

Milwaukee Rising



*Profiles of the people who are developing
a more equitable Milwaukee*

January 2023

Introduction

Communities are shaped by the people within them.

Over the course of a year from fall 2021 to 2022, news organization Technical.ly profiled the social entrepreneurs, civic technologists and creative innovators who are most shaping the Midwest city, especially those focused on bringing a more just, equitable and dynamic Milwaukee economy.

Made possible in partnership with the American Family Insurance Institute for Corporate and Social Impact, these profiles were initially published as part of a weekly newsletter called This Week in Milwaukee Rising.

This is a collection of many of these stories to serve as an inspiration to how communities can be shaped. Find the complete series at technical.ly/series/milwaukee.

The original series was authored by Sorrina Beecher and edited by Julie Zeglen.

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What does it take to thrive in Milwaukee?

💡 For growth after stagnation, the Midwest city must both invest in its nascent cohort of entrepreneurs, and develop in-roads for those who want to get there. Collaboration can help.



How can old cities revive themselves?

Those already established need to go further — while making it easier for others to follow.

“Sometimes we get the invite, but we don’t get the plus one,” said Montréal Cain, a teacher turned entrepreneur.

Based in Milwaukee, he’s part of a new wave of entrepreneurs bending technology to solve deep social problems. How did we at Technical.ly meet him? Well, we were introduced by Christopher Perceptions, himself a founder growing a national practice.

It’s a recurring theme we see at Technical.ly when reporting across the United States.

In the last 20 years, digital transformation has come to dominate economic development and efforts to make more inclusive economies. The tools powering that transformation, including debt-fueled speculative entrepreneurship and technical skills, have been heavily concentrated within existing wealth — resulting in workforces that are whiter and more male than the general population.

Making tech more representative of the people it serves isn’t just a moral stance, it’s a dominant economic strategy. To grow a constrained workforce and pursue new innovations, local economies need the strength of its entire population.

In a place like Milwaukee, with flat population growth and challenges with poverty, its own revival is dependent on reversing generations of disinvestment. To get it done, those who have found success already must reach new heights, and far more new voices need to join the fray. The future for Milwaukee, the slow-growth state of Wisconsin and much of a reimagined US Midwest depends on it.

Where Milwaukee's efforts stand

The city is making strides in coordinating its resources. The Milwaukee Tech Hub Coalition, for example, has taken up the mantle of bringing corporate, nonprofit and other groups into the same room for the sake of collaborating on an ambitious goal: "inclusively double" tech talent across the region. Its FOR-M incubator for underrepresented founders has a mission to be the open door to the local tech ecosystem.

Milwaukee Tech Week and the new VC MKE events bring entrepreneurial-minded folks together IRL. And Milky Way Tech Hub and Sherman Phoenix, both founded or cofounded by Black women, are specifically focused on boosting entrepreneurs of color in a majority-minority city.



But those efforts are newer — most launched within the past few years — whereas other, bigger tech communities have been growing for decades. Venture capital still lags behind cities of comparable size, and Milwaukee is losing entrepreneurial talent to regions more tolerable to risk. The city is not immune to nationwide tech hiring challenges.

Separately from tech and entrepreneurship, Milwaukee continues to grapple with more urgent human challenges. Its reputation as one of the United States' most segregated cities stands firm, and it faces high infant mortality rates, especially in communities of color.

What are the city's innovators doing about it all? As we've seen in our This Week in Milwaukee Rising series, they're going beyond talking about the issues to standing up programs, partnerships and companies. They're working in communities, inside and outside systems.

But before action can happen, the underlying issues must be assessed: What does it really mean to thrive in Milwaukee? Cain and Perceptions joined Technical.ly last week in a conversation of a dozen entrepreneurs and civic leaders who are working to make Milwaukee a better place.

