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'Ignored' millennials stake a claim on Tampa Bay community's political future

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A group of about 50 self-described millennials with an interest in politics got together Sunday, Oct. 10, at the Aloft Hotel in Tampa for a panel discussion on issues of importance to them. After their two-hour meeting, they gathered around to watch, cheer and groan at the night's televised presidential debate. [Courtesy of Melissa Baldwin]

TAMPA – Millennials, the young and youngish, are much more than college students living on campus or with their parents.

“We are the generation that created Facebook and social media,” said Cesar Hernandez, 30. “Sometimes we feel a little ignored, as if we are not contributing. But we are changing the game, we are saying we are ready to lead.”

He and about 50 fellow “older” millennials decided to prove it.

They got together Sunday at the Aloft Hotel in Tampa for a panel discussion on issues important to this increasingly powerful generation of people from about age 20 to 35.

The occasion was the presidential debate, which they watched, cheering and groaning, after their

nearly two-hour discussion.

Hernandez and the New Leaders Council Tampa Bay organized the panel of five local millennial business leaders.

The NLC is a national nonprofit group focused on recruiting, training and promoting “the next generation of progressive leaders.”

“Millennials are getting a little older and a lot of us are beginning to have families. We need to change things,” said Alexandra Esparza, 28, CEO of Jefes.co, an online network for Gen Y Latino leaders and entrepreneurs.

Other panelists were Roberto Torres, 36, CEO of Blind Tiger Café and Black & Denim Apparel Co.; Tony Selvaggio, 29, CEO of eSmart Recycling; Andrew Machota, 34, CEO of New Town Connections; and Sari Famiglietti, 34, CEO of Creative Lab Studios.

“We wanted to give millennial voices a chance to speak,” said Hernandez, who is government relations director at the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority.

And speak they did.

It turned out there was tremendous agreement and even passion on a variety of issues.

They were also intensely interested in their businesses being socially responsible, particularly in leading the way to a better and more responsible politics.

“It’s our turn to fix it, to voice our opinions,” Selvaggio said.

Machota’s suggestion that members of Congress be term-limited was a big hit with his fellow panelists.

Topics discussed ranged from a lack of ground transportation around the Tampa area, to failing schools, climate change, immigration, innovative technologies, and even the need for economic solutions for older generations pushed out of their careers.

“We are the first generation whose school classrooms were filled by technology,” said Janelle Irwin, a Tampa Bay Business Journal reporter who moderated the discussion.

Leadership qualities, they said, can be adopted by anyone and should include empathy, experience, tact, integrity, vision, and the ability to communicate effectively.

Opinions became particularly heated when the panelists began talking about social and criminal justice.

“I don’t see color or gender but the reality is a lot of people do,” said Famiglietti, who tries to promote

“hometown heroes” who do good deeds in their neighborhoods.

Selvaggio was particularly concerned about boys and girls who have no access to computers or the Internet in their homes. He has partnered with Pinellas County Boys and Girls Clubs to set up after-school technology labs.

When the audience wanted to know why so many new businesses fail, the panel had a lot of ideas, ranging from not planning enough to overplanning.

“Entrepreneurship is way more romanticized than it should be. It is a dirty, ugly, lonely road,” Selvaggio said to laughter. “I love it, but it is not a romantic scenario.”

New business owners usually work 80 hours a week for pennies, Torres said. “You don’t need to be married to your business, you need to be married to the idea of being successful.”

Locally, Machete suggested that the Hillsborough County Commission needs a “change of guard.”

“There needs to be millennials on the County Commission to make transportation changes in Tampa Bay,” he said. “This is one of the hottest cities in the U.S., and young, professional millennials want to move here but there is no transportation.”

Famiglietti wants city and county officials to be more aware of opportunities provided by new technologies.

“We have to go out there and help make the decisions,” she said.

And as for the presidential election, they all agreed that no matter how it turns out on Nov. 8, the decisions by the next president will affect not only the next four years, but the next 50 years.

“It is very important to me that millennials vote,” Machete said.

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