

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Entrepreneurship is part of the American dream, and it is booming. A record 5.4 million new businesses were started last year as workers across the country struck out on their own searching for a different path to a fulfilling career and economic mobility. But that road isn't always a smooth one for some new business owners who hit roadblocks such as access to financial capital, lack of a strong social network and other barriers to success. In this special four-part work in progress series, economic mobility through entrepreneurship, we'll look at those headwinds and solutions. We'll hear directly from entrepreneurs and get advice from leaders in business, education and government to learn how entrepreneurship can be a fulfilling and profitable career choice and a boon to a community. A lot of people who've never been to Kansas City, Missouri may have some misconceptions about it.

Jackie Nguyen, Café Cà Phê founder:

I was like, "Oh God, I'm moving in the middle of farm country." I pictured it to be just like not cool and not diverse and I am blown away. It is diverse, it is accepting.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's Jackie Nguyen, the owner of Cafe Ca Phe, the first Vietnamese coffee shop in Kansas City, Missouri. I met with her and other entrepreneurs in KCMO when I was trying to find out what made the city such a strong incubator for new businesses. Nguyen's journey to business owner started during the COVID shutdown in March 2020. She was an actor based in New York City and she was on the road touring with Miss Saigon when the pandemic hit, all shows were canceled and she was stranded in Florida. Someone else was already renting out her New York apartment so she couldn't go home.

Jackie Nguyen, Café Cà Phê founder:

And so my partner, who is originally from Kansas City was like, we should just stay with my parents for a week or two and wait out the pandemic. And that two week waiting period ended up being about two years long. So I just ended up staying in Kansas City and it felt like, "Oh my gosh, there's a lot of diversity here in Kansas City," but not anywhere near the amount that California has or New York has. And I just felt like I didn't have anywhere to hang out and my mom was like, "First of all, I want you to stop crying and complaining because I think that there are other people that feel the same way as you. Why don't you just make that space and create it since it's missing there?" That might be something to kind of kill time. And I have always wanted to have my own business, but I didn't really know in what capacity.

Because show business, I was my own business. I had always worked in a coffee shop in between my auditions, in between the things that I would do, like nannying, catering, babysitting, you name it, I would do it in New York. But I always had a job at Starbucks and so I loved being in a coffee shop and so I thought, well, why don't I try and explore the idea of coffee? Since coffee is a huge part of my culture, it's something that the grandparents in the family make coffee. The parents in the family makes coffee, they go to a coffee shop all the time and it's just integrated into what we do. And so I thought maybe I can create something that can involve the community but also involve my artistry, my creative need. And I just kind of started selling cups of coffee on the side of the street and then it started to pick up momentum.

People were trying to look for me on the weekends and so I was like, you know what? I think I'm going to make a bigger investment. I'm going to buy a coffee cart and do a food truck. But that was mainly because I just needed to make money too. I had no auditions, I had no time to... or outlets to make any type of money off of theater because theater was shut down. It just kind of took off.

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Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The coffee cart was so successful that this year she took the next step, opening a brick-and-mortar shop, but that takes more capital. She entered every pitch competition she could and ended up winning two of the city's major business contests, which gave her some seed money.

Jackie Nguyen, Café Cà Phê founder:

I think the folks of Kansas City saw that there was a need for something like this as well, just because there was no coffee shop that was owned by an Asian woman, no coffee shop that predominantly featured any Vietnamese coffee or any type of Asian flavors. There was no coffee shop that specifically wanted to hire from marginalized communities. So I kind of came in and shook up the coffee seat in Kansas City, but I feel very lucky that the community like really took me in and welcomed me with open arms.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Kansas City is the kind of place you can start a small business even if you have to do it yourself like Nguyen did. But there's also plenty of help including incubators, contests, and even local leaders who encourage startups. We'll be exploring some of those avenues and talking to those people later in this episode.

Jackie Nguyen, Café Cà Phê founder:

There's no other city that I've been to that supports local and small businesses like Kansas City.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Nguyen didn't know it at the time, but she picked one of the best places to start a business. In 2016, Convene Magazine ranked Kansas City, Missouri, in the top 20 cities to start a business in the US. It also ranks high in other categories, top five for good pay and affordable housing. Second best city for jobs and the fourth most cultured city in the nation. The engine of the KCMO economy is small business startups and the city is doing everything it can to encourage them.

