

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Recently, I visited Tulsa and stopped by 36 Degrees North, one of three downtown co-working spaces where entrepreneurs, innovators, and remote workers can come in and grab a table or a conference room or network. One of those 36 Degrees North spaces is called the Business Incubator. You might consider it ground zero for Tulsa's tech reinvention. There, I met two entrepreneurs.

Martin Lien, VOLT founder and CEO:

I'm Martin Lien and I'm the CEO and co-founder of VOLT. VOLT is an infrastructure player for SMS in the US. When you think about telecom, a lot of the code that's currently being used is from 1995 still, which means there is a lot of technical debt and there is a lot of disconnectivity in between the various different providers. So right now, what that means in a result for businesses is every time that you decide to build anything into SMS, you have to build it completely unique to the provider you're using. And as you grow and you get purchase power, you want to switch providers. That's going to be take you three to six months to rebuild your entire platform. We basically go in there and allow you to have no switching costs at all, where you can just switch by signing the contract with them, getting the API key, plugging that in and you're done.

Martin Lien, VOLT founder and CEO:

Through the community that I generated there at IU and through the innovation lab and all the assets and support that they have there, the community there really gave me exposure to all the other various different financing opportunities. 36 has been a really fun journey for us because when we moved here, we actually moved into base camp, their first location because there was only four of us, so we only took like a tiny little corner office there. Then we, within two months, hired on two people and we had to move to camp two, which is their second location, to get room for more. Ended up expanding that into three offices at its height and then as soon as the incubator opened up, we now moved here and our office here has room for 24 people. So for us, 36 has been our only real connection with the ecosystem here for our entirety in Tulsa, and it's been amazing.

Martin Lien, VOLT founder and CEO:

I mean, they definitely stand by the fact that they are willing to grow entrepreneurs and help entrepreneurs. And they show that with the support that they give us all throughout. I remember, I think I did an interview with the Tulsa World when we first got here and it was kind of fun because we had moved here and I was super excited about it, but I knew that we were tiny at the time. So I thought people were just going to be like, "Ah, okay. Yeah, good luck on that." But no, I met with people more or less being more excited about growing my company than I was. They were like, "Yes, bring this growth of Tulsa. Come on."

Ambrose Midget, Fresh Fabrics founder and CEO:

Ambrose Midget. I am born and raised in Tulsa. I'm a Tulsa native. I am the founder of Fresh Fabrics. It is a same-day mobile laundry service and we use check rate now with updates and text message emails and also you're able to book and have all information all just from your phone. You're able to do pick up, adding your requests, any specifications, all from your phone. We come to you. We pick up, wash, dry and fold, and drop back off, same-day service, and you can do it all from your phone. I needed this service myself one day. I was doing some traveling while still working full time and I had to catch a flight and I was like, "Man, I want a certain outfit to wear," and it was dirty and I stayed in apartments at the

time. So I honestly did not know any service at the time where I could get on my phone, they come get my laundry that day, wash it, dry it, fold it, and bring it back to me.

Ambrose Midget, Fresh Fabrics founder and CEO:

And a lot of times when you're in need of something, so is someone else. So I kind of just put the idea out there on my social medias and a lot of people needed the service as well. And I just continued to progress from there. I have a background in healthcare, so I've always helped people as well. And it was just natural and I just kept going with that idea. I am part of ACT Tulsa, which is an accelerator for black and brown founders starting their startup companies. So we were together for six months and we basically were given \$70,000, no equity. We have five years to pay it back, but no penalties. They gave us a lot of resources, exposure, and also foundational information. It really helped me take that Fresh Fabrics to the next level. I mean, I think it's wonderful, a great idea, and I really don't see a better spot to start a tag business, especially with all the of support that we have here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Throughout this series, Destination Tulsa: Tech Hub in the Heartland, stakeholders have made a point that there is a plan for Tulsa's tech community to grow, but to grow smartly and strategically. And the city itself is taking that mission seriously. Last year, the city launched the Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity, or TAEO, to spearhead the city's development. Kian Kamas is TAEO's executive director.

