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Incubator for socially minded entrepreneurs launches in New Orleans

January 5, 2013 By [Joe](#)

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Andrea Chen's specialty is making connections. She pairs seasoned professionals with [upstart businesses](#), links grants and other financing sources with nascent causes and helps turn ideas into real-life organizations.

Chen is the force behind the latest business incubator to take shape in New Orleans, this one focusing on socially-minded businesses and non-profits in areas such as healthy food access, justice, education, the environment and land use. On Wednesday, the group, called [Propeller: A Force for Social Innovation](#), moved into a renovated former rim shop on Washington Avenue near South Broad Street in Central City where it now houses 23 organizations with room to grow.

The incubator offers inexpensive office space to social entrepreneurs and a venue for professionals from different fields to collaborate and take advantage of Propeller's consulting services. The group is a non-profit, but the incubator is a for-profit entity run in partnership with [Green Coast Enterprises](#), an environmentally oriented real estate developer.

This week, Chen, 30, surveyed the empty space, preparing to welcome its first tenants and meeting with a procession of people. Construction details remained unfinished. But the two levels of offices, overlooking open floors for communal working and events, were ready to go when their occupants arrived on Wednesday.

James Anthony Braendel, far left, and his RapJab co-worker Richard Alexander Pomes discuss work at an open workspace near Adam Mejerson, back center, with Fit-Lot, who was talking to Kevin Morgan-Rothschild, far right, of Aquaponic Modula Production Systems. All of them rent space at Propeller, an entrepreneurial incubator for socially conscious businesses that opened on Washington Avenue in New Orleans on Wednesday.

Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune and NOLA.com

“When people get together who are like-minded, they get things done,” said Chen, a Stanford-educated California native who arrived in New Orleans in 2004 as a Teach for America educator.

Propeller itself had been germinating in an incubator, working out of [Launch Pad](#), which houses companies in the Warehouse District.

Now Propeller has more space for its “accelerator” fellows to meet. The accelerator program, running from June to March each year, matches professional consultants with founders of socially-minded enterprises to help them clarify financial goals and set their ambitions for how many people they hope to reach.

Propeller also co-sponsors the business pitch contests [Pitch NOLA](#) at [Tulane University](#) and Lots of Progress, which seeks creative uses for vacant lots around New Orleans. And sometimes, like when it started a healthy food campaign in 28 New Orleans public schools, Propeller launches a new effort directly.

Chen’s background in education sparked the food initiative. When New Orleans public schools closed and she lost her teaching post after [Hurricane Katrina](#), she left to earn a master’s degree in education policy and management from Harvard University, returned to teaching in New Orleans and then worked for the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools and consulted for the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts.

“I think being embedded in the community gives you a unique perspective on what your students, what your kids, are going through,” she said about teaching. “You see problems through a different lens.”

Andrea Chen, right, co-founder of Propeller and Will Bradshaw, left, of Propeller Incubator partner Green Coast Enterprises, stand inside a break room area at the incubator, talking with Kevin Morgan-Rothschild, center, who is a project manager with Aquaponic Modular Production Systems, one of numerous small startup companies renting space at the newly renovated Washington Avenue building in New Orleans.
Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune and NOLA.com

Among the problems, she said, were the timeless complaints about the unhealthy and unappealing nature of school cafeteria food.

So she reached out to the [KIPP charter school group](#), pushing an effort to persuade food vendors to drop fried foods and fruit juices and emphasize fresh vegetables, fruit and other wholesome fare. Chen encouraged KIPP, in turn, to become a consultant for other [charter schools](#), said James Graham, school services director for the nine KIPP schools in New Orleans.

Now, in a new venture for KIPP, Graham oversees a food improvement push in 28 schools serving 10,000 students. Graham is a member of the current class of Propeller accelerator fellows.

“The need wasn’t just with KIPP schools,” he said. “Propeller got us in contact with other charter schools. We were able to partner with those schools and help them manage their food service vendors.”

Propeller’s co-founder, Morgan Williams, who is from New Orleans but now works as a lawyer for a housing organization in Washington, said the incubator had its origins in a discussion group that formed before Katrina among about 15 people who wanted to talk about issues facing the city.

Katrina scattered the group, but when it started forming again later, Chen joined and began transforming it from a brainstorming exercise into a functional organization, he said. The goal, Chen said, was to harness and preserve the post-Katrina surges in civic involvement, rebuilding initiative and entrepreneurship.

Westley Bayas of Stand for Children unloads boxes of office supplies into a room at Propeller, an entrepreneurial incubator for socially conscious businesses and non-profits that recently opened on Washington Avenue in New Orleans.

Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune and NOLA.com

“There was just a lot of energy, of people saying, ‘Let’s do it ourselves,’” Chen said. “We wanted to make sure that that energy continued to thrive. How can we make sure that this exists in five to 10 years? That, I think, was our biggest fear, that it would fizzle out.”

First Propeller was an all-volunteer consulting program called Social Entrepreneurs of New Orleans. When it won enough grant money in 2010 to employ Chen as a full-time executive director and pay some of the professionals who counsel the startups, it rebranded itself as Propeller.

“When she says she’s going to do something, it’s going to happen,” Williams said about Chen. Her reputation for follow-through boosted Propeller, he said.

“Andrea has made it much more results-oriented,” he said. “She’s a force of nature. It’s pretty amazing.”

Propeller reports that its 2011-12 class of nine accelerator fellows have gone on to create 30 fulltime jobs, 10 part-time jobs and generate \$2.2 million in investments, revenues and grants for their causes.

Shannon Dosemagen, right, and Nick Shapiro, both with The Public Laboratory, one of numerous small companies housed inside Propeller, have a meeting inside the main room of the building on Washington Avenue in New Orleans.

Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune and NOLA.com



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Tippy Tippens was one of those fellows. She runs [MATTER Inc.](#), a New Orleans industrial design firm that shares proceeds from its products with various causes. Her first effort, called BirdProject, inspired by the [BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico](#), sells soaps shaped like black birds that dissolve to reveal white ceramic birds at the core, representing the cleanup of oiled wildlife. Tippens shares sales of the bird soaps with spill cleanup groups.

The Propeller accelerator, she said, “helped eliminate some of the baby steps and wasting some time on things I don’t know how to do,” in starting the business.

Her expertise is design, so she worked with a finance expert to understand managing money. “I’m a massive fan of Propeller,” Tippens said. “It really hooks you up with things that you need at that moment but you also can’t afford.”

Ameca Reali is nearing the end of her 10-month fellowship. She said Propeller helped her focus the mission of her startup, the [Justice and Accountability Center of Louisiana](#). The idea was for a wide-ranging social justice law clinic; now it concentrates on helping people expunge criminal records so they can better find work and function productively.

Propeller also helped Reali promote her service. When she started working with Chen and company last year, she and her partner had 15 clients. Now they have about 300, she said.

“You can present a challenge to her that’s insurmountable,” Reali said. “She can point out the pieces” of a solution.

Reali also is now an inaugural tenant at the incubator, trading makeshift working conditions for a solid home base and looking forward to intellectual exchanges with other social entrepreneurs.

By the end of the first week at the incubator, Chen said, tenants who had never met before already were talking about new ways of working together.

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