

Mainers pitch ideas at ‘Shark Tank’ audition

BY FRANCIS FLISIUK
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — About 800 people showed up to pitch their ideas to casting directors for ABC’s reality show, “Shark Tank,” on Wednesday, in what was their first step toward the elusive dream of becoming nationally televised celebrity entrepreneurs.

The casting call was held at the Italian Heritage Center in Portland, and according to organizers and sponsors from U.S. Cellular, it was the largest attended leg in a three-city tour that also included Knoxville and Oklahoma City.

“I wanted to bring this unique opportunity to Mainers,” said Matt Kasper, director of New England sales for U.S. Cellular. “There’s nothing better than Portland in July and this area is brimming with entrepreneurial ideas.”

The turnout reflected that, with a line of inventors, business owners and entrepreneurs circling the building twice for a chance to pitch their product to the show runners. The first 500 in line were guaranteed a minute with the production staff and designated with a blue bracelet.

Scott Salyers, “Shark Tank’s” supervising casting producer, said that his staff sought “personality and passion,” above anything else.

“More than likely what they are pitching we’ve seen before, so what is going to set somebody apart is their personality and the way they pitch it,” said Salyers. “If somebody comes up to me and says that their product speaks for itself, we don’t want them on the show.”

According to Salyers, the process to actually getting in front of the “sharks” — sales and entrepreneurial gurus selected for their status in the bloodthirsty corporate world — is a long one that usually includes about 10

waves of screening and interviews.

If they win a rare chance to pitch to those sharks, entrepreneurs will have gone through their routines multiple times. The drama of the show hinges on whether the celebrity sharks decide to invest their own money in it. If none of the sharks decides to make a deal, the contestant walks away with nothing.

“Nobody sees the sharks until they get onto the show,” said Salyers. “By the time they get to the sharks, we know their company or product through and through.”

So what kind of ideas did entrepreneurs from all over the country bring to Maine during the casting call?

The “Wading Room” brimmed with potential contestants sipping U.S. Cellular’s free coffee while honing the details of a wide variety of pitches.

Connected living

Going over his elevator speech out loud was Alex Sargent, a Mainer who’s been in the moving and storage industry for more than a decade and views managing one’s possessions as a “\$24 billion problem.”

“We need a smarter way of cataloging and condensing your belongings,” said Sargent.

Sargent’s idea would essentially digitize everything you own.

“It’s a little infuriating to me, because there’s millions of people, storing thousands of dollars worth of stuff, and there’s no real system in place for monitoring it digitally,” said Sargent.

Sargent joined the line of people in the “Shark Tank” casting call, because he needs capital to move his idea from concept to product.

“Imagine the applications. Imagine never having to make a duplicate purchase,” said Sargent. “You could just hit Ctrl-F and search through all of your things.” ... It’s



FRANCIS FLISIUK | BDN
About 800 people showed up to pitch their ideas for ABC’s reality show “Shark Tank” on Wednesday in Portland.

Wearable cup holders

Sitting in the front row of chairs, right next to the opening in the curtains where people entered five at a time to pitch their idea to casting directors, was Russel Murray, wearing three cup holders on his arms and leg.

The cup holders were made from paper and plastic with a design featuring many international flags. Each cup holder could be taken off with Velcro pads. According to Murray, his product comes with binoculars and will be very popular for concerts and sporting events. He hopes to catch the attention of a 2018 World Cup marketing group.

“This combo beverage holster and binocular kit will be very popular,” said Murray. “The concept is hands free everything.”

‘Where is the bus?’

After remembering the stress and anxiety of not knowing when your school bus

would arrive as a kid, Chris Bunnel from Portland, realized that he had the technical skills to solve that problem.

Bunnel created an app that allows students and parents to know exactly where school buses are at any given time.

According to Bunnel, the app would allow parents to send their child outside exactly when the bus is arriving and it also sense them updates when they’re dropped off at school. He’s already spoken with a lot of interested parents and investors and believes that even if he doesn’t get on “Shark Tank,” his app will be successful.

