



# From dreams to reality

## Project helps ideas come to fruition

By ANTHONY WILSON Special to the Standard-Times

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You may say Mitch Matthews is a dreamer. But he's not the only one.

You're a dreamer. So is your next-door neighbor. And your brother. And each and every one of your friends and acquaintances.

We're all dreamers, Matthews preaches, but until we share those dreams and connect with others who possess the wherewithal to help those dreams come true, it's unlikely our dreams - be they big or small, personal or professional - will ever be realized.

That simple concept has spawned a movement that began nearly three years ago in Matthews' Iowa home and has since snowballed into the Big Dream Gathering. On March 5, courtesy of the Texas Midwest Community Network, Matthews will bring his Big Dream Gathering to San Angelo to nudge West Texans into publicly sharing their secret desires. Experience tells him the airing of those aspirations will result in a linking of people with the skills, know-how, connections and finances to transform those dreams into achievements.

So rather than resolving today to lose weight or become more organized at work in the new year, Matthews is encouraging locals to focus on their grandest dreams in preparation for the spring event.

"It's real people getting big dreams done," Matthews said. "There's no sales pitch or catch. You just come, dream big and connect with other big dreamers. It sounds too simple, but there's so much power in that."

Wendy Ellis, the community development director in Brady, calls the opportunity for the region to host a Big Dream Gathering "a no-brainer." Ellis serves on the executive committee of the Texas Midwest Community Network, a regional effort that promotes a cooperative approach to economic and community growth among its 43 member cities.

"I expect a great meeting of the minds and an opportunity for people to really connect with people who share their passion and their dreams," Ellis said of the Big Dream Gathering. "We want to create a day where people remember the power of their dreams and what they really want from their lives. We're going to find really great dreams and connect people with support networks. Once we do that, there's no way to predict what the outcome will be."

Matthews' movement began three Christmases ago with his own simple dream - to market a game he devised that connects the players through rounds of questions. When a group of his friends played a mock version of the game for six hours one weekend, Matthews thought to himself, "Gosh, we might be on to something."

As with most dreams, however, there were roadblocks - in this case, Matthews' lack of spare time. At the time, he was working in the pharmaceutical industry. Shortly after the Christmas gathering with friends, a project on which he was working - and in which 95 percent of his income was tied - got shelved by the Food and Drug Administration. Ever the optimist, Matthews saw the setback as a sign he should pursue marketing his game.

A few months later, he ran into more hurdles that depleted his capital. He considered surrendering his dream.

"I started to realize that we've all got big dreams, but we think we don't have enough time, money or contacts," Matthews said. "All of this started welling up in me."

Thus was born the first Big Dream Gathering, "a real organic thing" in which Matthews and his wife invited some friends to their home on a Tuesday night to share their dreams. About 40 people showed up to find sheets of paper stuck all over the Matthews' walls. The top half was reserved for each person to write his dreams. The bottom half was for others to write on, whether to offer encouragement, advice or contacts.

"It wowed us," Matthews recalled. "You could tell people were just hashing this out: 'What are my big dreams?' We had no ideas the dreams that hatched that night. We thought we were done."

But for a solid week afterward, strangers appeared at the Matthews' doorstep, inquiring if this was the place they could write down their dreams. One night at 9 o'clock, a pair of college students walked right into the home and began jotting their dreams.

"My wife and I were in the kitchen going, 'When did we lose control?'" Matthews laughed. "It confirmed that we all have big dreams and, at our core, a yearning to help each other with our big dreams."

Matthews returned all the sheets to his dreamers, and ...

"Nothing happened," he confessed.

But over the coming weeks and months, he began hearing reports of progress being made, dreams being achieved, lives being changed.

Mandy Van Maanen credits that first Big Dream Gathering with forever changing her.

Van Maanen, who works for a company that crafts incentive packages for sales organizations, wrote down seven dreams that Tuesday night in Matthews' home. All of them, she said, have come true, including the biggie - a desire to take a two-week mission trip to Africa to work with orphans.

