

# DISPATCHES



Masters of party  
planning: Bisnow  
and Zabar



>first look

## Good Fellas

A group of hyper-energized twenty-somethings want to form a community of the country's brightest young CEOs by skiing, kayaking, and getting tattoos together. Crazy, right? The CEOs don't think so. BY GRAYSON SCHAFFER

"THIS IS THE TOUGHEST door anywhere," says Brett Leve, 25. He's tapping frantically at his BlackBerry while the rest of us—four dudes—wait at the VIP entrance to Miami's Liv nightclub. It's the week of the city's famous Winter Music Conference, Scottish DJ Calvin Harris is spinning, and 500 impossibly good-looking scenesters are feeling equally stymied.

"This guy plays in front of 70,000 people in Europe," says the crew's headman, Summit Series founder Elliott Bisnow, 24, who comes on with the charm and swagger of Tom Cruise circa *Risky Business*.

Then, somewhere in the ether, Leve's text messages crack the code. The slick Latin bouncer makes nice, and we're in, surrounded by thudding beats, pulsing lights, and waitresses unsubtly

delivering bottles of Dom rigged with lit sparklers. Billy Idol drifts past, displaying a new hairdo that closely resembles a carnivorous sundew plant.

"Hey, Billy!" shouts Jeff Rosenthal, 25, with a fist pump. And so it goes—deep into the night.

The next morning, I'm convalescing poolside at Summit Series HQ, where Jeremy Schwartz, 25, is explaining how eight guys in their twenties have managed to launch a business conference—equal parts party, hangout, and outdoor fun—whose list of attendees could soon rival those of Davos and Silicon Valley's TED gatherings. "Whoever's reality is stronger will win," Schwartz declares. "If you really believe, so will they."

This thing they all believe in—the Summit Series, which comes to D.C. this May 13–16—is Bisnow's idea to create a community of the world's brightest and most adventurous young business minds. In one sense, the Summit Series is just another conference, modeled in part on TED, but it's specif-

ically geared toward up-and-coming entrepreneurs who would rather ski, kayak, and surf than hang around in hotel lobbies and swap business cards. We heard about the group after *Outside* correspondent Thayer Walker (see page 54) joined them on a ski trip to Big Sky—and then got hired by Bisnow. "Dynamic shared experience" is at the heart of it all, says Rosenthal. "If you go skydiving with someone, you're friends for life." In D.C. they'll kayak the Potomac, play paintball, do Skanda Yoga together, and get inked by tattoo artist Scott Campbell.

Of course, the real measure of any conference is the caliber of the people who agree to speak—Bill Clinton and Mark Cuban have volunteered their time for May—and the credentials of the people invited to attend. Raise those two factors to a critical mass and the event starts to snowball like a popular kid's birthday party, even at \$3,500 a head.

"You have to be doing amazing work," Bisnow says of the entry criteria, "and we'd want to be friends with you even if you weren't successful." And despite



## FIRST LOOK

They're on a boat:  
From left, Schwartz  
(in back), Walker,  
Zabar, Cohen,  
Leve, Rosenthal,  
Bisnow, Korshak



appearances, there's no age limit.

The whole thing came about after Bisnow dropped out of the University of Wisconsin in 2006. He and his father had started a commercial real-estate e-newsletter. Elliott wanted to network with other young entrepreneurs, so he cold-called Ricky Van Veen and Josh Abramson—the 28-year-old co-founders of Vimeo, College Humor, and Busted Tees—and invited them on an all-expenses-paid ski trip to Utah in 2008.

“I thought he was just this crazy kid,” Abramson recalls. “He was offering everything you could possibly want to do on a ski trip—flying first-class, heli-skiing ... We heard him out.” So did Ben Lerer from Thrillist and Sam Altman of Loopt. In all, 20 guys showed up and hit it off.

“Later, he told me he'd made up everything,” says Abramson. “He thought that if he got all of us on board, then he'd be able to make the rest happen. He takes the ‘Fake it till you make it’ to the extreme.”

Six months later, they did it again in Mexico, where they surfed, dove, and fished. This time, 65 entrepreneurs came along. Bisnow, who'd sold corporate sponsorships against both trips, realized that Summit Series meetings weren't just a means to help his publishing business; they were the business itself.

To push the concept forward, Bisnow assembled a salaried team of like-minded go-go guys. Leve was running an energy consulting office out of D.C. Rosenthal was landing upstart consumer products in big-box stores like Target. Schwartz was playing guitar on the Vans Warped Tour. Justin

Cohen, 23, an Indiana University grad, was producing fashion shows at upscale hotels. Josh Zabar, 26, a third-degree taekwondo black belt and Yale center fielder, was burned out at his tech-consulting gig in L.A. Mark Korshak, 24, was producing documentaries in L.A. And Thayer Walker, the oldest at 31, was freelance writing.

All of them have roughly the same job—sell the conference to attendees, speakers, and sponsors—which they execute at a boiler-room pace, trying to hit their quotas.

The team's dislike of rigid structure spawned their peculiar office culture, which is radical even by the standards of the millennial generation. Headquarters is in a different city every few months. Rather than spring for both office space and housing, the guys save money and see the world by renting a house together in exotic locales. The current office is a \$9,000-per-month, six-bedroom waterfront villa that's right out of *Scarface*. Rent includes use of the 35-foot yacht parked out back. Before Miami was New York, and before that was a farm and surf break in Nicaragua.

A few hours after getting home from Liv, Bisnow awakes, darts out, and returns with heaping sacks of fresh fruit and hard-boiled eggs from Whole Foods. Then he's into business attire—boardshorts—and everyone is pounding the BlackBerry. Zabar multitasks his calls with slow dumbbell curls in the yacht's bow. Bisnow claims the diving board.

“These guys do \$400 million a year and get their social cues from MTV,” I overhear Rosenthal tell Jay Coen Gilbert, co-founder of basketball-shoe maker And1, as an expla-

nation of the millennial mogul's mindset. “All they want to do is get bottle service and fly to Vegas on a private jet. ... I was wondering if you could speak about B corps.” (B corporations strive for a double bottom line of profit and social benefit.)

Bisnow, meanwhile, is pitching former XM Satellite Radio CEO Hugh Panero to speak. (Summit doesn't pay speakers.) “He's so skeptical,” Bisnow whisper-shouts with the mouthpiece covered, and then picks the conversation back up. “You've been around the block. You're obviously a rock star.”

The Summit boys are so over the top that they're completely disarming. I get the sense that the deskbound suits on the line mean to push back but just end up saying yes.

“We had our best day yesterday,” beams Bisnow. They landed 26 qualified attendees, bringing their total to nearly 500.

Sometime in the afternoon, FedEx delivers nine boxes containing a thousand-odd water-purifying LifeStraws, the invention of another of their presenters, Mikkel Vestergaard Frandsen. Two days from now, the guys will fly to Haiti to personally deliver them.

That evening, I ask what they'll do next and whether they think they're being naive about what they can accomplish through what is essentially adventure social planning. But there's no room for self-doubt.

“The conference is just the beginning,” says Bisnow. After D.C., they plan to use the collective influence of their community to foment major social change. Maybe push for gay marriage. “Or,” Bisnow says, “maybe we'll end a war.”