Talking plants

Talking excitedly about his product to other entrepreneurs waiting with him was Al Benner, the owner and founder of Powerful Plants, which aims to combine technology and gardening for educational purposes.

Benner had with him a collection of vegetable seed packets that looked more like trad-

ing cards. Designed to get kids “re-excited” about going outdoors and gardening, each type of seed was presented as a character. A green Hulk-like monster called the “Italian Giant,” is pictured on one seed packet for parsley, while another shows a T-Rex made out of kale, with the name, “Dino Kale.”

“I got the idea from staring at my two sons play Pokemon for hours,” said Benner.

Using the free “Powerful Plants” app, one can position their smartphone or tablet over a seed pack and watch the character spring to life through augmented reality, with 2 minutes of informative, and often funny dialogue. Benner also has a line of interactive books with the same feature and is looking for funding to expand into a trading card game.

Style for slobs

Pamela Riesenberberg said she got her idea after her husband went out to a wedding wearing a top hat, a cane, a

black suit and white socks. After that, her husband committed what she considered fashion suicide, wearing socks with flip flops.

“Some men just don’t know how to dress,” said Riesenberberg. “Guys need help.”

Struck aback by her husband’s lack of style, Riesenberberg wondered if other men had similar fashion problems and created Mix Match Men, an online style guide that promises to find and buy a trendy outfit in five minutes.

As of now, there’s nothing on the style guide website except for an “about” page. The company doesn’t own any licensed products. Riesenberberg was armed with nothing but her idea, enthusiasm and hopes to convince the casting directors that Mix Match Men can partner with big stores.

The next season of “Shark Tank” is scheduled to begin on Sept. 25. To participate in the casting call, fill out an application in advance at abc.go.com/shows/shark-tank/applications.

Garden

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His relationship with plants is akin to his relationship with his co-workers. Walking through the gardens, he is sensitive to moods and performance. When it comes to flora, he touches spruce, smells herbs and evaluates all displays for balance.

Eason shares his delight in all things botanical with the workers, who are eager to show him a marvelous genetic mutation of a snapdragon, for example. This is not a science museum, but it’s not just about looks, either.

“We record how different plants change during the season,” he said, which goes into a database of plant performance. All told, 200,000 plants are mapped and inventoried.

Along with the ceaseless

unfolding rhythms of nature, the botanical garden is shifting, too.

The remaining 150 acres of wild space will be cultivated in years to come. A majority of the parking area will transform into ornamental gardens including a conservatory, Eason said. An LED light show called Gardens Aglow is planned for November and December. Future concepts include a culinary center and the opening of a historic farmstead on the property.

“As much as there is here today, there is so much potential,” Eason said. “This is for the people, designed by the people. It’s not an oligarchy. A group of people got together and said we want it to be in Maine. One of the beautiful things about gardening here on the midcoast is rather than start with a flat slate. It is a beautiful landscape to itself.”



KATHLEEN PIERCE | BDN
Rodney Eason, plant curator and director of horticulture, examines one of 200,000 cultivated plants and 12,000 annuals at Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens.

Exhibit

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graffitied bridge underpasses, riverbanks littered with tattered blankets and granola bar wrappers.

For four years, Fleming, an outreach worker for the Shaw House, has taken photographs of these places to help him remember where to find and help teenagers without a safe place to sleep at night. He knows what homelessness looks like, and it’s not what many would expect.

Now those powerful images have taken on a new life as art and are on display at the Art Haus gallery in Nocturnem Draft Haus in Bangor through Aug. 8.

“There are stories that will make you hate humanity,” Fleming said of the circumstances under which many teenagers end up at the Shaw House. “When you think of homeless kids, you think of punk little runaways. But most of our kids were tossed out years ago. ... We’ve had parents drop their kids off and just be like ‘I’m done with them.’”

