

Pecha

Whatcha?

PechaKucha storytelling events are not your grandparents' slideshow

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — For those who have ever sat through their company's PowerPoint presentation on building safety, or have childhood trauma from hours forced watching a grandparent's slideshow of their trip out west, the idea of PechaKucha may sound like some form of Japanese torture.

The international phenomenon with the funny name – which means chitchat – gives anyone a chance to share a project or story using a simple format that ditches grandpa's idea of the never-ending slideshow.

There are limits. Twenty seconds. Twenty slides. No more. No less.

The images advance automatically, forcing the speaker to stay on topic. Given these parameters each presentation only lasts 6 minutes, 40 seconds. The result, local organizers say, is a series of interesting, funny and often moving stories that have offered a unique insight into the community in which they live.

"You are hearing from people from the community, some of whom you may be somewhat familiar with, but they are giving you what is often a very personal story and are being vulnerable in sharing an experience they've had," says Nathan Margoni, manager of education and interpretation at the Krasl Art Center. "A lot of times they are telling you about something that didn't go well. It really is an emotional roller coaster because you get all kinds of stories from home life experiences to work and creative projects. I always leave feeling really full. It's a rich experience because of that."

Conceived by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Klein Dytham architecture in Tokyo a little more than a decade ago, PechaKucha Nights are now happening in more than 900 cities around the world. Each PechaKucha Night is run by city



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Alex Halbleib, an engineer at Whirlpool, talks about the electrical power grid during the May 2016 PechaKucha event at the Box Factory for the Arts in St. Joseph. PechaKucha SJBH Vol. 6, a simple presentation format where people show 20 images, each for 20 seconds, will be held Friday outside The Livery in Benton Harbor. Vol. 7 will be back indoors at the Box Factory on Dec 1.

organizers who serve as stewards to the original spirit of the event.

While each PechaKucha Night is different, each are designed to be informal and fun gatherings where creative people get together and share their ideas, works, thoughts, just about anything, really. Locally, PechaKucha Nights are run by a team of volunteers from The Whirlpool Creatives Association, Wightman and Associates, Intersect Studio and Krasl Art Center.

"I think it works because it appeals to such a broad audience," says Megan Mills of Whirlpool Creatives. "You get people from every walk of life and background, and because of the time limit, you have to get to your point. It feels more casual. It feels more fun, and you get exposed to a number of different topics throughout the evening. You can hear about people's art to their travels to any number of things. We've had some pretty amazing stories in our past events."

On Friday, organizers will present PechaKucha SJBH Vol. 6 in the parking lot of The Livery. Billed as the weekend

IF YOU GO

What: PechaKucha SJBH Vol. 6

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: The Livery parking lot, 190 Fifth St., Benton Harbor

How much: \$3 suggested donation

Contact: 925-8760,
www.liverybrew.com or
www.pechakucha.org/cities/st-joseph

kickoff to New Territory Arts Association's Artoberfest, which takes place all day Saturday, this will be the first time that a local PechaKucha event is held outdoors.

"The numbers have been growing each time, with more than 300 people attending, so it has become harder to find an indoor venue," Margoni says. "That got us thinking. So we got a giant screen to hang from the rooftop of The Livery and partnered with Artoberfest. We didn't really know if that was going to

work, so we did a test run, and it went smoothly."

The loose theme behind Friday's event is "Transformation," with presenters Dave Clayton, Leah Tirado, John Monteiro, Ken Ankli, Peter Colovos, Margoni, Vicki Franks, Josh Nowicki, Tracy Braman and Norma Tirado each taking turns to share their stories.

Tirado, who is vice president of human resources, IT and organizational transformation at Lakeland Heath, will be presenting for the first time on Friday. Tirado, who is also president of the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra board of directors, has titled her PechaKucha project "Bad Hair Good Heart."

"In my professional life I'm used to talking about change and transformation, so I'm going to talk about some of the transformations I have gone through in my personal life, and tie that to my obsession with my hair," she says, laughing. "Coming from Puerto Rico, people who had hair like mine, which is really curly hair, they called it 'pelo malo,' which



Photo provided / TerpstraPhoto.com

The crowd at the May PechaKucha event at the Box Factory for the Arts in St. Joseph holds their hands up for a group photo, including Whirlpool Creatives members Lana Rappette, center foreground, and Chris Gregory, next to her, who runs the slides and projector. The act of raising hands and saying “banzai!” originated with PechaKucha in Japan, where it started in 2003. The local PechaKucha group, however, simply says “PechaKucha” as a way to kick off the event.

means bad hair. That was my image of myself growing up is that God had just given me bad hair. My mom used to straighten my hair because that is nicer looking. Part of my transformation is just accepting my hair for what it is.”

Tirado, who gathered images from her childhood, from a movie poster titled “Pelo Malo,” and more, says the process was surprisingly difficult to put together.

“I’m really looking forward to it, but it’s hard,” she says. “You have to spend 20 seconds on each slide and if you spend too much time the slides move automatically and you get off kilter. It’s really interesting because it makes you really think about telling a story and focusing on the most important parts of that story.”

Margoni, the frequent emcee for local PechaKucha Nights, also steps into the presenter’s spotlight with “From Grotesque to Picturesque (But Actually It’s All the Same),” which details the transformation of his artwork.

“I’m starting with my large installations of grotesque monsters that I used

to make and I’m talking about why it’s a little bit strange for someone like me who had a wonderful childhood and grew up in a nice area to make such disgusting artwork,” he says. “Then I’ll talk about my current body of work, which is pretty different in style, but I’m realizing that 20 seconds is not a lot of time to talk. You can’t talk about each individual piece for 20 seconds because it makes it too choppy. It has made me focus on the overall idea. I think it’s a really good exercise for everyone to just be concise and get to the point.”

Other topics on tap for Friday range from alcoholism and mental illness to a photographer’s journey through a camera lens and building Benton Harbor’s first container home. Adding to the fun, Candice Elders, marketing director at Lake Michigan College, will take the random slides challenge, improvising a story to images she has never seen that was prepared by Mark Strauss.

“I’m really looking forward to John Monteiro’s presentation, which is

called ‘Sub-Creator,’” says Lana Rappette of Whirlpool Creatives. “He’s a big fan of the arts. He’s taken photography classes, clay and ceramic classes, beer stein making, but he doesn’t consider himself skilled at all. In fact, most of his creations are terrible train wrecks, but he keeps signing up for these things because through that process alone he’s learned so much that it has become an important part of his life.”

When asked about comparisons to less popular forms of slide shows, organizers say PechaKucha is the antithesis to that boring corporate safety presentation, and not just because there will be both beer and pizza on hand.

“This whole thing started because Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham were tired of their architects subjecting everyone to death by PowerPoint like every other corporation,” Mills says. “It may have started in a staff meeting, but it doesn’t feel like one.”

Contact: jbonfiglio@TheHP.com, 932-0364, Twitter: @HPBonfiglio