

How TED is TEDx Columbus?



Columbus Foundation CEO Doug Kridler and Columbus health commissioner Teresa Long (inset) both give presentations at TedxColumbus.

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Squirrels are what make Columbus great. Texting can be used to improve teen health.

Creating collages might make better toasters.

These were some of the more surprising ideas shared at TEDxColumbus, a six-hour gathering held at CCAD on a sunny Friday in late October.

TEDx is the latest expansion and, some say, democratization of TED—the annual, invitation-only, \$6,000 conference that brings the best and brightest to California to talk, engagingly and briefly, about “ideas worth spreading.” First held in 1984, TED became a worldwide phenomenon after 2006, when the talks began to be posted online. The name refers to technology, entertainment and design, but anything can be the subject of a TED talk, be it Turkish literature or spaghetti sauce. What makes a TED talk is short, smart and succinct storytelling that’s often galvanizing, sometimes funny, *always* concluded in no more than 18 minutes and shared with a clear passion for an idea or discovery without a whiff of self-promotion.

In 2009, TED began lending its name, format, a few rules (no profit, talks are shared online) and some guidelines (speakers leave “thy usual shtick” behind)

to independently organized TED events.

So far, there have been some 800 of these TEDx’s worldwide. Ruth Milligan, principal of Articulation Inc. and also Milligan Communications, and Nancy Kramer, CEO and founder of Resource Interactive and five-time (big) TED attendee, brought TEDx to Columbus in 2009. The one rule they added: A speaker or topic must have a hometown connection.

The 2010 TedxColumbus began at noon. As the all-volunteer staff busily matched names to nametags, the nearly 400 attendees had time to mill and chat before settling in for the first round of talks. With a theme of “What’s Next?” one might expect a focus on the next best this or that. But while there were many examples of inventiveness in Columbus—the unbreakable lacrosse stick, for instance, and MRIs on a treadmill—the organizers took a refreshingly expansive take on the theme. Though 15 spoke on 15 topics, a few recurring messages emerged from the day.

To find what’s next, find what’s here. Michael Wilkos, community research and grants officer at the Columbus Foundation, rolled out statistics, entertainingly so, to illustrate a decade of change in Columbus

and to pinpoint the primary agent of growth—international migration. And what do some international visitors find appealing about Columbus? Squirrels, of all things.

According to David Staley, an Ohio State University history professor, if we are looking for innovation, it’s already happening. What the city lacks is a sort of creative infrastructure to “mash it together.” Dr. Jennifer Dyer also finds “what’s next”—her innovative texting app that optimizes the health of her diabetic teen patients—by looking at “what’s here”—teens who text. From the design world, Chris Rockwell, founder of lextant:, a design research and user-experience firm, cautions against a myopic focus on creativity and innovation that overlooks how people respond to the product. Yet, users often can’t predict what they want in, say, a toaster. To tap into our wants, Rockwell employs tools from art therapy, such as collage.

Do something. What’s next after the unthinkable happens? If there is an answer to this, it’s to be found in the stories of a mother who lost a son and a boy who lost his country. After her son’s death, Columbus’s Suzanne Beachy began an investigation and ultimately a crusade for a whole different

approach to mental illness. Bol Aweng, who graduated from OSU in 2009, shared his unimaginable journey as a lost boy of Sudan; he now is working to bring medical care to his village. (Aweng was the subject of a *Columbus Monthly* cover story, “Lost, but now found” in August 2009.) The example of their lives brings home a message repeated throughout the day: Do something, something good if you can.

So, in the end, how TED was TEDxColumbus? The organizers get an A for their approach to the theme (and for somehow ending on time). TED is about connecting not just ideas, but people, and whether during food breaks (one “salty,” one “sweet”) people were solving world problems or discussing their favorite flavor of Jeni’s ice cream, the vibe, overall, was friendly and open. And the talks? Some missed the mark, admittedly set high. Common pitfalls: lecturing, evangelizing, too vague, too much, too many buzz words. Others, such as the one by Wilkos, hit the mark with a crystallized message shared in a funny and informative way. Not a lecture, his talk invited the engaged and interested audience to think and discover along with him. Very TED indeed.

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