

Gina Danner, one of 275 local businesspeople who gathered for the opening E Day festivities on May 15, said she came for the ideas, the energy and, of course, the opportunity to hang out at Neal and Jeanne Patterson's palatial estate.

"We're all apprentices tonight," Danner said, likening the experience to a visit to Donald Trump's home.

The get-together was part of the third two-day event that the Entrepreneurial Exchange has sponsored in the past four years to give budding entrepreneurs access to some of the area's greatest business minds. The event continued May 16 at **Rockhurst University** with presentations by three business authors.

The presentations were open to the public. But for those who paid the \$249 registration fee, E Day provided something not available in books: access to the lifestyle of one of Kansas City's rich-and-famous entrepreneurs.

"Frankly, the home is part of the process," said Neal Patterson, co-founder of the program and CEO of **Cerner Corp.** "Start a company. Grow it to a billion dollars ..."

Patterson waxed modest when asked how many bedrooms and square feet of living space were ensconced in his home in the Village of Loch Lloyd.

"I have no idea," he said. "It's really not as big as it looks."

But his welcoming remarks gave a good impression of its spaciousness.

"It's kind of like an airport," he told attendees. "If you walk long enough, you're going to see a restroom."

The crowd was gathered behind the home, which was long enough to accommodate separate seating areas -- all out of earshot from the others -- for seven leading area entrepreneurs.

The entrepreneurs, who spoke and answered questions in the small-group settings included Bob Bernstein, CEO of **Bernstein-Rein**; Bill Dunn Sr., chairman emeritus of JE Dunn Construction; Jim Ferrell, CEO of **Ferrellgas Partners LP**; Barnett Helzberg, former CEO of **Helzberg Diamonds** and founder of the Helzberg Entrepreneurial Mentoring Program; Cliff Illig, co-founder of Cerner; R. Crosby Kemper Jr., former chairman and CEO of **UMB Financial Corp.**; and Jim Stowers, founder of **American Century Investments** and the **Stowers Institute for Medical Research**.

"Kansas City's entrepreneurial community is legendary," said Danner, co-owner of **Mail Print Inc.** and a member of the Entrepreneurial Exchange board. "But many of us living here don't even realize how special it is."

The May 15 festivities provided reminders of the area's big names and the fact that they once endured many of the same challenges budding entrepreneurs now face, Danner said.

"They're like rock stars," said Rich Warner, who came seeking advice for expanding his 10-employee business, **Contractors Appliance Inc.** in Lenexa.

Dalton Hermes, CEO of Lenexa-based **Hermes Landscaping**, has 200 employees and \$15 million in revenue.

"But I still want to grow it," he said. "We may be the largest landscaping company in the city. But we still have a small piece of the overall market."

Hermes said former Kansas City Chiefs Coach Dick Vermeil inspired him to seek help from the Entrepreneurial Exchange.

"He said he tried to learn something new about leadership every day," Hermes said.

Patterson encouraged attendees to ask the event speakers hard, probing questions.

One obliged by asking Helzberg about any scrapes with disaster he may have faced before selling his jewelry business to Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway in 1995.

Helzberg responded by recalling "the greatest mistake I ever made" -- one that could have destroyed his business.



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Neal Patterson says his mentor relationships made him want other entrepreneurs to feel the "unbelievable impact" of those experiences.

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"If you're starting a company -- and this is what I did -- admit to yourself that you don't know all the answers," he said. "That's extremely important. Then, because you don't know the answers, surround yourself with the very best people. And then work as a team, because the team does it, not you."

Patterson said he was inspired to bring together the masters and students after learning the "unbelievable impact of one session with the right person" from his mentors, including the late Ewing Kauffman.

In addition to facilitating similar encounters for today's budding entrepreneurs, the Entrepreneurial Exchange is affording ongoing networking opportunities, Patterson added.

A group of past E Day participants has started EE2, which meets year-round, and an EE3 group is expected to follow suit.

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