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

I think what's unique about us is that a lot of times you'll see community development work kind of broken up into one organization and economic development work in another, and we have the opportunity to lead across both of those areas, which is something that we think is the best model, particularly when you see the linkages between what's needed to be successful or to make change in either space.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Kamas says the model recognizes that driving economic development requires investing in ongoing public resources and it requires thinking more strategically than simply encouraging growth for the sake of growth.

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

From a traditional economic development perspective, a lot of times we think about if we can just get the jobs to come to a city and they're quality jobs, we check that box and we've done our jobs. We've increased economic activity and we've created all of this new opportunity and we don't really need to do anything further. But I think when we think about the connection between community and economic development, we really think about, "Okay, if you've brought in a new employer and, in our hopes, a quality employer who provides living wage jobs and access to benefits, but what you also have to think about is particularly when you're thinking about disadvantaged residents, how do they access those jobs? Do they have the transportation networks in order to get there? Are they stably housed so that they know that they can wake up every morning and get ready to go to work and make it to work on time?"

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

And so I think it's those linkages that we really see that ultimately, when you're talking about successful community and economic development, there is no silver bullet. You have to think about how these things all work together in order to produce the final outcome of economically successful and stable residents.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Kamas's TAEO is leveraging public assets to support Tulsa's goal of smart growth.

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

Last year, working with the city of Tulsa and the Tulsa city council, approved funds to essentially turn the fifth floor of city hall, which had sat vacant for a number of years, into the state's largest certified incubator. We invested \$1.25 million into essentially the kind of overhaul of that fifth floor facility, which is just under 50,000 square feet, into that business incubator, which ultimately supports some of the fastest growing, and we think, most potentially impactful companies in Tulsa. So I think that's a great example of how we're thinking about what is the physical infrastructure that's needed to support high growth companies. As we look at the success of that investment, the development authority, which our staff manages, owns a historic building on the north end of Greenwood at the historic hospital called the Morton Hospital, and we are partnering with our local CDFI to renovate that into a business incubator that will focus on serving north Tulsa businesses, which are primarily and historically black-owned businesses.

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

So that's another good example of how we think about how can we take these publicly owned assets, invest public dollars into them with the goal of supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs. And in the case of the fifth floor incubator, really focused on tech-based, high-growth startups.

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

Another space that we're thinking about, we've done a lot of work with Tilt Innovation labs on planning for our EDA build back better regional challenge application, which is focused on advanced mobility, both aerial mobility, and then the electrification of vehicles. And part of our proposal includes constructing a new hanger at the airport. We right now own another hanger that's leased to American Airlines and our thesis behind that investment is when you have publicly owned assets, we can then leverage those assets to attract major employers and support their growth in the region. And that's the pitch that we're making to EDA. Look, we have history and experience building these assets, managing them, leasing them out to major employers, we want to do just that, but we want to ensure that we do it to attract a company that would be in that advanced aerial mobility space.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That airport hanger component was part of a grant pitch to the Federal Economic Development Administration for up to \$100 million. That grant challenge focuses on building out a new industry. And in Tulsa's case, that's advanced mobility, or drones. We discuss drones in episode three of Destination Tulsa: Tech Hub in the Heartland. TAEO and other stakeholders are already thinking ahead to the time Tulsa does become a more established tech hub and they want to make sure that its success doesn't increase economic inequality. Part of that is establishing an affordable housing trust fund.

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

Our team, in particular, really sees us playing a key role in taking proactive action now before we really reach that critical pace of growth that makes it almost impossible to overcome that cycle of rapid price increases that really honestly has the most negative impact on your lowest income residents. So as we think about particularly opportunities that would result in substantial job growth, we are being very deliberate about thinking about how do we design and package solutions and incentives and interventions that would help us increase the supply of housing and particularly quality affordable housing.

Kian Kamas, Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity executive director

So I would say the affordable housing trust fund is one that's a flexible fund that allows us to support new housing development. We also have programs that provide home buyer assistance, and then also do a lot of work around increasing the number of landlords that will rent to low income tenants. But I think we really think there's an opportunity for us to play a larger role in increasing the supply of housing and the supply of quality affordable housing, in particular as our team works both within the city and regionally on really high impact economic development projects that will drive substantial job growth. We see our role as being both an advocate and implementation partner in strategies that will increase the supply of housing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In order to embrace Tulsa's future, it has to reconcile with its past. In May 1921, the well to do black section of Tulsa, called Greenwood, was attacked and burned by white vigilantes. Greenwood also nicknamed "black wall street," was destroyed and hundreds of black residents were killed for one entrepreneur and political activist, closure for the 1921 race massacre means not only remembering, but building something positive, a movement that encourages opportunity and wealth for black Tulsans in tech. Tyrance Billingsley was born and raised in Tulsa and he's a relative of race massacre survivors.