Fleming helps identify and connect with at-risk youth in the Bangor community and beyond. The photographs he took of these places while on the job weren’t



DOMINIQUE HESSERT | BDN
Art Haus gallery in Nocturnem Draft Haus is displaying works by Dan Fleming. His photography can be viewed until Aug. 8.

originally for artistic purposes, but Cara Oleksyk, curator of the Art Haus, saw their creative merit. After presenting his work at PechaKucha in Bangor this past spring, it became clear Fleming’s photography had wide appeal.

That’s why his photos are hanging on the walls of the space, and that’s why his message to the community about at-risk youth is gaining an audience.

“I saw his photos a couple years ago, and I realized that this was part of his creative

expression. And I value that,” Oleksyk said. “I realize how important all these different threads of our community are, including the Shaw House and young people who live there or get services and resources there.”

The mission of the Shaw House “is to engage youth who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless in achieving stability and a viable plan for the future by providing a safe, stable environment, access to essential services, supportive adult

connections and to advocate for changes that address the needs of homeless youth.”

“I’m not a photographer,” Fleming said. In fact, he doesn’t even own an actual camera. He used what he had on hand at the time — his iPhone — to document the places he sees every day in his line of work.

Fleming’s stark, straightforward style and the reason behind his photography is what drew Oleksyk and Art Haus director Zachary Robbins to

his work in the first place.

“He’s humble. He’s a hard worker. He wants to use the images that he’s taken ... and put them toward something bigger than himself,” Robbins said.

Haunting images of sagging tents and abandoned family photo albums are among the many shots Fleming has taken. Others are more abstract, such as his snapshot of a cracked brick wall chalked with the words “Be kind,” and the simple response “I try.” He hopes his photography shows homelessness isn’t always found in obvious places.

“If you’ve gone up Main Street, you’ve seen homeless kids,” Fleming said. “Sometimes you can’t tell from sight who’s homeless and who’s not.”

In his artist statement, Fleming explained what the Shaw House has taught him and what his photos represent.

“There are places that exist in this city where these throwaway kids go to find one another, to find a place where they belong, to be accepted by someone, anyone,” Fleming said in the statement. “Often these are not safe places. The campsites, abandoned houses and bridge underpasses can offer them many things, but a home shouldn’t be one of them.”

Book

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story of Mount Desert Island in the 1920s. ... To the extent that the Rockefellers, the Fords and other really influential families influenced the island and the island culture, that surprised me.”

That was one of the things she learned while researching the book on a topic she didn’t know much about Bar Harbor — or the 1920s.

“I learned a lot about both the 1920s and about Mount Desert Island,” said Yetter. “I really started out with just general knowledge about both and just kept delving deeper and deeper into local stories. ... I read some books about 1920s in America in general, to help me understand the era a little better.”

She also spent a lot of time in Bar Harbor.

Yetter, who also is the author of “Remembering Franklin County” and “Portland’s Past,” teaches writing classes at the University of Maine at Farmington. She researched and wrote the book steadily over the course of three years, while also teaching.

“I’d written a couple other books about local history in Maine, and I was looking for a new location. And I just love Bar Harbor and Mount Desert Island. Who doesn’t,” said Yetter during a phone interview Wednesday.

Her editor encouraged her to concentrate on a single era for this book — a different strategy than she used in her previous books.

“I was watching the series ‘Boardwalk Empire’ at the time. It’s set in the 1920s, and I thought, ‘I bet there were a lot of stories in the 20s in Bar Harbor,’” said Yetter.

Yetter was happy to discover that Bar Harbor remains a vibrant year-round community.

“Spending time there in the last couple years — It’s been great to see what a thriving community it still is,” said Yetter.

Yetter will be giving a book talk and signing copies of “Bar Harbor in the Roaring Twenties” at 7 p.m. Aug. 13 at Jesup Memorial Library in Bar Harbor. Her book is available at Sherman’s in Bar Harbor, in Acadia shops and other places where books are sold.