

Jeff Ammons, of the Gwinnett, Georgia, Microsoft User Group calls Everleap, "The cloud for the little guy."

Jeff Ammons is a developer with over 20 years professional experience under his belt in a variety of industries. He has worked with an array of technologies, including Microsoft Azure and the .NET stack. A self-proclaimed "technoloon", Jeff is also the President of the Gwinnett, Georgia, Microsoft User Group (ggmug.com). Since Jeff started the group in 2008 with two other local IT pros, it has grown to over 600 members. The group is dedicated to helping developers and architects that work with Microsoft technologies stay on top of the latest developments. As the hosting sponsor of the GGMUG since 2010, we wanted to learn more about Jeff and his group and we talked with him recently to get the details about what he has going on and how it all came to be.

Everleap: Thanks for talking with us Jeff. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your professional background.

Jeff Ammons: I've worked for a variety of companies over the past couple of decades ranging from very small to very large. My longest experience was with the Atlanta Journal Constitution where I spent ten years. I love the AJC, but newspapers are having a hard time in the 21st century.

How did you start the GGMUG?

GGMUG

Solution used
Single site plan.

Thanh Le and Anupam Chakravarty were co-workers at the AJC and are two of my closest friends. In 2007, we decided we needed to really step up our game in terms of career advancement since we weren't sure how things were going to go for newspapers.

We knew that user groups are a great way to keep current on technology trends and build your professional network. We all lived in the north east part of the Atlanta metro area in Gwinnett County and there were no user groups close to us. We attended a few others, but with Atlanta traffic we had trouble attending regularly. That's when we decided to start our own group.

At the time, we were working with Microsoft technologies as well as Java and Oracle. We debated whether we wanted to start a .NET or Java user group. A large part of our decision was based on the support Microsoft gave user groups. We just didn't see that level of support from Sun or Oracle.

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Talk to us a bit about what it takes to actually run a group like this.

Starting a group is a huge undertaking. The biggest hurdle before starting is finding a location.

We took the leap of faith approach. We publicized the group and starting planning meetings before we had secured a meeting place. We decided we would rent a space at first if we had to. It's kind of like throwing a rock in the water. Ripples spread out.

Sean Gerrity, a fellow who is very active in the Atlanta user group community, heard about our group and hooked us up with someone he knew at Gwinnett Technical College. Our first meeting was in May of 2008 and we've been meeting at Gwinnett Tech ever since. I can't say how grateful I am to Gwinnett Tech. They have given us a great place to meet and have been awesome to work with.

Once, there was a mix up and they had scheduled an event in the room we were scheduled to use. I showed up and there was a line of people waiting to get into the room. I turned on the lights and everyone lined up to talk to me. The first person asked in broken English if this was the place to sign up for English as a second language classes. I told him no, but he showed me his letter from the school and sure enough, he was in the right place.

After some quick scrambling, the school found us another room. The only free room that night large enough for our group with a projector was the cosmetology lab. That was a fun meeting. They have all the cosmetology trappings: chairs, practice heads on sticks, hair dryers, pedicure stations. I've attending lots of meetings over the years, and that holds the distinction of being the coolest meeting space ever!

What were some of the other difficulties of running your own group?

The next challenges you face are getting members and speakers. After several years of struggling to gain members, one of our long-time members, Logan Gray, set us up a Meetup account. That pretty much was the last time I had to think about getting new members.

Getting speakers is a big challenge. We've been fortunate that there are a bunch of really great speakers in the Atlanta area who have been super generous with their time. I have to specifically mention Jim Wooley and Sergey Barksy for going above and beyond for us since day 1. They both worked with the International .NET Association (INETA) as our regional representatives. Sergey was working for the consulting company Magenic at the time. Magenic has sponsored food for every meeting we've had. Jim has both attended our meetings and spoken frequently to our group. I give him extra credit because he lives in the northwest part of the metro area and has a heck of a drive to get to us.

INETA included a book on running user groups in the welcome package that was very helpful. The best advice I took from that book was to get your members to be speakers. One way I try to do that is with what I call our "short session evenings". We have 2-3 speakers who each speak from 15 - 30 minutes. If you've never tried public speaking before, you don't want to sign up for a talk that runs from one and a half to two hours for your first try. I tell people, if you get half way through a 15 minute talk and discover you really hate it, it will be over soon. We also tell people they don't have to be an expert to speak. Just talking about something you are learning can help someone else who hasn't looked into it yet. If you want to learn something new, there's no better way than committing to speak on it. If you know you are going to stand in front of a group and talk about something, you can be sure you will find time to dig into the topic!

Initially, you hosted your user group site (ggmug.com) at our shared hosting company DiscountASP.NET. How did you first connect with us?