Choices mean prosperity

First, disparities must be faced, said Perceptions, who is the founder of blockchain startup PerceptForm. Plenty of people are already thriving because of the silos they live in – “but there are so many other pockets of Milwaukee where there are [not] opportunities, and ultimately, where there are broken hearts, and broken hearts break things.”

From there, the issues at hand remind of those faced by other 21st century American cities.

Choice is a fundamental factor, noted Teresa Esser, an impact investor focused on housing.

“I think if we all have a place to sleep, and if we all have enough to eat, and if we all are working at jobs that we at least choose and we are not being trafficked, that’s on the way to thriving,” she said.



Dr. Kristina Ropella, dean of the Opus College of Engineering at Marquette University, agrees: “People should want to be here. They want to live in Milwaukee, they want to be part of the community, they actually feel like they’re part of the community, they’re contributing to the community.”

Getting there is the harder part. Offering education and training to enable economic contributions is a first step.

Milwaukee Tech Hub CEO Kathy Henrich thinks of thriving as creating “life-changing opportunities.” That means focusing on both strengthening the overall economy, and on bolstering industries promising the most growth, thus leading to those jobs that can sustain a livelihood.

It all starts with the long view, argued John Knapp, who’s leading the new Innovation Alley initiative at Marquette. Today’s 20-year-olds won’t be prepared for college, or to find that life-changing job, if they weren’t offered the resources they needed to learn at age 4.

“We have to think about the lives we’re providing for our young people across our whole city,” Knapp said. “That leads to opportunity over time.”

Power in collaboration

Bringing more people into the “thriving” tent will require an ongoing commitment to that heralded tenet — collaboration. Historically, the literal and metaphorical tables where decisions get made are surrounded by the same people who have long held power, but don’t come from the communities being discussed.

Cain, who founded mental health startup HouseCall Wisconsin, said it’s time for some of those leaders to cede that power and make room for new ideas.

We want to be in places and welcome into spaces where our gifts make room for us, where individuals who may have had seats at boards for 25 years are creating successes, and they’re doing it through diversity as well as inclusion,” he said. “We want to make sure that when we look at ‘what does a success track look like in Wisconsin,’ that the creatives and the CEOs are sitting at the same table.”

And on a community level, anchor institutions can play a similar role, Knapp said — for instance, what the multi-partner Near West Side Partners has done to revitalize the Milwaukee neighborhood.



That type of work doesn’t solve today’s challenges now. It’s an attempt to address tomorrow’s, or those of 40 years from now.

As Perceptions put it: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. It’s going to take time.”

The question is whether Milwaukee can eat fast enough to catch up with those who started eating a decade ago.

What happens now?

The last 20 years of local tech economy growth was fueled in part by a private-market business investing craze, aided by low-interest rates and early wins in digital transformation. We’re entering a new stage. Local economic change will have to adapt, too.

Milwaukee is still a poor city. It requires both economic success and opportunities for those locked out of the conversation so far — including more intentional plus-ones.

A Milwaukee arts collective pays homage to a legacy of Black business owners

💡 Here's how cofounder Lilo Allen says Bronzeville Collective is supporting equitable community development and fair pay for creatives in a changing neighborhood.

For as long as she can remember, Lilo Allen has been creating art for change.

As a child, she would spend hours sitting in the restaurant where her mother pulled morning shifts, selling her handmade jewelry out of a small briefcase to the regulars. As a college student at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, making and selling jewelry became more than a creative outlet. When her mother unexpectedly fell ill and required close care, creating became a mode to survive – mentally, spiritually and financially.

Today, Allen is thriving as a cofounder at Bronzeville Collective, a Black-owned collaborative storefront that features the art and works of more than 30 Black and brown, LGBTQ and ally artists. Founded in 2018, the store sits on the corner of Vel Phillips and North avenues, just outside of downtown in Milwaukee's historic Bronzeville Arts and Culture District.



The store's location is intentional, Allen said. In the 1960s, the area was home to a thriving Black neighborhood. Bronzeville Collective's storefront was once home to a Black dentist. But after years of systemically racist practices and the departure of family-sustaining manufacturing jobs, the area had fallen on hard times.

