective partner organizations, the focus was on startups in media and



technology, two leading industries for the New York economy. But by spring of 2010, a series of meetings involving Fordham and EDC representatives led to a recrafting of the program.

“We decided we wanted to be open to all the industries that are important to New York, and that includes nonprofits and the arts,” said David Gilford, a senior project manager at EDC who is heading up the program. He said the development corporation considered proposals from several universities and nonprofits. Fordham was chosen not only because of its “deep roots in New York City,” but also because the University has made increasing efforts in recent years to work closely with the mayor’s office, local businesses and social ventures.

A nominating committee of 300 high-profile business executives and entrepreneurs considered New Yorkers and foreign candidates whose operations might develop links in the city. Officials at the EDC and Fordham threw a few names of their

own into the hat, and then culled the list to about 40 candidates. Final selections were made by a six-person committee that included Fred Wilson, managing partner of Union Square Ventures, a leading New York venture capital firm; and Joseph M. McShane, S.J., president of Fordham.

The 23 members of the inaugural class of NYC Venture Fellows reflect the breadth of the retooled program. They include the founders of fast-growing startup companies—from the friend-finding local social network Foursquare to the for-profit Hudong, China’s version of Wikipedia—but also groundbreaking nonprofits.

Adam Green, a Manhattan native and a former public schoolteacher, is one of the social entrepreneurs in the program. In 2001, he created Rocking the Boat. Today, his nonprofit occupies a converted industrial warehouse in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. It runs several boat-making, environmental and sailing

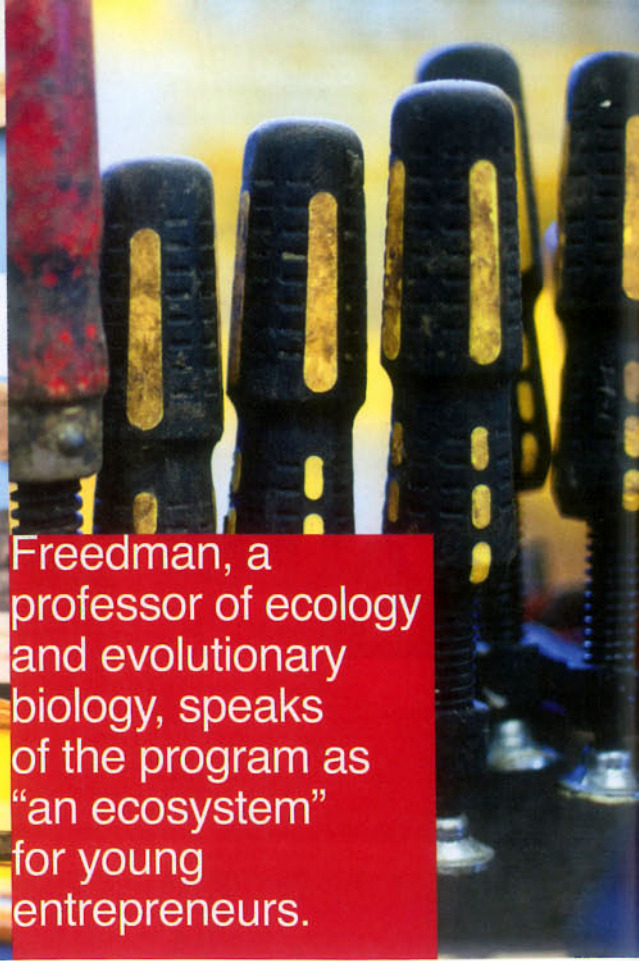
programs on the Bronx River, just behind the warehouse.

Rocking the Boat serves 3,000 students and community members a year, with 130 high school students engaged in intensive youth development and job-skills programs, like designing and building boats, which are paid after-school jobs.

To Green, the venture fellows program is “all about institution building,” he said. On a recent afternoon, he took a visitor on a tour of the warehouse. His own office is a converted broom closet, too small for two people. He knows every teenager in the jobs-skills programs by name and greets them as they arrive.

“Every force in the universe is pushing these kids away from doing something constructive for themselves like this after school,” Green said.