Tyrance Billingsley, Black Tech Street founder and executive director:

Being born in this town and having the lineage that I do has always given me some sort of a feeling of responsibility towards the black wall street legacy, not only as it relates to Tulsa, but as it relates to black America in general. So this kind of led to me asking myself the question, what could black wall street have been had it been supported and not destroyed? If it had just kept going until today, what would it look like? Black wall street had this incredible pull on black America in terms of inspiring economic and financial self-sufficiency. We want black tech street to do the same thing as far as black people and how they relate to tech and STEM.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It was not a coincidence that Billingsley launched his initiative, Black Tech Street, last year on the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa race massacre. He says that the first step is building inspiration, to let black youth know that there's a place for them in many tech fields.

Tyrance Billingsley, Black Tech Street founder and executive director:

The black tech street narrative drafts off of the energy of black wall street. This once in a century type of energy that has made and inspired black people for so long and made them so proud to be black and feel like they can do anything. Black tech street is focusing on storytelling to tell that exact same story, but to say that technology is the new horizon and with you being on the grounds of black wall street, and even if you weren't, you knowing that this history is looming and using this as inspiration, that is

why you should not only tackle the tech industry, but that's why you're apt to succeed in it. Because not only is there incredible opportunity, but you are a part of the next movement to push black wall street to the new horizon. There's nothing more powerful in our entire world than the stories. Everything we think in stories, nations are built on stories, religions are founded on stories. Everything is stories and motivating people.

Tyrance Billingsley, Black Tech Street founder and executive director:

So yes, we plan to expose them to programs and expose them to tech entrepreneurs from a very young age, but all of that is a part of a broader storytelling effort that will have them looking in the mirror saying, "I'm what the next tech CEO could look like. I'm what a technologist who might be the one who solves climate change could look like." Looking at these different pictures where they typically see white men and seeing themselves, that's going to be the biggest step and most important, even almost more so than getting them any sort of programming.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Billingsley has been getting out the message and the story through mainstream media and an upcoming TEDx talk. The other part of black tech street is ecosystem building, including helping new entrepreneurs.

Tyrance Billingsley, Black Tech Street founder and executive director:

Our role is really ensuring that black tech entrepreneurs are supported, that black entrepreneurs who aren't in tech have access to the means to tech-enable their businesses and that they have all the other things that they need. So I envision, and some of the things we've already done, putting these entrepreneurs in contact with some of the incredible people we cross as we build our story and build our network, giving them access to not only different mentors, but really capital, which is kind of what they need. But that's a way to do it.

Tyrance Billingsley, Black Tech Street founder and executive director:

I mean, with entrepreneurship in general, again, I keep going back to cultivating the mindset because even with capital, we know nine out of 10 businesses are going to fail. And even with VCs, VCs only pick the right businesses about 20 or 30% of the time. You're almost better off with a coin toss of which ones are going to succeed. But the one thing that is consistent and can be affected is the better, not only mentorship that these people get, but the better personal narrative that they have and the more resources they have access to to hold them up. That creates a system in which winners are more likely to emerge and succeed.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of those organizations helping black entrepreneurs is ACT Tulsa. We heard Ambrose Midget explain how an ACT Tulsa grant helped her launch her mobile laundry app. The Tulsa Economic Development Corporation provides funding and guidance for black business owners, including tech entrepreneurs who are a little more established. And 36 Degrees North, where I met Midget, also offers over 400 professional development events throughout the course of the year for all entrepreneurs.

Justin Harlan, Tulsa Remote managing director:

If we can lure people to the city, incentivizing them with both finances, a community, a place to work, then our bet is that when people get here and see what Tulsa has to offer, they're going to stay beyond that year commitment.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's Justin Harlan, the managing director of Tulsa Remote. That's an LLC under the George Kaiser Family Foundation umbrella that pays people \$10,000 to move to Tulsa for at least one year. The idea is to increase the local talent pool with professionals who might decide to stay long term.

