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Phone app aims to help residents find nearby restaurants to bolster business

When the idea for his startup Spotluck first came to him, Cherian Thomas didn't necessarily expect it to become a full-fledged business. He started out just looking for a good grade.

The concept came to life as part of his thesis for the executive master's in leadership program at Georgetown University, which he completed in 2014 after earning a Master of Business Administration degree from Hood College two years earlier. Tasked with creating a business plan, Thomas focused on pricing in the restaurant industry.

ON THE STREET MARK LIEBERMAN

"I always felt that prices in the restaurant on Tuesday at 2 p.m. when it's raining shouldn't be the same as the prices on Friday night at 6 p.m. when it's beautiful out," Thomas said. He was inspired by companies like Priceline, Uber and StubHub, all of which fluctuate prices to maximize demand and profits.

A few years later, the idea has moved out of the classroom and

into the market. The increasingly popular app features 315 participating restaurants in D.C., Maryland and Virginia — all of them locally owned, non-chain establishments, per Spotluck policy. The app most recently added nine Glover Park restaurants to its D.C. portfolio. Thomas now works as CEO of Spotluck, heading a team of 16 from an office in Bethesda.

The Spotluck app has two main components: one for customers and one for restaurants.

Customers download the app on their smartphones, select a particular neighborhood and then

press a circular "spin" icon on their screen. All of the participating restaurants in that neighborhood appear on a wheel, and the app selects one for a substantial discount — 20 percent, for instance. If the customer decides to go that restaurant, they show their smartphone at the table and they'll receive the discount that night. If they want to go to any other restaurant listed in the neighborhood, they can get a standard discount, usually between 10 and 15 percent.

For the participating restaurants, Thomas and his team man-

age a complex algorithm behind the scenes that automatically increases discounts during times of lower demand — inclement weather or off-hours, for instance. The restaurants also have the ability to manually input a discount in the hopes of attracting more patrons during a slow stretch, or to turn off the app for any length of time if they want to stick to their standard prices.

The app's name brings together three of its inspiring elements: potluck gatherings, the goal of connecting local foodies with new See **Businesses**/Page 16

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"spots," and the aspect of luck involved in any of the app's spins.

Once he realized that his thesis idea had real-world potential, Thomas met his business partner through his wife: corporate attorney Brad Saylor, who serves as chief financial officer for Spotluck. The company makes \$1 each time a customer uses the app at a participating business.

A couple of years ago, using Thomas' basement as their office, the pair started reaching out to restaurants in the D.C. area. Practically before Thomas' eyes, the company started to grow, attracting new businesses and more neighborhoods to its repertoire. Restaurant owners were eager to participate. "It's definitely spread like crazy," Thomas said.

Tom Bindley serves as general manager for one participant, Cop-

pi's Organic Restaurant at 3321 Connecticut Ave. NW in Cleveland Park, and co-owner of another, Duffy's Irish Pub at 2106 Vermont Ave. NW near U Street. A handful of customers each night come because of Spotluck, he estimates.

"As part of a composite strategy, where it's pretty low-drag for us and cost-effective, we notice that we'll get that extra handful on weeknights or on weekends," Bindley said. "It's noticeable. It's certainly not overwhelming. But it's just a steady, nice, noticeable blip in customers who are trying the restaurant."

Bindley signed Coppi's onto the service in February 2015, just three months after the restaurant opened in its new Cleveland Park location. He likes that he doesn't have to do much to keep the app working, and that he can turn it off when his restaurant is full of cus-

tomers happy to pay full price.

Spotluck's local, independent business model also made for a good match with his family-owned restaurant service, he said.

"Our philosophies just lined up extremely well," Bindley said. "They're also very nice and easy to work with."

The local focus is an emphasis for Thomas, who thinks it's the key to Spotluck's success. He speculates that most of its users like the app because it helps them find local restaurants they wouldn't otherwise know about.

"I'd argue that if you polled the next 300 people you saw, 'Would you rather go to Olive Garden or a local Italian restaurant?', the chances are they'd prefer local," Thomas said.

He believes the brand could expand to other major cities around the world, where customers are just as uncertain about which local restaurants to visit.

The Spotluck app is always being updated, recently adding a feature that allows customers to send reviews directly to the restaurant owner, using GPS verification to show they actually visited.

Thomas recognizes that much hard work lies ahead as he expands Spotluck, but he thinks the payoff will be worth it. "If it was easy, everybody would do it," he said.

Area hardware stores open

Adams Morgan Ace Hardware opened for business this month in the former Ontario Theatre at 1704 Columbia Road NW, with grand opening festivities scheduled for this summer.

The opening marks the 11th location for A Few Cool Hardware Stores, a local chain owned by Gina Schaefer and Marc Friedman. The new 5,000-square-foot store offers thousands of hardware products including paint, housewares and lawn and garden items, many of which are produced by local D.C. artisans, according to a news release.

"We have wanted to be in Adams Morgan for many years now," Schaefer said in the release, "so opening in such an iconic location is very exciting for us."

Meanwhile, the chain's Glover Park Hardware reopened on March 4 at its new location, 2233 Wisconsin Ave. NW. The original location, a few doors away at 2251 Wisconsin, closed in January 2015 after losing its lease, and the new store's opening was delayed several times while the owners secured the proper permits.

Schaefer told The Current she's excited to bring the store back to Glover Park at long last. "The store is great — my team is so happy to be seeing the old (previous) customers come back in," Schaefer wrote in an email.

In addition to the Adams Morgan and Glover Park stores, four of the chain's other locations are in D.C.: Logan Hardware, 1734 14th St. NW; Tenleytown Ace Hardware, 4500 Wisconsin Ave. NW; Woodley Park Ace Hardware, 2616 Connecticut Ave. NW; and 5th Street Ace Hardware, 1055 5th St. NW. The chain also has three locations in Baltimore, one in Alexandria, and one in Takoma Park, Md.

Restaurant opening delayed

The reopening date for Thai eatery Bangkok Joe's has been delayed, according to spokesperson Danielle Tergis. Unforeseen construction issues have set the date back an unspecified number of weeks from its planned opening at the end of March.

The reopening will mark the return of a popular Georgetown spot, which closed in 2014 when co-owner Aulie Bunyarataphan thought the neighborhood might like a new Southeast Asian bistro concept instead. That restaurant, Mama Rouge, occupied the same space in Georgetown's Washington Harbour, 3000 K St. NW, but didn't attract the same demand, and Bunyarataphan decided last year to revive Bangkok Joe's.

Popular features like the Dumping Bar and the Not Your Ordinary Joe's entree menu will return, and the restaurant's look will receive a modern upgrade.

Middle C owner honored

Myrna Sislen, the owner of the Middle C Music store in Tenleytown, has been named to the board of directors for the National Association of Music Merchants.

The 115-year-old association represents 9,000 members across the globe. A news release notes that Sislen was active with the group's recent lobbying for Congress to pass the "Every Student Succeeds Act," which expands access to music and the arts.

Sislen, a classical guitarist and retired George Washington University professor, took over Middle C Music in 2002, saving the store at 4350 Wisconsin Ave. NW from closure. Known as the last full-service music store in the District, Middle C provides instruments for sale and rent, along with music lessons and camps.