Now, amid ongoing civil unrest, its mission fits alongside other Milwaukee efforts to boost local businesses and support equitable community development such as the Sherman Phoenix entrepreneurship hub, the Granville Business Improvement District and the Lindsay Heights Neighborhood Improvement District. Bronzeville Collective is hoping to contribute to the Bronzeville area's revitalization efforts and make similar economic and social impacts seen during the "renaissance."

“We really want to pay homage to that legacy,” said Allen.

Besides providing visibility for artists, Bronzeville Collective makes vending more financially accessible, Allen said. Artists pay a vendor fee on a sliding scale and shop commission rates are lower, making its model more inclusive than traditional storefronts.

“When I first started out, I would have to shop my jewelry to consignment [shops] for 40 to 50% of the revenue,” Allen explained. “I kept thinking ‘these are handmade.’ Artists that we don’t know about need to be highlighted. They just need that chance and visibility.”

“We’re five minutes from downtown Milwaukee and you can see yourself represented in the space,” said Allen. “Some people can just walk in and hear the music. We are the only space of this kind. That means the world to me.”

As the creative owner of Papyrus & Charms, one of the store’s four anchor brands, Allen describes her works as culturally conscious wearable art. Inspired by her Afro-Caribbean roots and spiritual affinity, much of her work features crystals, messages of empowerment, and promotion of self-care, like candles, soaps, and bath bombs. But over the years, Allen’s creations — and many others at the shop — have taken on more significant meaning.

Art has become their way to fight against polarizing division — and provide space for BIPOC creators to move out from under the radar.

“As people of color, as queer people, we are always in a fight for a revolution,” Allen said. “But revolution doesn’t always look like ‘fighting.’ Somebody had to make those Black Panther posters, somebody had to tell the stories. We live in a capitalistic society, so I have to participate, but I do hope to affect my change on the world.”

Before she helped launch Bronzeville Collective, Allen was crisscrossing the city to sell her handmade jewelry at neighborhood festivals, craft fairs, and marketplaces. Her friendship with fellow artist and Bronzeville cofounder Tiffany Miller led her to formalize her business — “There was so much I didn’t know, I didn’t know,” Allen said.

When the pair participated in Pop Up MKE after floating the idea of a collaborative, a program that allowed the artists to set up shop for 30 days to test their business model, they generated \$17,000 for city creatives. Following their success, they pitched their idea through the Rise MKE competition and won “Fan Favorite,” using the prize funds to launch Bronzeville Collective.

Since opening, Allen has continued making waves across the city, winning grants and winning over customers through her activism and creations.

“Art is the key,” Allen said. “There is no change without inspiration. There’s no inspiration without being seen. When you feel represented, that’s truly the spark. That moment of affirmation can make all the difference on how you make your mark.”

Facing a pandemic shutdown, this restaurateur pivoted to fighting food insecurity



Former Tandem owner and chef Caitlin Cullen talks about her new role at Milwaukee's Kinship Community Food Center and the power of community: "We should choose helping our neighbors."



When Caitlin Cullen opened The Tandem restaurant in 2016, she never set out to achieve financial gain.

Instead, the English-teacher-turned-chef saw an opportunity to teach budding chefs the culinary ropes while transforming a blighted tavern into a gathering place for Milwaukee's Lindsay Heights community.

Running a restaurant with a kitchen staff-in-training wasn't always easy. Running a restaurant in a neighborhood facing poverty, high unemployment rates, and a litany of social other challenges made it even harder. Early on, guests sometimes faced long wait times, uncooked food, and a few workers who would "scream and walk out of the restaurant at extremely opportune times," as she once shared with OnMilwaukee.