Mayor Quinton Lucas, Kansas City Missouri:

Very few dollars into entrepreneurship actually goes a very long way. Compare that to a billion-dollar real estate property tax incentive where really you're only getting those 4,000 jobs and they usually don't bloom or grow anymore.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's Mayor Quinton Lucas. I met him at an event for Launch KC, an organization that helps fund tech startups with high potential. Through an annual grant competition, they invest half a million dollars in preseed and seed stage companies that relocate to downtown Kansas City. Launch KC is funded through the state of Missouri and the Kansas City community, including individuals, businesses, foundations, and the Missouri Technology Corporation. Mayor Lucas tells me, Launch KC is just one way the city is stimulating business activity and creativity. Another is a city sales tax that primarily helps startups in the Black community. The goal is to give entrepreneurs with ambition and vision a little help because when they succeed, the city prospers.

Mayor Quinton Lucas, Kansas City Missouri:

Development isn't just taking whatever comes to you and say, all right, we'll find a way to expand the giant department store. It's instead saying, how come to be as diversified as possible both in businesses and the people who are represented within them, and more than anything, how do we help them grow and survive? That's been the Kansas City, I think secret sauce and frankly, it's something that continues to grow for our region long term. When I go to events like the Launch KC event that I'm attending tonight, you see everyone here, leaders, the mayor, top business people, people who just have come up with an idea yesterday and are saying, "Hey, what should I do?" Students, seniors, really everyone is represented, and I don't think that there was a market in America that is more accessible, that is less patriarchal, that is less kind of closed.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

At the Launch KC event, I also spoke with the founder of one of the winning companies. Risa Stein's SeeInMe helps people create custom digital profiles that allow others to see them as the unique individual as they are. These profiles can be used across many settings and they can be easily modified and updated. The user gets notified when anybody accesses their profile or the profile they've created for a vulnerable loved one.

Risa Stein, SeeInMe founder:

I'm a clinical psychologist by training. I have lots of friends with vulnerable children, and I have a grandfather who died of Alzheimer's. So from my perspective as a psychologist, as a parent and as a design thinker, I noticed a convergence of pain points and wanted to address them. I didn't see a digital profile out there that enabled parents to share what makes their vulnerable loved ones unique. And so that's where I started and now we're working with United Healthcare to enhance that and expand it to include HIPAA covered information so that anyone can get care from anyone else in any setting.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Like Nguyen, who we met earlier. Stein didn't start out as a business owner. In fact, she had a long career in academia.

Risa Stein, SeeInMe founder:

It's to my advantage to also have a husband who's extraordinarily supportive of this and to have the wisdom of having a clinical career and academic career in a full parenting career. All of those things have fed into my developing SeeInME. I always thought businesses were cutthroat and competitive, and so it was a little trepidatious in going out into the business world. But what I've realized is that because Kansas City is just the right size, it's now too big to be overpowering, but it's not so small that you can't get anywhere. Everybody knows everybody and it's the perfect place to create connections. Everybody's been very welcoming and very helpful.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

While in Kansas City, I had an opportunity to visit another event, a mixer hosted by KCSourceLink to kick off global entrepreneurship week in the city, a couple hundred entrepreneurs in various stages of their careers, gathered and mingled at the Chicken N Pickle in North Kansas City. KCSourceLink is program out of the University of Missouri, Kansas City's Innovation Center, and it's been around for almost two decades. It was started during the major shock of the aftermath of the dot com bubble burst. To help eliminate some of the challenges for people who wanted to start businesses by connecting them to sources of funding, mentorship, and to each other. I interviewed the host of the event, Michael

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Carmona, the senior director of Regional Ecosystem Development for KCSourceLink. I asked him how the organization helped to fuel new business creation in the city.

Michael Carmona, KCSourceLink senior director:

We followed this model that Maria Meyers, our founder, created so many years ago of connecting people to the right resources at the right time. We get folks from our community who reach out to us with ideas of starting or growing a business, and they have these aspirations to get started or move forward, but they know very little of where to go, what the process looks like, who to talk to in any space. That network that you have is very important in order to move forward and gain opportunities. So a lot of the work that we do is in managing relationships, not just with people in the community, but also folks who support entrepreneurs, whether it be through their non-profit organizations, through for-profit organizations that are looking to be more supportive of community members, university resources, and then also foundations and other groups that in some way have an impact on the local entrepreneurship space here in KC.

So we refer to all of that work as ecosystem building, entrepreneurial ecosystem building, and making sure that we are driving and supporting the needs of all folks in the space in order to help support Kansas City in its initiative to be the most entrepreneurial city in America.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The COVID pandemic has spurred many more people to start their own businesses, especially in underserved communities. Carmona says that's brought a greater need to access help.

