



Speaker Series at Saint Viator Featured Former Google Exec

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Kevin Willer, former head of the Chicago office for Google, talks about his experiences working for Google.

Kevin Willer spent 10 years building up the Chicago office of Google, shepherding its growth from a staff of two to the more than 400 creative and marketing experts who work there now.

“It was a neat time,” Willer said. “We were really trying to build something. We kept thinking of new ways to do things and continually challenged the status quo.”

Willer described his years at Google on Tuesday during Saint Viator’s 50th anniversary “Shaping the Future” speaker series. Its particular focus was “Awakening the Innovator in our Young Men and Women.”

“We wanted to do something for the broader community,” says the Rev. Robert M. Egan, C.S.V., president, “that would

highlight some of the values and vision we have as a school in looking toward the future.”

Willer left Google last month and now serves as the president and CEO of the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center.

He headlined a panel that included Genevieve Thiers, founder of Sittercity.com; John Roberson, executive VP of the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center; Jim Banaszak, chief technology officer for OpenCEL; and Jim Fruchterman, founder and CEO of Benetech.

John Aiello, a Saint Viator alumnus and founder and chairman of The SAVO Group, which creates collaborative sales software, moderated the evening.

“Exposure to innovators and leaders can’t help but challenge and inspire students’ thinking,” Aiello said.

Willer was up to the task. He called his address, “What I learned about Innovation at Google and Beyond.” It described his progression from a series of jobs with technology companies before taking the biggest risk of his career and joining Google.

“I was 26 with nothing to lose,” Willer said.

Driving him, he said, was Google’s mission: “To organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”

He described how the first six years --- before the company went public --- were rough, and that he and his co-workers often felt like giving up.

“But we continued to challenge ourselves,” Willer added, “and worked at bringing new innovative products to the market.”

He shared his experiences with an audience of parents, students, alumni and entrepreneurs who were eager to learn more about the benefits of innovating and taking risks.

Among his parting tips to educators and budding entrepreneurs were to spend time building a culture of innovation, to surround themselves with creative and innovative people, and to use their success to advance the greater good.

Panelists added their own take on innovation and how it had jumpstarted their careers. Thiers said her inspiration came from watching a pregnant woman walking around her college campus, posting notices for a babysitter. Thiers figured there must be a better way.

Consequently, she conceived of an innovative Web site that merged the online dating model with a job board, and sittercity.com was born.

Fruchterman described himself as “a real nerd” while attending Saint Viator for his love of science and physics classes. But he now has parlayed that passion for fiber optics and technology into helping persons with disabilities.

“Tons of people are inventing things,” said Fruchterman, whose company developed reading machines for the blind. “But being innovative is making people care; it’s telling them a story.”

Likewise, Banaszak, another Saint Viator alumnus, earned three degrees in engineering before combining all of his interests into helping the environment. His company develops renewable energy from wastewater management.

He encouraged school leaders to “build an environment where students can respectfully question the status quo.”

Roberson, who cut his teeth trying to be innovative in the City of Chicago’s Building Department, concurred.

“Encourage students to try something new, to stretch themselves,” Roberson said. “Even when they fail, encourage them to go back out and try again.”