Justin Harlan, Tulsa Remote managing director:

I think there are a lot of misconceptions about what the city or state has to offer and I think that's why it takes a little bit more to get somebody here and see it for themselves and say, "Oh wow, there's a downtown scene. Oh, there's actually a lot of people here. There's one of the biggest parks in America. There's a fine arts scene that I could do something every weekend within if I wanted to and there's awesome restaurants and bars." You know, I think it really is something that you have to see for yourself and that's really what we're focused on doing. People are, I think, starting to wake up to the fact that you can get an awesome lifestyle in places like Tulsa for a lot less money than the coast and you can do your same job here and have a city and community that's built around remote work and welcoming and getting you plugged in. Communities like Tulsa, I think, are really going to gain from this work from anywhere environment that we're all navigating.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Tulsa was one of the first cities to incentivize people to move. Now, there are almost 50 similar programs around the country, but Tulsa Remote might be the largest. Since 2019, more than 1400 people, many of them so-called digital nomads, have already moved and interest only accelerated throughout the pandemic. Harlan says the program already benefited the local economy.

Justin Harlan, Tulsa Remote managing director:

For every two people we bring, there's an extra job created in Tulsa. So there's obviously a lot of job creation that's happening within the city. We also know in an economic innovation group study that was done last summer, just in 2021 alone, the Tulsa Remote members contributed \$60 million to the Tulsa GDP. And we know that for every dollar we've spent on the incentive, there's been almost a \$14 return on that investment to the city.

Justin Harlan, Tulsa Remote managing director:

So there's obviously a lot of economic impact, but I also think the exciting thing for us is the ripple effect of just bringing in really great people, great human beings. Beyond that economic impact, beyond the work that they're doing or the jobs they're creating, I'm excited about looking back five, 10 years from now and seeing somebody that started a business or somebody that joined a board and made a real impact in that way, or somebody who has not only started a business, but opened up a headquarters here and brought other employees with them. And I think we're really just starting to get on the precipice of that and see the real impact that ripple effect can make.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

While at 36 Degrees North, I also met Dustin Baker. He's a head hunter and recruiter, and one of those digital nomads. His clients are banks and finance companies that make government guaranteed loans to small businesses. In 2020, he was living with this family in Texas when he took advantage of Tulsa Remote. Because in his business, he could work from anywhere.

Dustin Baker, Baker and Lewis founder and CEO:

So, as a kind of a solopreneur for a long time, I have kind of generally worked out of an executive office space and co-working spaces and things where you've got the energy of other people, but they're not necessarily a part of your team. But our clients are really, it's a niche business, and so they're spread all over the country. So, most of my work was not with local people. I was more with kind of national shops that were from San Diego to Chicago, to New Jersey, just kind of all over the place. Really the community that was kind of promised with Tulsa Remote was pretty attractive. I told somebody before, they offer you \$10,000, which is a rounding error if you're going to move all your stuff and your family. You don't move for the money. It's kind of nice to soften the blow of moving costs. But what I moved for has really kind of been my experience and that is a network of other kind of motivated, smart, innovative people who are doing all different kinds of things.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Baker says the kinetic environment of places like 36 Degrees North has led entrepreneurs to take some risks.

Dustin Baker, Baker and Lewis founder and CEO:

I think what happens is you put a bunch of creative people together, it's like a Petri dish of different kinds of innovation. We started a project, which is a YouTube show where we travel around the country and talk to people in the SBA lending industry, and borrowers who've gotten loans and how they have weathered the storm and pivoted in the middle of all the adversity of the last couple of years. Well, I had no idea how to go with a buddy and record a show, how to do editing of the video, all of these things, but I immediately had access to a family business and that was their business. And so that access really gave me a quick jump start into being able to actually execute on an idea that I had. And that's just one example. I think when you put a bunch of people together who are all driving and growing and doing new things, all kinds of projects spin off of that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've been listening to the final episode of a special five-part series for the Work in Progress podcast. Destination Tulsa: Tech Hub in the Heartland. Destination Tulsa was written and produced by Larry Buell. Music for this series is from bensound.com. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor in Chief of Working Nation and the host of the Work in Progress podcast.