Michael Carmona, KCSourceLink senior director:

The pandemic, of course, really demonstrated the need to be more intentional in supporting some of our most disadvantaged businesses. A lot of what you're starting to see is this idea that not just small businesses, but also micro enterprises really being key pieces to community development and neighborhood preservation, building neighborhoods, communities, and so forth. And what's fascinating about Kansas City and the region is that during the pandemic, and even now still, you are seeing more and more be invested into the small businesses and especially the micro enterprises. So understanding that by impacting these businesses and providing support to them, you're also providing support to families. You're providing support to those communities where those businesses are located.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

While in Kansas City, I also spend an afternoon at the open office space at The Porter House KC, which vendors would be business owners in underrepresented communities, supporting them with information and contacts, and importantly, money. Porter House recently partnered with JP Morgan Chase to give grants to the most promising local entrepreneurs.

Dan Smith, The Porter House KC founder:

We try to be a bridge. There's a lot of gaps in access. Our goal is to try to fill those access gaps.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Dan Smith is the co-founder of The Porter House KC and oversees its day-to-day operations.

Dan Smith, The Porter House KC founder:

So we've formed some relationships with the Kansas City Chamber, our large chamber of commerce. They actually created this access to capital task force. We were like, "Hey, we want to be involved in this." And so one of the ways that we were able to do that was this access to capital committee. They actually recruited a lot of bankers from various banks around the city. They convene maybe once every other month. And one of the solutions was, hey, let's get some of these bankers in the same room as some of these entrepreneurs so they can have open dialogue, and these entrepreneurs can talk about their need, what they do, and the bankers can learn more about them and maybe provide some more insight on that end and pull the shade from whatever this looks like, and make it more real for the entrepreneurs that we serve.

And so we actually got the opportunity to host that, one of those sessions here where we had maybe representatives from five different banks, and then we had four or five of our entrepreneurs pitch to them, and then there was just an open dialogue and we circled up. So it wasn't like a panel where you got the banks looking at the people. We were actually all intertwined together. A lot of that is just to try to reduce it as many anxieties and fears and things as we can and normalize what this thing is and because a lot of the folks that we serve are not in these rooms often, and it's demystifying what entrepreneurship is for them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Smith says, Porter House targets more mature business owners, people who have established businesses and want to grow, and people with other careers wanting to start their own companies.

Dan Smith, The Porter House KC founder:

We do better with folks that actually have established businesses, not have a great idea between six months to three to four years is kind of our sweet spot as it relates to business ownership. So age wise, we actually like it when it's a diverse group because it allows them to mesh and network and learn each other and work with each other and play off of each other.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

While I was hanging out with Smith learning about the organization, I also had the chance to meet three entrepreneurs who stopped by the gathering space.

Jahna Riley, Aya Coffee and Books founder:

I am Jahna Riley and I am the founder of Aya Coffee and Books. I really believe in the power of physical space and third places, and because of the way that Kansas City is segregated and historically has been that way for a very long time, I still want to put my shop in a community that is underserved. I shouldn't have to travel 25 minutes to go hang out at a coffee shop with my friends. There should be one that is much closer, because coffee shops are not only a place where you go to get your caffeine hit, but it's a place of community building and ideas exchange. Our neighborhoods deserve that as well. So that is really a sticking point for me and my business in terms of where I want to go.

I think Kansas City is a place where there is just so much genuine support for no matter what you want to do. If you start to tell people like open up your mouth and talk about your idea and somebody will at least say, "Hey, I know a resource, or, hey, I know you should go talk to this person." And there's such a huge spirit of collaboration, especially for I see Black and brown entrepreneurs who are really digging in deep to even with limited resources, support each other and build their businesses and also give back to the community, which I love. And Kansas City is home.

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Cameron Martin, Love is Key founder:

My name is Cameron Martin. I'm the co-owner of Love is Key, a restaurant, food and desserts innovations. We have a unique concept. We serve breakfast, brunch and desserts, but not your traditional breakfast. All of our sandwiches and most things are on a cake waffle. It's more from southern cuisine and that we kind of bring that southern love. We kind of bring it to the Midwest. I've seen support through neighbors. I've seen support through different businesses, city hall, it's like an open highway to be able to become an entrepreneur. So many grants and loans and things that you can in classes. The gift program is another place that you can... If you don't have any business, all you can take a seven-week course and become one. There's so much support here that is crazy not to be an entrepreneur if you didn't want to be.

