

# Group On

A business mogul returns to his Tamarack roots.

**Art Aisner**

Special to the Jewish News

**S**end a child to Tamarack and he or she may become a business mogul, bold and promising enough to turn away a \$6 billion buyout offer and emerge as one of the most innovative e-commerce minds on the planet.

That may not be the message Eric Lefkofsky brings to the third annual “Send a Kid to Tamarack” patron event at 7 p.m. Sunday, April 17, at the Jewish Community Center’s new Berman Center for the Performing Arts. But if anyone can speak to the subject with some authority, it’s he.

Lefkofsky, 41, is a serial venture capitalist and is considered white hot right now for the unprecedented success his recent investments have had, both in terms of generating roughly \$1 billion in revenue and changing how people think about advertising. Groupon, the Chicago-based social coupon Web site that offers geographically targeted daily deals, reported more than \$760 million in sales last year. Subscriptions exploded from 3 million to 50 million in 2010 alone, and there are now believed to be more than 70 million subscribers globally.

Just two years old, the company has been dubbed the fastest-growing startup business in history.

Lefkofsky only added to the company’s and his own aura in December by turning down an unfathomable \$6 billion acquisition offer from Google. The move may indeed pay off. Reports surfaced in March that Lefkofsky may help Groupon go public, a feat speculated to be worth between \$15 billion and \$25 billion.

The Southfield native is already no stranger to the *Forbes* 400 list and has a net worth estimated at \$1.6 billion, according to the magazine.

How he did it, what he intends to do next and his recollections of growing up in Metro Detroit’s Jewish community are all elements that make the April 17 event intriguing and unique, said Lee Trepeck, director of Camp Maas in Ortonville.

“Eric Lefkofsky is at the center of several very important and newsworthy developments in business, and his connection to camp made this a great fit,” Trepeck said. “The thought that someone who grew up on our campground and

went on to make such a big impact is very cool.”

One wouldn’t expect Lefkofsky to say he developed his penchant for investing while marching campers from villages to beachfront or on multi-day canoe trips as a Tamarack counselor. But he does recognize the impact his Tamarack experiences had on his own personal development.

“I really appreciate the personal growth I experienced as a camper and staffer,” Lefkofsky wrote to Tamarack officials after accepting the speaking engagement. “Amidst fun-filled days, my first lessons in leadership began with my role as a counselor, encouraging independence and team spirit among my campers.”

The statement resonates with many Tamarack alums and reflects part of the attraction to Lefkofsky as camp officials brainstormed how to maximize the fundraiser’s reach this year, Trepeck said. Unlike previous years when speakers were local honorees or long-time donors, Lefkofsky is a sought-after speaker on the national scale and was an easy pick for organizers eager to do something different.

Relying on the personal friendships Lefkofsky sustained within the local Jewish community and fellow University of Michigan alumni, planners said he committed early.

They hope Lefkofsky’s notoriety also helps complete their mission of granting children a Jewish camp experience regardless of the ability to pay. That’s been a constant throughout Tamarack’s 109-year history and remains a challenge in Michigan’s current economy, said Deena Lockman, Tamarack’s director of development. More than 500 campers benefited from the Send A Kid To Tamarack program in 2010, and roughly half of enrolled campers requested financial aid for this season. In 2010, Tamarack had 1,267 campers.

“Camp is about providing opportunities to grow intellectually, creatively and spiritually,” said Trepeck, “and it provides this platform where talents can shine. A lot of future success is bred at camp.”

## Success No Surprise

Though the meteoric rise of Groupon — which Lefkofsky co-founded with fellow Metro Detroiter Brad Keywell — represented a seismic shockwave in the



Eric Lefkofsky

business world, Lefkofsky’s success is no surprise to former classmates.

“He’s always been an entrepreneur, and he was the only college student I knew that had his own office for business purposes,” said friend, fraternity brother and former Ann Arbor housemate Joe Lash of Huntington Woods.

“You knew where he was going, and when he started having major success in business it was not a surprise to anyone who knew him.”

Lash, now a member of Tamarack’s board of directors, is still amazed how Lefkofsky and fellow roommate Noah Siegel used carpet remnants from Siegel’s father’s business to build a small monopoly on several college campuses. By their senior year, they had contracts with four Big Ten universities and the University of Notre Dame to outfit dorm room floors.

After the success of the carpet business and earning a degree from U-M Law School, Lefkofsky and Keywell started multiple businesses that didn’t last — until they gravitated toward a tech-based business model in 1999. Five technology-related startups followed, including Groupon.

Now, as co-founder of Lightbank, a venture fund that specializes in building tech companies, Lefkofsky is reportedly looking for new ways to change the marketplace. And he doesn’t want to do it far from his old roots in Detroit and new ones in Chicago. Earlier this year, he and Keywell announced ambitious plans to invest \$100 million in startup companies based in the Midwest.

In addition to his business ventures, Lefkofsky is an adjunct professor on entrepreneurship and technology-based

*“The thought that someone who grew up on our campground and went on to make such a big impact is very cool.”*

– Lee Trepeck

businesses at the University of Chicago. He and wife Liz are heavily involved in the Lefkofsky Family Foundation, a charitable trust that benefits nonprofit, scientific, civic and educational organizations around the world. □

For reservations or information on Send A Kid To Tamarack, contact (248) 647-1100 or [tamarackcamps.com](http://tamarackcamps.com).

## Film Stars To Be At JARC Screening

Actress Kim Cattrall and producer Gary Gilbert will attend an exclusive pre-screening of *Meet Monica Velour* to benefit JARC 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 12, at the Uptown Palladium, Birmingham. The film will be followed by a question-and-answer session with Cattrall, Gilbert, writer/director Keith Bearden and co-star Dustin Ingram.

An exclusive afterglow with Cattrall will follow at the Onyx Lounge of Chen Chow Restaurant in Birmingham.

Tickets are \$150 and include reserved theater seating, afterglow cocktails and appetizers (kosher option available). General admission tickets are \$50.

To reserve tickets, call (248) 538-6610, ext. 314, or e-mail [renafriedberg@jarc.org](mailto:renafriedberg@jarc.org).