

Arts and culture groups told to 'dare greatly'

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Mashantucket — The owner of two of the region's finest restaurants challenged members of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition Tuesday to "dare greatly" as they help spark the fire of progress and innovation that will help turn the economic tide locally.

Keynote speaker Daniel Meiser, named 2016 Restaurateur of the Year (<http://www.theday.com/local/20161130/mystic-restaurants-bring-home-bacon-with-awards>) by the Connecticut Restaurant Association, was applauded warmly by the 150 people in attendance at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center (<http://www.pequotmuseum.org/>). The cultural coalition's half-day conference, Thrive (<http://www.theday.com/local/20161125/thrive-brings-arts-culture-under-one-tent>), was the first of its kind and is believed to be the first time such a wide range of local arts and heritage leaders had ever been together in one room.

"I really believe in our little corner of the state," said Meiser, who owns Oyster Club and co-owns Engine Room in Mystic. "We are not only recovering, but we are growing."

"Thank you for the call to arms," said Preston Whiteway, chairman of the coalition's board of directors and executive director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center.

Meiser pointed out several positive stories happening in the region, including the Mystic firm that sells the award-winning Real McCoy Rum (<http://www.theday.com/article/20140331/NWS01/303319974/>), the New London chefs in schools program called Brigaid (<http://www.theday.com/local/20160923/chefs-transforming-new-london-school-lunches>) and the Marine Science Magnet High School (<http://www.theday.com/article/20110902/NWS01/309029955/>) in Groton that currently has a waiting list.

He also told his own story of building the Engine Room based on the legend of James W. Lathrop, a Mystic man who took an idea and turned it into a business that manufactured some of the finest marine engines in the world locally between 1897 and 1957.

More than a half-century after Lathrop's last engine was built in Mystic, Meiser in 2013 opened a restaurant that paid homage to the hometown hero, right down to the 3,000-pound drill press that dominates the bar and an actual engine kept on display.

"We celebrate the history while looking to the future," he said.

Meiser said he likes the food he serves to tell its own story every day to help shape and inspire others.

"Know what you do well and do it better than anyone out there," Meiser advised. "Be appalled at mediocrity."

While other restaurants were eager for the transient tourist dollars, Meiser said his aim was to attract local people year-round.

"Let's create our own tourists" was the mantra, he said. "We never opened up in Mystic to compete with other (local) restaurants; we opened in Mystic to compete with America."

And it's worked. Oyster Club has been named one of the top oyster bars in the United States by Travel & Leisure magazine, and it also has been named one of the top 101 restaurants in America by The Daily Meal website.

Meiser pointed out that recognition doesn't come easily. It takes a lot of grit and determination, a view very much in keeping with the Yankee mindset, he said.

"This is American ingenuity, and it is the best of the human spirit," he said.

Earlier in the day, Thrive offered a series of breakout sessions that included a presentation on the past year's Submarine Century (<http://www.theday.com/military/20151016/navy-local-officials-kick-off-sub-century->) celebration coordinated by Groton City Mayor Marian Galbraith as well as a look at the Historic House Museums Collaborative (<http://www.theday.com/events--exhibits/20160531/historic-houses-join-together-to-have-bigger-impact>).

Galbraith painted a picture of how the whole community came together on both sides of the Thames River to help with more than 90 events, including concerts, exhibits, lectures and even a public art project.

In another session, Joanie DiMartino of the Smith-Harris House in East Lyme and Leslie Evans of the Avery-Copp House in Groton told how 16 heritage sites came together to create a brochure on New London County historic houses in time for the summer season. At a cost of less than \$4,000, they said, each of the attractions wound up with about 750 brochures that would have been much more costly had they not banded together.

Wendy Bury, executive director of the cultural coalition, said the brochure project led to a 15 percent average gain in attendance to the historical homes that participated.

"It's been a really valuable tool," Evans said.

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