Many get diverted, but of those who are in the upper levels of the jobs-skills program—about 16 a year—nearly all go to college, Green said. There is a lot of applied math



Freedman, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, speaks of the program as “an ecosystem” for young entrepreneurs.

and science in the boat-making and environmental programs. “But kids come here because it’s fun; it’s not school,” he said. “Everything we do here is on the character-building side. We’re doing life, not academics.”

Rocking the Boat has an annual operating budget of \$1.5 million, mostly from donations and grants. It has 12 full-time staff members, including two social workers, and 14 part-timers.

Fellow-mentor relationships, it seems, have grown out of shared interests. Paul Guenther, FCRH ’62, former chairman of the New York Philharmonic, recalled sitting at the same table for lunch as Adam Green in December 2010, when fellows and mentors gathered at Fordham’s Lincoln Center campus. “We hit it off,” he said—a camaraderie helped, no doubt, by learning that Green’s father-in-law had played bassoon in the Philharmonic.

Guenther spent 30 years on Wall Street, retiring as the president of

Paine Webber, and has worked for the past 15 years in the nonprofit world. His mentoring, he said, has involved offering some “friendly advice” gleaned from experience.

“It really boils down to two things—running your nonprofit well and knowing how to raise money,” he said. “It’s the same whether you’re the New York Philharmonic or a small nonprofit like Rocking the Boat. Just the number of zeros is different.”

Father Parkes has been a mentor to Rachel Lloyd, the executive director of GEMS, short for Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, a nonprofit that seeks to help girls escape the sex-trafficking industry. GEMS has won human rights awards and helped pass a landmark anti-trafficking law in New York state. Lloyd is the author of a widely praised book, *Girls Like Us* (Harper, 2011), which recounts her story as a trafficking survivor, working as a teenage prostitute in her native England, controlled by a pimp. She eventually escaped, came to the

United States, began working with troubled teenage girls and founded GEMS in 1998, when she was 23.

Today, GEMS has a staff of 35, counseling victims and running housing programs to provide girls with a place to live while they are getting out of the sex trade. Its advocacy programs extend beyond New York, though its main services are local.

“She has a very fine up-and-running organization,” Father Parkes said, “but this is a national problem. So I’ve urged Rachel to think about [expanding].”

His model is the Cristo Rey network of high schools, like the one he heads in Harlem. The first Cristo Rey high school opened in Chicago in 1996, as a Catholic college preparatory school for disadvantaged students. There are now 25 such schools across the country, with more than 6,500 students, 95 percent of them black or Hispanic, and nearly all go on to two-year or four-year colleges.

Lloyd has been listening.



“He gave me some real insight into how you manage that kind of expansion, how you hold onto the brand and align things if you go national,” she said. Yet the national ambitions for GEMS, said Lloyd, will hinge on economics. The nonprofit’s operating budget is \$3 million annually, about half of it federal and city funding. In a weak economy, Lloyd fears that holding on may have to take precedence over expansion.

In August, a group of the international fellows returned to New York for a week. They joined local venture fellows for a group trip to Rocking the Boat, complete with a boating excursion on the Bronx River.

Haidong Pan is the chief executive of Hudong, the leading online encyclopedia in China, which, unlike Wikipedia, is supported by advertising. Pan met with one of his mentors, David S. Rose, managing principal

Fordham was chosen not only because of its “deep roots in New York City,” but also because the University has made increasing efforts in recent years to work closely with the mayor’s office, local businesses and social ventures.

of Rose Tech Ventures, partly to talk finance. Founded in 2002, Hudong is growing fast, with 350 employees on its payroll, including 100 new hires in the last year. Pan said the company will likely raise funds for expansion by going public in a couple of years. He is considering the New York markets

for a public offering and stock listing, he said, something Rose helped him examine. “New York is the financial capital,” said Pan, who is interested in reaching the affluent Chinese-speaking population in America.

Pan also talked with Rose about opportunities in China. “I had some advice for him,” he said. “This is not just one-way mentoring.”

For Fordham, too, the venture fellows program is seen as a two-way learning experience.

“It’s part of our mission to create networking opportunities for a broad range of professionals,” Freedman said, noting that the program extends the University’s social network. Yet the provost hopes the experience will influence Fordham as well.

“When we look at developing new programs, over the next five or ten years,” Freedman said, “we need to be more creative and entrepreneurial.”

—Steve Lohr is a senior writer and a technology, business and economics reporter for The New York Times.