Over the years, Cullen's vision started to materialize. The Tandem grew a reputation for its delicious menu and workforce opportunities. During her tenure running the social enterprise, she trained more than 150 workers, including those who were formerly incarcerated or who had never held a job before. Many of her staff went on to cultivate careers in the kitchen, she said.

But just as Milwaukee was preparing to take to the world stage as host of the 2020 Democratic National Convention, the pandemic stuck and everything came to a screeching halt.

"I'm thinking the Obamas are going to eat at our place," Cullen told Technical.ly. "And this thing happened and I thought, 'We're finally going out of business.'"



Pandemic pivot

Like so many restaurateurs forced to shutter their doors due to state mandates, Cullen was ready to throw in the towel. She began to lay off staff and cut her menu down to the essentials. It still wasn't enough. As she got ready to close The Tandem's doors, she said couldn't fathom wasting so much unused food. So with the city's soup kitchens down and out, Cullen decided to give the food away for free.

She created a Facebook post to let the community know about the free meals. By the next morning, it had been shared thousands of times.

"All those meals were gone in two hours," Cullen recalled. "And we did it again the next day."

In nearly five years of business, Cullen said the restaurant had its busiest day following the Facebook post, but the restaurant's shrinking staff wasn't equipped to handle the influx of paid orders and serve neighbors seeking food assistance.

"I was like, we have to choose one or the other," she added. "And I think we should choose helping our neighbors. And we did that for a year and a half."

Roughly a half-dozen restaurants came to aid Cullen's cause, but it was when a buddy of hers reached out to World Central Kitchen — a global food relief organization headed by celebrity chef José Andrés — that the floodgates opened.

By winter, The Tandem was serving more than 800 meals a day and launched a food delivery program, funded in part by a \$350,000 grant from the City's CARES Act dollars. In total, The Tandem marshaled more than one million dollars to feed residents struggling during the pandemic.

In 2021, Cullen, exhausted and overwhelmed by work and personal struggles, hung up her apron after serving more than 115,000 meals. She gifted the restaurant to another aspiring entrepreneur.

A new mission

This spring, Cullen returned to her charitable and culinary roots when she joined the Kinship Food Community Center as the organization's food director. Formerly the Riverwest Food Pantry, the Kinship Community Food Center provides a fresh food market, collaborative meals, crisis assistance mentoring, and community training. The goal is not only to feed families who are struggling with food insecurity, Cullen said, but also to help residents transition out of poverty altogether.

The center, located at St. Casimir Church at 924 E. Clarke St., certainly feels different than a typical run-of-the-mill food pantry. On a recent summer afternoon, the center is bustling with guests who are jamming to music and catching up with neighbors over snacks and a shared meal.

"There's no standing in line," Cullen said as she walks through the market and greets guests like old friends. "We got music playing, we've got coffee, and if you're there on a Tuesday evening, we got a dinner bar going on with healthy food. We really created this welcoming, inviting environment. And then you're not looked at as a cattle call when you're running through a line."

Cullen hopes to grow Kinship Community Food Center into a true community hub and contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty in Milwaukee.

"The cliches about food and community are so abundant because they are true," Cullen wrote in her bio for the company. "When we are able to share even the humblest meal, strangers become friends and community becomes family."

Cullen's journey was shared in a new short documentary "In Tandem," filmed by the Emmy-nominated team 1 Girl Revolution + Behold. The film premiered this spring.

This founder uses ‘trap therapy’ to show the importance of culturally relevant mental health care

💡 "Mental illness is closer than you think," Milwaukee-based Speak Wellness founder Tarsha Wiggins says.

Tarsha Wiggins remembers the day her life changed as if it were yesterday.

The University of Wisconsin – Madison rehab psychology student was wrapping up an afternoon at her internship in 2006 when a man assaulted her, unprompted, and attempted to thrust her body into oncoming traffic.

To make matters worse, no one came to her aid. Later, when Wiggins heard the man suffered from schizophrenia and had been off his medications, she felt a pang of empathy and realized she wanted to make an impact. That opened the door to a new career path, where she eventually earned a master's degree in social work with an emphasis on mental health.