At the time, she considered the dream "far-fetched," doubting she could get that much time off from work or could raise the money to pay for the trip. With the encouragement of others, however, she shared her hope with her boss, who surprised her by urging her to pursue the dream. A short time later, he came into her office and gave her a personal check to help pay for her expenses. He also handed her a \$1,000 donation

from a client to whom he had mentioned Van Maanen's dream.

She sent a letter to family and friends explaining the dream. Within a week, she had received the \$3,000 she needed for the trip. She ended up raising \$6,000, half of which she gave to the orphanage in Mozambique where she did her mission work.

The experience of interacting with children who live in extreme poverty and filth, who eat rice and beans for nearly every meal, and who own only two outfits each and manage to convert pieces of rubbish into playthings drastically changed her.

"I've never met happier children," Van Maanen said. "It definitely changed me and gave me the passion to pursue adoption. That's my next big dream.

"It's amazing what happens when a few people say, 'I can help.'"

Van Maanen confessed to being "kind of an addict, in a good way," to the BDG process. She now helps Matthews with his Big Dream Gatherings throughout the Midwest.

"At the end of the day, people are genuinely good," she said. "The Big Dream Gathering is an environment that breeds camaraderie and encouragement. We don't sit back and think, 'What do I want to do with my life?' If you take the time to write down your dream and have the ability to open minds and have faith, there's something powerful in that."

Matthews can share other such stories - the small branding firm that landed a contract with Nike, the two women who partnered on a Web business that let them be stay-at-home moms, the teacher who is delivering educational supplies to Third World countries. Matthews has even managed to market his game - Q friends (and a romantic version called Q dates) - in the Midwest and is close to landing an account with a national chain.

Ellis is convinced the West Texas Big Dream Gathering - the first such event outside the Midwest - will yield similar successes. In addition to aiding individuals, it could help communities connect the dots on some of the dreams they want to achieve, be that revitalizing a downtown, enhancing a tourism attraction or creating jobs.

"It's an exciting concept," she said. "When we're kids, we dream all the time with no restrictions or boundaries. When we get older, we put boundaries on ourselves. When we can dream without limitations, that's a powerful place to be."

Matthews said the BDG has grown to include 11 categories of dreams, including business, travel, health, spiritual, agricultural and entertainment.

As the new year approached, he drew a sharp distinction between a dream and a resolution.

"Resolutions are things you hope to do but are forgotten in a day or two," he said. "A big dream is something that burns in your heart - something you long to do, to walk out what you were put on the planet to do."

As important as sharing the dreams, Ellis said, will be learning "who your neighbors are" and the resources they possess, noting that "you never know when those will come in handy."

Already anticipating the success stories the San Angelo gathering will spark, the Texas Midwest Community Network is planning another Big Dream Gathering in Abilene in 2010.

"It's only one night," Ellis said, "but it's an opportunity to be connected with your fellow dreamers."

If you go

n What: Big Dream Gathering, a chance to share your dream and connect with others who may have the resources to help you make that dream come true.

n When: 6 p.m. March 5.

n Where: McNease Convention Center, 500 Rio Concho Drive.

n Cost: Free.

n More information: Contact the Texas Midwest Community Network in Abilene at (800) 845-3563 or (325) 795-8626 or >[tmcn@tmcn.org](mailto:tmcn@tmcn.org).

On the Net

n Big Dream Gathering: [big dreamgathering.com](http://bigdreamgathering.com)

n Texas Midwest Community Network: [texasmidwest.org](http://texasmidwest.org)

You have a dream

We all have dreams, and the Standard-Times wants you to share yours. Send us your dream, in 50 words or less, and we will publish a selection of those dreams in the days leading up to the Big Dream Gathering on March 5. E-mail your dreams to City Editor Michael Kelly at [mkelly@gosanangelo.com](mailto:mkelly@gosanangelo.com).



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