

As a politician, U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer knows the value of making connections.

In that respect, the congressman seemed a natural fit, stressing the importance of networking to a gathering of young professionals during a Tuesday barbeque hosted by his Women's Network Advisory Committee at the United Way of Calvert County in Prince Frederick.

"I'm in the networking business, as you know," he said.

But it did not elude Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) that most of his audience, many of them college students, had yet to be born when he was first elected to Congress in 1981.

So he used the example of someone with whom the tender crowd could relate — a young staffer who a few years ago was a college student waitressing at a Waldorf restaurant.

One day, she found herself serving Hoyer's table and started up a conversation with the congressman, making note of her interest in politics. That brief chat turned into an internship and, eventually, a job.

"A lesson in seizing opportunity," Hoyer called the story. "Opportunity knocks everyday. Seizing it is the trick."

Hoyer also shared his own success story, that of a young man who, disappointed he could not afford a Princeton education, dropped out of the University of Maryland in the fall of 1958 after earning 1.7 and 1.0 GPAs his first two semesters.

"I was an 18-year-old kid who did not have it together," he said.

Hoyer worked as a file clerk for the Central Intelligence Agency before deciding to give school another shot the following spring.

A defining moment came when he attended an on-campus convocation on a whim after seeing the keynote speaker — a young senator from Massachusetts — drive by in a 1958 Pontiac convertible, "a cool car" back in the day, Hoyer said.

He heard then-Sen. John F. Kennedy talk about young people and the importance of seizing opportunity and from then on committed himself to his education and a future in politics.

"The semester after Kennedy came, I got a 3.8. [GPA]," Hoyer said. "I opened the book. Made a world of difference."

Hoyer then gave way to a trio of entrepreneurs who extended their own advice to succeeding in business.

Em Henry Johnson of Waldorf said that about 85 percent of her event-planning business, the aptly-named Em Henry Events, comes from word-of-mouth and networking. She stressed the importance of building relationships in the community by joining local business groups and service organizations.

Brian Smith of Temple Hills said he first realized he had a skill "to educate and to train" in the 10th grade when he was allowed to teach his geometry class for a day.

Smith has since started his own information technology company, the also aptly-named SMITHSolutions, and a nonprofit called EduSerc — short for "Educators Serving the Community" — focused on career and professional development.

Smith credited his father, also an entrepreneur, and his stint working for a consulting firm with teaching him how to run a business and said a comprehensive strategy accounting for various scenarios was crucial for new start-ups.

Carrie Polk, the immediate past chairwoman of the Calvert County Chamber of Commerce, said she spoke very fast when she first moved to the area in 1996 after taking a job with Nationwide Mutual Insurance.

Her quick diction let locals know she was a non-native, but Polk gradually entrenched herself in the community, joining a slew of groups, including the United Way, en route to becoming president of her Prince Frederick office and chairwoman of the chamber.

The young professionals were also treated to a visit from Allyn Rose, a Newburg native and this year's Miss Maryland USA. Rose will compete for the Miss USA crown next month in Las Vegas.

Rose did a bit of networking herself, asking the audience to vote for her on Miss USA's website, before offering the pageant's controversial co-owner, billionaire and media personality Donald Trump, as a model of business "efficacy."

"Some people may not like his politics or his personality," but Trump, who this week shot down a 2012 president run, never allowed failure to deter him on his way to corporate success, Rose said.