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JACQUES HABRA

Entrepreneurship Evangelist

On any given day, this entrepreneur can be found running his technology business from his home office, playing volleyball on East Beach, perfecting his down dog at Yoga Soup, mentoring budding industrialists, lecturing at UC Santa Barbara, and relaxing with his three cats at his Riviera home. A Midwest transplant, 35-year-old Habra >



Habra kicks back
in his office at the
University Club.

BY KATRIN WANBERG PHOTOGRAPH BY CORAL VON ZUMWALT

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especially admires the plethora of nonprofit organizations the town has to offer. Since moving here nearly three years ago, the self-professed Santa Barbara fanatic has immersed himself in both his professional and personal passions, entrenching himself in the fabric of the community.

Key among Habra's pursuits is his latest venture, Catalyst, a not-for-profit lecture and event series for young professionals. Habra helped construct the nonprofit model for the business, where sponsors host cocktail mixers and guest speakers address topics of entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and philanthropy. "I spend time with young entrepreneurs who are right where I was when I started," he says. "They have enthusiasm, drive, and motivation, but they need help executing the plan—that's where I come in."

Catalyst arose as an outreach concept of his tech company, Noospheric, founded in 2002. The multifaceted consulting practice helps entrepreneurs launch businesses, includes an investment division that buys into and raises capital for those businesses, and also works with educational, academic, and nonprofit programs. For the latter, he lectures about technology and entrepreneurial topics at UCSB and Santa Barbara City College and mentors students enrolled in the UCSB Technology Management Program.

If anyone knows how it feels to launch a career as a young entrepreneur, it's Habra. Born in Lebanon, he spent his early childhood in Brussels, eventually moving with his family to Kalamazoo. He worked his way through school at the University of Michigan with computer-related jobs, and was introduced to the Web in 1994. While still finishing degrees in English and philosophy, he started Web Elite—an innovative Internet application and online communication company. He worked as CEO for six years then sold the business in 2002. At 28, Habra found himself at a crossroads. "I suddenly had a freedom that I never thought I would have by that age," he says. "Do I continue technology? Do I try a career in film? Stand-up comedy? I felt like anything was possible." He approached his mentor, branding maven Janet Muhleman (claims to fame include Domino's Pizza), for guidance.



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Her prophetic reply: "Why not do it all?" "I was blown away by that notion," says Habra. "But it really was that simple."

His first step was to leave the "lung-freezing cold" of Kalamazoo for the palm-studded shores of Venice Beach. He worked as a consultant, developing business plans and targeting clients for companies, while attending film production and script-writing classes in his spare time. Although he enjoyed his work and thrived in his new digs, he soon felt at odds with the fast-paced lifestyle of L.A. "I'm not quite as glamorous as I thought I could be," he says. "I wanted more simplicity."

As fate would have it, Habra found himself passing through Santa Barbara while on a business trip. "I was instantly enamored," he says. Three years ago, he secured a client in town and transitioned into a more laid-back way of life—enjoying drinks at local watering holes, weekend hikes, and visits to the "tiny corner shops that make this such a special place."

"One of the first things I did when I moved here was join Big Brothers Big Sisters, where I met my little brother Alexsei," says Habra. "Both of his legs were amputated due to a health condition, yet he has no limits or boundaries. He always reminds me to stay positive." Next, he signed on to work with the Riviera Association Board—which fosters communication in his neighborhood during disasters—and the MIT Central Coast Forum, "a definitive standard for area entrepreneurs, angel investors, and venture capitalists," he explains.

How does he find time for it all? "I'm a high-energy person," he says. "When I finally found a place that I wanted to call home, I not only got more involved, but I tried a bit of everything." Also vying for Habra's attention: Chartmedica (an online storage for medical records), Internet city guide SBClick.com (a resource for newcomers), and, of course, further mentorship and volunteer commitments.

"My way of declaring my enthusiasm for living here is through my involvement in the community—I look at it as a social obligation," he says. "It only takes a little extra effort to make a difference." ■



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