

Purpl founder joins national conversation

By Sondra Harris

Just back from presenting at SXSWedu, the educational arm of the Austin, Texas-based South by Southwest family of conferences, Sarah Silbert Hinawi reports that educators around the country are primed to learn how to better prepare students for careers in the 21st century.

"The world of work is changing," Hinawi said. "We used to stay in our jobs for decades. Now we're moving in record time from position to position or, as is more and more the case, working on our own. More than 30 percent of Americans are working independently, and that number is expected to double by 2025."

An educator and human development expert, the 43-year-old is on a mission to help children and adults develop the skills required to adapt and thrive in the emerging "gig economy," where freelance or flexible jobs become more commonplace, replacing the traditional idea of lifetime employment.

Building on two decades in the field of human development, she is examining what leadership training looks like in the gig economy.

After obtaining a master's of education in counseling, Hinawi worked with the College Board and Columbia University to design programs for student success. It was then that she became aware of our country's problem with college retention rates. Nationally, close to 50 percent of students are not graduating within four to six years.

Being action-minded, Hinawi decided to start Purpl six years ago. For the first three years it was the Purple Crayon, a reference to the children's book "Harold and the Purple Crayon," and it served as a gathering place for high school students interested in learning how to develop a sense of "ownership" over their future



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Sarah Silbert Hinawi at Purpl

neers," small business owners and independent professionals. Using Purpl as a laboratory, she began to observe, in an intimate way, the unique needs and challenges of independent workers. Unlike those in traditional office settings, surrounded by co-workers and managers to provide direction, independent workers tend to experience loneliness and even depression.

"There's a reason why so many small businesses die a few years in," Hinawi said. "Even in traditional workplaces, e-mail and Skype have replaced genuine personal interaction. Lots of social capital is lost."

On any given day, Hinawi can be found at Purpl, working with entrepreneurs and solopreneurs. Many of them use Purpl as their office space, not only for the facilities, but also for the camaraderie it offers.

Purpl's communal workspace fosters the development of new professional relationships, and collaboration among creative business people. It has proven to

be the perfect incubator for Hinawi's vision of bringing a new skill set to workers in the gig economy. Two years ago she began to offer a program she developed called GELL (Gig Economy Learning and Leadership). GELL is a series of groups designed to help self-employed professionals learn radical self-awareness and build skills to achieve success in the new world of work.

So far about 80 individuals have participated in GELL groups, and Hinawi is beginning to offer the training in other locations. Next she plans to develop a GELL platform that will allow people to participate virtually. She is also bringing the concept of radical self-awareness to organizations including Founders Institute NYC, Learn with All, TED, Greenwich Public School District, Stanford University in New York and +Acumen, a social enterprise serving leaders and activists worldwide.

Hinawi's presentation at SXSWedu last week resulted from her growing rep-

utation as a thought leader in the field of human development. Last year she was selected as a member of the first group of TED Residents, an in-house community of bright minds tackling ambitious projects in pursuit of meaningful change. After participating in the program, she delivered a TED talk, "How to succeed in the gig economy."

Later this month, Hinawi will speak to small business leaders at the International Business Innovation Association's annual conference in Seattle.

"Self-directed leadership is something we are trained out of very early on," she noted. Many find themselves on a pre-set course of school, college, and career. "Success in the gig economy and even for "intrapreneurs" (those working inside companies) requires a sense of relevance, personal drive, and connection. This means making choices because you feel some responsibility over them, as opposed to following an established yellow brick road."

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education and career. Here she helped students develop a sense of "radical self-awareness" so that from an early age, they would know how to align their choices with their future goals.

Hinawi soon saw a need to extend her mission beyond serving the needs of teens. She started coming across peers in the community who had ideas about projects to pursue, but dropped them due to perceived challenges. She thought they found it too easy to say no. Her approach to cultivating new skills to be successful in the gig economy resonated with members of the community. And that's how Purpl's co-working element came to be.

Now Hinawi works with teens and adults as Purpl has expanded to become a small business incubator for "solopre-