"Ultimately, I had a horrific experience that really opened my eyes," Wiggins told Technical.ly. "That was the first time in my life that I didn't feel safe, I didn't feel heard. But everything happens for a reason."

Wiggins returned to Milwaukee where she worked as a mental health professional in a variety of roles including in juvenile detention, veterans affairs, and at some of the city's biggest mental health organizations. But during the pandemic, she found herself facing her own mental health challenges. Overwhelmed with the stress of raising three children, virtual schooling, and the responsibilities of a full-time corporate leadership job, she said she collapsed under the pressure.

"I was sitting on my front porch on the verge of tears thinking, 'I can't do this,'" Wiggins said. "There was this constant state of worry." She remembers thinking: If I feel like this with my professional background and education, how are others who look like me feeling?

It was a lightbulb moment.

The importance of culturally relevant mental health care

Black adults with mental illness are also significantly less likely to receive mental health treatment than their white counterparts; just roughly 31%. According to the American Psychiatric Association, Black adults are also less likely to be included in clinical research, receive guideline-consistent care, and are more likely to visit emergency rooms and primary doctors to access treatment.

In her professional life, Wiggins has observed the lack of access and support resources — and the depths of community mistrust of public institutions. She points to families who are fearful of "calling in" their relatives for mental health crises due to publicized mistreatment of individuals living with serious mental illness, including the 2014 police-involved fatal shooting of Dontre Hamilton, the 31-year-old who suffered from schizophrenia and paranoia in the years leading up to his death.

Other seismic barriers — such as lack of comprehensive health insurance, provider bias, and gaping socioeconomic disparities — continue to persist. And there's this: Many people simply aren't in the loop on what mental health resources are already available.

Yet one of the biggest hurdles to get over, Wiggins said, may well be the BIPOC community's pervasive history of generational trauma and the resulting feelings of guilt, stigma and shame. Still, Wiggins saw an opportunity to help change the BIPOC community's perspective on sweeping mental health challenges under the rug.

"Mental illness is closer than you think," Wiggins said. "Sometimes we think, 'It's that person.' In reality, it might be that person at work, your best friend, your auntie, or your uncle. Or it's yourself. I thought, 'I'm just going to get out here — I'm going to talk to people about uncomfortable things in a comfortable way.'"

Bringing ‘trap therapy’ to the public

Wiggins initially started with a series on YouTube. In the meantime, she began to practice her own rounds of self-care. While jogging and listening to “club bangers” by artists like City Girls and 2 Chainz, she had an epiphany – to combine the passion, energy, and “good vibes” of hip-hop with culturally relevant mental health care.

She called it “Trap Therapy.”

In 2021, Wiggins officially founded Speak Wellness Behavioral Health Consulting to break the stigmas around mental health in the BIPOC community she had witnessed during her years of providing direct care. The company provides behavioral health trainings, behavioral health consultations and public speaking.

Within two months of launching Speak Wellness, nearly 40 people had gathered into the lower level at Skybox Sports Bar on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive to take part in Wiggins’ first Trap Therapy session. The free, community event featured food, live music, and breakthrough mental health workshops to drive the importance of mental health care home – no matter where someone might be along their mental health journey.

That’s why everything is presented in a culturally relevant format, including slating time to openly discuss tough topics in a session with talk back; Wiggins wants all of her participants to “understand the assignment.”



“Depression, anxiety, suicide – there’s no topic off-limits,” Wiggins explained. “Psychoeducation is the platform I thrive in; we want to use evidence-based practices. But this isn’t one-on-one therapy. You can engage in a conversation about healing and take those next steps. ‘How can I connect to a therapist?’ We are bringing awareness. My goal is to destigmatize mental health; I want to abolish that.”