We've partnered with the amorous place. It's not too far from where our location is. It's actually for people that's trying to get rehabilitated back into the community. They might have went through mental health problems or just getting released from jail or just things like that to kind of get reintegrated into the community and be able to find work and stuff like that. Truman, they have a mental health part where people might have a disability or things like that, if they're still more than capable of working, we try to give those people the opportunity to be able to have a job.

Cynthia Fails, LaunchCrate Publishing founder:

My name is Cynthia Fails, and I'm the founder of LaunchCrate Publishing. We are a publishing company that is intent on flipping the publishing industry on end, and we do that in a variety of ways. One, through the lens of publishing services, so helping by coaching other authors who are interested in going from an idea to a print-ready book and self-publishing it themselves. One stop shop along the way, whether it's cover design, editing services, interior design of the book. The other avenue that we use is traditional publishing, and our difference lens on it is making sure that creatives are fairly compensated. So instead of the traditional split where it's 10% to the writer or the author and then the rest to the publishing company, we flipped it so that it's 60% to the author or the creatives. So if it's author, illustrator combo, they're splitting 30% each and then 40% to the publisher.

Kansas City is really connected. They talk about six degrees of separation in Kansas City, it's likely about two or three degrees of separation, especially in the entrepreneurial community. I think everybody just wants to see each other win.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was Jahna Riley, Cameron Martin and Cynthia fails. Three entrepreneurs I met at The Porter House KC. By the way, Martin stopped by because he is one of the first winners of the grants that Porter House is giving out with JP Morgan Chase, and he was picking up his check. He tells me he will use his \$15,000 to hire more workers from underserved communities at his restaurant. The entrepreneurs I met were from a wide variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, and their businesses were as diverse as the city. Earlier, you heard Mayor Quinton Lucas say diversity in terms of businesses and the people who opened them is the city's secret sauce in building a thriving community of entrepreneurs. Cultivating that diversity and nurturing it takes some work. That's where an organization like the Northeast Kansas City Chamber of Commerce comes in. It's located on Independent Street, which if you have never been there, is taking a trip around the world.

Bobbi Baker, Northeast KC Chamber of Commerce:

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Whether it be clothing or food or a gallery of wonderful things to be able to experience and never have to leave the northeast. Restaurants are really a phenomenal staple here in the northeast. We just recently did the international marketplace taste and tour and did a hop on hop off to about 14 different restaurants and coffee shops. It was a day long event that you ended up going home with enough food for the week.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Bobbi Baker's the president and CEO of the Northeast Kansas City Chamber of Commerce. She explains that immigrants and refugees who settled in the northeast part of the city, mainly because of very affordable rents have been thriving and businesses they've started have led to economic mobility for themselves and others in the community.

Bobbi Baker, Northeast KC Chamber of Commerce:

Those same folks stayed and they stayed because there is a piece, a taste of their home, if you will, here where folks tend to really get to know one another, embrace one another, and take care of one another, and that's why they stay. They've started their businesses to be able to serve one another. That's kind of where we come in and say, "There are so many others out there that once they know about you, you'll be serving them as well."

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Baker says that instead of looking for jobs with companies outside the neighborhood they live in, many in this region decided to make their own opportunities.

Bobbi Baker, Northeast KC Chamber of Commerce:

Most of our businesses are truly small businesses. They are family businesses. They don't really have employees other than one another. So the kids are coming in and working after school. The parents are coming in bright and early in the mornings and getting things up and running, and to take a nap in the afternoon once the kids get there and then come back for the evening business. Truly small businesses that are improving their economic viability, but also a stabilizing factor for the rest of their community. I think one of the things that we do and one of the most important things that we do is weaving the community, residents and businesses together, supporting one another.

As we try to do that, one of the things that we have found is it takes seven touches, a minimum of seven touches, just to get the ear of someone who might be interested in how they can better engage in the community. That's one of the things that I think we are very good at with our businesses. To continue to do that only makes them stronger, and that's what we want to achieve out of it, is to make our businesses stronger because our businesses also live in this community. So as we make businesses stronger, that makes our family stronger, that makes their neighborhood stronger, and we shall be a stronger community when we're done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

According to Baker, not only do these businesses in the northeast part of the city serve as an economic engine, but they also contribute to the diversity of KC mold. One of the things that makes it a growing international business powerhouse right in the middle of the country. You've been listening to the fourth and final episode of Work in Progress, Economic Mobility Through Entrepreneurship. I'm Ramona

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Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. This series was produced in partnership with the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.