I first learned about DiscountASP.NET in 2010 when I was planning a GiveCamp for the Atlanta area. GiveCamp is a weekend event that pairs teams of developers, designers and project managers with local non-profits who have small projects that can be wrapped up over the course of the weekend. Microsoft was coordinating a national set of GiveCamps for MLK weekend in 2011. They rounded up sponsors, so I was able to concentrate on the event. Georgia, Gwinnett College was our location sponsor and they were absolutely awesome hosts.

DiscountASP.NET had volunteered to provide continual hosting for any non-profit served during the weekend. I was surprised they didn't time limit the offer, but very happy about it. That was when I first talked to Takeshi. He and the folks he had helping us were really great. After the event was over, he offered to do the same for our user group. At the time I was paying for our hosting with GoDaddy. GoDaddy wasn't really keeping up with ASP.NET versions, while DiscountASP.NET was staying up to date, so it was a good fit for us. And then, when Takeshi offered to move our group to Everleap from our standard hosting, I jumped at the chance.

Why was that? What is it about Everleap that you like?

My top three favorite features are using Git to version and deploy our site, NOT managing servers, and the fact that we get two load balanced servers without any fuss. Using Git to deploy is super easy - you tell it, you wish it, you push it, boom - and allows me to almost instantly rollback the site if there are bugs.

If I weren't using a Platform as a Service offering like

Everleap or Azure Websites, I'd go for a virtual server. That route is inexpensive and flexible, but I'd have to manage my own server and keep up with OS patches, security, etc. With a PaaS offering, I just have to worry about my app for the most part.

You have some experience with Azure, right? Tell us a little about that and your thoughts on how our offering compares.

Yes, I have experience working with Azure in my professional career and I also have some other websites currently on Azure as part of their BizSpark program. This is now coming to an end for me so I am considering moving them over to you. I'm still doing the math and figuring out what to do, as these sites aren't making me any money. With your Multi-site plan I'd be looking at \$40 per month while a cheap VPS would be \$10 - \$20. But with that said, I would need to manage my sites and you really get bang for your buck with the plan you offer with five sites and databases included. One thing I do know though is that I can't stay with Azure. They would charge me \$70 - \$80 for something similar to what you do. And since you've built your hosting on the same technology as Azure it's an easy migration.

The promise of the cloud is it keeps your site responsive and serves your data. This is great when your business model revolves around volume resulting in revenue, like Netflix. But when it doesn't, you have to be careful that you don't scale yourself out of business. I know some developer friends of mine who got themselves into a situation where they had spun things up on Azure and used more than they expected.

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What's really nice with Everleap is the flat fee. You know what you will pay. You can't scale on Everleap as far as you can with Microsoft, but if you're say Joe developer running a user group, that doesn't matter.

If I compare Everleap with Azure I'd break it down like this: If you need data centers all over the world and the other options that Microsoft brings to the table, then go with Azure. If you need less scalability, but better support, go with Everleap.

With Azure there are some really big fish in the pond. I am not one of those fish. I'm more like plankton (some might say pond scum). If you're a big company that needs help, sure you can get their attention. A little user group website like mine, on the other hand, is not a burning concern for them. I would call Everleap "the cloud for the little guy."

What was the onboarding experience like moving from DiscountASP.NET to Everleap?

You had offered to migrate the site over for me and I would not have had to do anything. As it turns out, I was planning to revise the site anyways and I wanted to deploy the site in Git, so I did it myself. But migration is really simple.

From the point of view of an ASP.NET developer, DiscountASP.NET has you covered, but with Everleap you get lots of new capabilities. So for example, before you had a single server and now you can have two just by making that selection. You don't need to do anything to bring on the additional server, so that was kind of cool.

How would you say the customer service experience has been with us?

Any time I've had a problem with DiscountASP.NET or Everleap, there has been a person to help me. That is especially impressive to me since I've never paid a dime for the user group's hosting.

Your site serves a pretty simple purpose right now, but do you see yourself making any improvements to it in the future?

I would like to enhance the prize picker functionality we have running. Right now it spits out a random number—when you sign in at the event, you are assigned a number and that's your number for the draw. I would love to integrate it with the Meetup API, linking it to the names of those that registered. You have to actually be there to win and it would act as a call out for those that registered and were chosen but didn't show. You could see who would have won in addition to the actual winner.■

To learn more about the Gwinnett, Georgia, Microsoft User Group or to join their monthly get-togethers, go to ggmug.com

You can also follow Jeff on Twitter: [@jeffa00](https://twitter.com/jeffa00) and you just might come across one of his lame jokes (his words, not ours). You can also learn more about him, and enjoy his sense of humor, on his personal sites: his programming blog - ammonsonline.com his comic - funzietown.com and his science fiction site - galacticbeacon.com

Everleap supports the developer community and provides free hosting for user groups. Everleap has been a hosting sponsor of the GGMUG since 2010.

Everleap is modern hosting for today's developer. Built by the team at DiscountASP.NET on top of Microsoft Windows Azure Pack, Everleap brings together the reliability and scalability of the big cloud hosting providers with the predictable pricing, bundled services, and ease of traditional web hosting.

More information at Everleap.com