Today, Wiggins has expanded her Trap Therapy sessions, serving hundreds of locals, and extending to youth and women-led groups. She continues to host quarterly sessions that are free and open to the public. Wiggins hopes her sessions will help mental health providers earn BIPOC community members’ trust and contribute to building a community of empathy.

“It changes the conversation and it gets us the support and resources that we need,” Wiggins said. “In the poorest ZIP code, the hardest ZIP code [in Milwaukee], you have more than 100 people registered for Trap Therapy and talking about their trauma. It’s really amazing being able to be a bridge for people.”

In Wiggins’ words: Out of lemons, you can make some bomb lemonade. Life-changing lemonade, even.

One way to shrink the national labor gap? Reimagine the ‘ideal’ job applicant



Employ Milwaukee CEO Chytania Brown says employers need to upend the hiring status quo: “How can you grow the economy without understanding the business of people?”



For some people, taking their children out for a movie and ice cream might not seem like a big deal. But for others, finding the ability to pay for a fun family night out can feel like a small victory.

That’s the power of secure employment, per Chytania Brown.

“It reminds us of the things we take for granted,” Brown told Technical.ly, sharing the story of a formerly justice-involved mother who landed a full-time job this summer. “There are so many parents who want to do it but aren’t in a position to. It’s a luxury.”

Stories like these are what inspire Brown in her work as the president and CEO of Employ Milwaukee.

The nonprofit is one of 11 workforce boards located in and governed by the state that connect individuals to training resources and job opportunities in an effort to expand the regional economy.

Brown said Employ Milwaukee serves a dual mission: to be at the table to help collaborate, monitor and coordinate workforce development efforts, and to build and bridge that talent pipeline. The organization serves anyone from low-skill to high-skill workers to individuals who are chronically unemployed, and reentry populations following stints of incarceration. They also work with youth, exposing children to career opportunities as young as age 10.

An employer-candidate disconnect

The exec came aboard Employ Milwaukee at the height of the pandemic. Despite critical labor challenges, she was determined to continue placing people in jobs and amplifying the organization's impact. Brown leaned on her relationships at the local, state and national levels, and tapped into the community to understand its workforce needs — both from an employer and a candidate perspective.

What she found was a major disconnect. On one hand, employers were griping about the labor shortage — a national challenge, including in tech — and the lack of qualified talent. On the other, candidates consistently felt their applications were being passed by.

"I remember coming into this space when workforce development and economic development operated independently," Brown said. "How can you grow the economy without understanding the business of people? That didn't make sense to me. We have to understand what is coming into our landscape so we can understand what we need to build, to shift those dollars and put them in the direction of what employers' needs are."

Meanwhile, Wisconsin faces a labor shortage of nearly 140,000 workers, according to the Department of Workforce Development. While inflation has dinged wage growth, nearly all 72 counties in the state have raised wages, exceeding the national average.

Upending the hiring status quo

The answer to the labor shortage may well lie in the "hidden workforce." A report from the Harvard Business School and Accenture estimates there are more than 27 million workers who are eager to fill open job roles, but due to traditional "hiring practices," are rejected before they can even sit for an interview. The hidden workforce includes people with felony convictions, extended unemployment gaps, veterans, those without a college degree and others with nontraditional work experiences.

"When you have folks working in certain jobs, and you're denying them, is it necessary, or is it because of an old policy?" Brown said, posing the question to employers. "Rejection is so hard for people, especially for someone trying to change their life. It can be hard for me to convince them to keep trying. It can suck the life out of people."

Fortunately, the pandemic has upended the hiring status quo, Brown said. Since taking the reins at Employ Milwaukee, she's been involved in a series of "candid conversations" with employers, tackling common misconceptions about workforce development and what the ideal candidate should look like head on.

"When we say we have resources to help skill a workforce, people automatically think about people who don't want to work, or who are receiving public assistance, or have no skills — it's this default that they are getting this bad crop of people," Brown said.

“These are individuals that are interested in being a part of the local economy,” she said. “They want the same opportunities as everybody else.”

