

Bringing a piece of Silicon Valley to Collinsville

By Glenn Shafer
Staff Writer

Don't let the kayakers, bikers, and easy-going atmosphere of the LaSalle Market fool you. High-stakes international technology business is taking place in Collinsville, Connecticut.

Look no further than two 30-somethings Aaron LaBerge and Eric Kirsten. Both left lucrative careers in Bristol with ESPN to start Fanzter, an Internet software company. They work out of renovated space on the second floor of the Collinsville Ax Factory.

When entering their office from a freight elevator, the large space is reminiscent of a start-up Silicon Valley Internet company back in 1999. LaBerge and Kirsten, dressed in jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts, communicate with their lawyers, designers, and the people who invested a million bucks in the company, through a flat screen television that hangs on the office wall.

Looking through the office window is the Farmington River and the steady noise of the waterfall that runs along their building. These guys love their location.

"We wanted a place to hatch this company," said LaBerge. "We go to Boston several times a week and New York is the media capital of the world. The world is flat anyway, so location doesn't matter."

Their only wish?

That the Crowne & Hammer Restaurant would open on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Both LaBerge and Kirsten have extensive Internet and technology experience that brought them to ESPN in the first place.

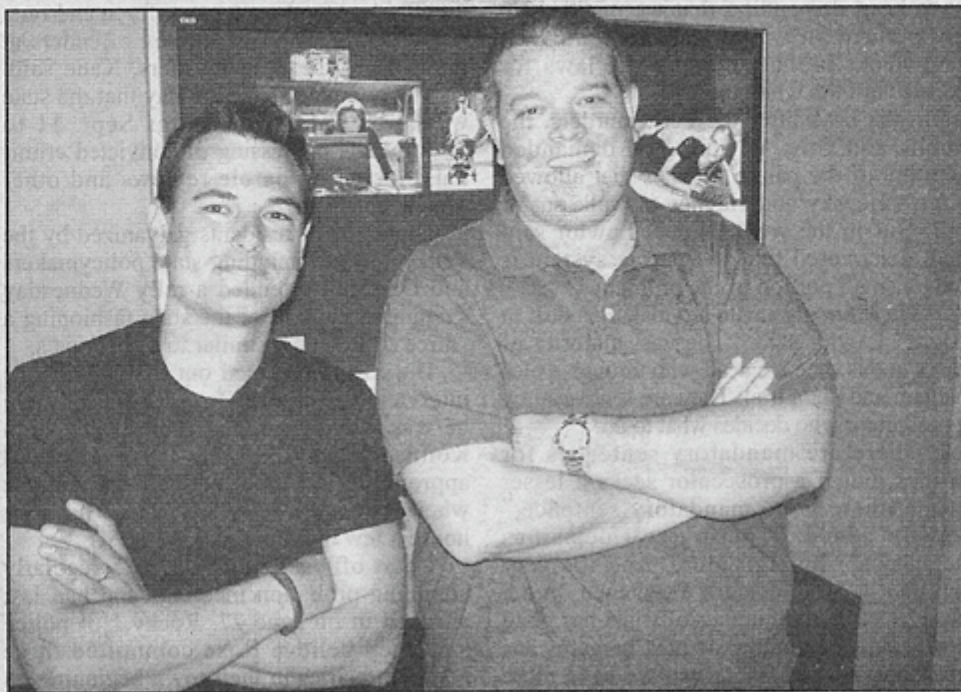


Photo by Glenn Shafer

Eric Kirsten (left) and Aaron LaBerge, co-founders of Fanzter, a Collinsville-based Internet company.

LaBerge was the senior vice president of technology and product development, while Kirsten was the director of college basketball programming.

LaBerge grew up in Charleston, S.C. and graduated from the University of South Carolina.

"I was looking to do something entrepreneurial," he said.

Soon after graduation, he moved to Seattle to work for a company called Starwave, which was later purchased by the Walt Disney Company. After the company merger, LaBerge was replanted to ESPN.

LaBerge said the Silicon Valley network of people is tight. His old boss at Starwave, Mike Slade, is a partner in Second Avenue Partners, the venture capital firm funding Fanzter. Paul Allen, one of the founders of Microsoft, was also a partner in Starwave.

Somewhere between one and two million in venture capital money will fund their company's growth.

"We chose Second Avenue Partners and they love what we are doing," said LaBerge. "It's a good sign." Kirsten agreed.

"I've never seen a group have an easier time get funding," he said.

Growing up in New Jersey and completing degrees from Duke University and Georgetown Law School, Kirsten has a more varied career path. He moved from attorney to screen writer with Universal Pictures before finding a niche with a string of Internet start-ups. Burlington is his 14th home in 15 years. Other stops across the country include Washington D. C., Los Angeles, Denver, San Francisco, Austin, and Chicago.

As for the software itself – the product – LaBerge and Kirsten are limited in what they can say since the product will be launched in October.

"We are building software that millions of people will be using," said Kirsten. "It is awesome. "We are in stealth mode. I can't believe the idea is not being done. We are out front and ready to compete. We are going to hit the ground running."

Like many who move to New England, LaBerge and Kirsten are becoming rooted in the community. They both are married with kids and left the financial stability of ESPN, a Seminole decision in their careers.

"The new company is more of a creative outlet," said LaBerge. "It's a lifestyle. I am able to make the decisions. I have always wanted to be an entrepreneur. ESPN was an equally rewarding experience but they are a big business that needs to be run. Here there are no rules. The roller coaster has been crazy. It's more about the experience and surrounding yourself with the best people and creating a culture that encourages creativity."

The idea of being part of a start up with a huge financial upside was something Kirsten could not turn down.

"It's the fear of missing the party," he said. "I don't want to read about it."

For more information or to inquire about employment, visit their Web site www.fanzter.com or call 860-269-7247.