

Program gives entrepreneurs a second shot at success

Innovation

Failure Fund started by UNB's Pond-Deshpande Centre

SHAWN BERRY
LEGISLATURE BUREAU

Gene Fowler knows the burden of being an entrepreneur carrying the mark of failure.

The owner of Loogaroo, a cartoon and gaming company in Miramichi, is now running a profitable business employing three and providing freelance work to almost 20 more. But he still remembers the sting of closing down Fatkat animation as it employed 120 and owed more than \$1 million.

The experience, he says, has helped him avoid the pitfalls he faced before, of growing too fast and not seeking help early on.

"I learned so much from trying to save my company back in 2009 and failing. Failure is an event usually made up of a lot of pieces."

While banks and government agencies may remember him for his past, he's also found those who recognize him as an entrepreneur who still has potential.

"That feels good," he says.

So Fowler's pleased to hear that a new initiative by UNB's Pond-Deshpande Centre is looking to help entrepreneurs who experienced collapse, got up, brushed themselves off and are eager to give a go to a new effort.

The centre's so-called Failure Fund will provide between \$5,000 and \$15,000 to failed entrepreneurs, giving them a chance to test their new idea, do



Gene Fowler looks to his dog Chicken while working on a cartoon from his studio in Miramichi. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

market research, meet potential customers or write a business plan to validate their project.

Karina LeBlanc, executive director of the Pond-Deshpande Centre at the University of New Brunswick, says entrepreneurs who stumbled shouldn't be forced to sideline their drive, determination and vision from the marketplace.

"They're a valuable asset in the entrepreneurial ecosystem – even more valuable now that they have failed," she said.

"Typically the most successful people have left a slew of failures

in their wake. But nobody talks about that when they succeed."

While the end of a business is often greeted as a failure, LeBlanc says there are usually many issues at play.

Failure, she says, is a natural part of that innovation cycle at a time when only about one in 10 of every early-stage business survives.

"If we're going to be innovative as a society, there has to be some level of risk-taking, which means we're going to have failures.

"We're hoping this fund sparks discussion and that it is a beginning so we can have a broader

dialogue about what exactly failure means, how we get there and why it is a good thing to have that as part of the natural process of entrepreneurship."

That's a discussion Fowler is eager to partake in.

Too often, he said, "business failure is regarded as a person's fault."

"That's certainly how I felt when I lost Fatkat in 2009, a bit ostracized and it hurt."

He worries the public piling-on that greets many a failed entrepreneur scares some with ideas off – preventing them from even

trying.

"I don't think failed entrepreneurs should be considered as a one-time shot. Failure's the most expensive business school there is," Fowler said.

LeBlanc agrees. She says if failure is seen as a barrier to success instead of a necessity, it could have a trickle effect on innovation.

"Let's celebrate it. Let's reward entrepreneurs who have tried something, failed and are willing to get back up and try again, learning from their mistakes to do a better job next time."