Part of this change requires employers to look beyond an individual’s resume, existing skill set, or past and to consider their future working potential. Veterans, older workers, and formerly-incarcerated individuals all have workforce value but are often forgotten or never given a second chance, she said.

Shifting workplace culture norms

While some employers have been increasing incentives in a bid to woo candidates, bonuses and salary increases aren’t a replacement for positive work culture, Brown said.

She uses the story of a young mother fretting about a half-hour gap between the start of her shift and when she could drop her baby off at childcare. In the past, being late to work or bringing a child to the job site would easily result in a write-up or termination, but Brown encourages employers to show some grace.

“You have employees who want to work and are trying to think of what to do, but also don’t feel comfortable addressing the dilemma with leadership,” Brown said. “Many employers think, ‘Why would I be entertaining this problem?’ But it is your problem. We are all facing these challenges. And if you’re concerned about retaining your workforce, we have to think differently about how our culture plays into building the same loyalty you would expect from your employees.”

Brown said there is no quick fix to the region’s workforce challenges but believes in promoting a “One Milwaukee” model.

“No one agency, no one group, can solve the ills of our city,” she said. “It’s going to take us all to do that. For me, it was thinking out of the box and innovating as a new leader. I truly believe I was born to be of service to others. I want to help people become their best selves.”



Milwaukee Bucks DJ-turned-entrepreneur Shawna Nicols finds purpose beyond the booth

💡 Following her "Dare to be" mantra, DJ Shawna Nicols talks NBA bubble and giving back to the community she loves.



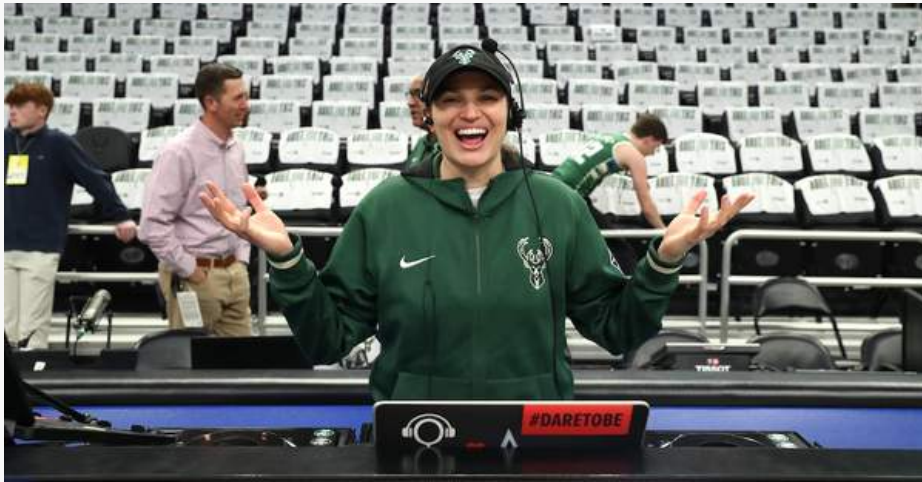
As the Milwaukee Bucks' official DJ and producer, Shawna Nicols — aka DJ Shawna — could rest on her laurels and enjoy the cushy gigs and partnerships that come with thrilling arena-sized crowds.

But that's not her style. Instead, the DJ-turned-emerging-entrepreneur is looking to extend her influence beyond the booth, using her growing platform to spread positivity. It's all part of Nicols' mission to "dare to be."

The mantra is something Nicols' embraced as she has transitioned out of a professional basketball career into live entertainment, and today as she dips her toes into creative entrepreneurship. The phrase is also behind the name of her parent business, Dare to Be Entertainment, under which she not only books DJ performances nationwide, but also runs a clothing line, hosts a podcast, and serves as a motivational speaker.

As an athlete for the better part of her early life, being a positive role model was something the young player took seriously. When she launched a DJ career full-time, her desire to inspire the people around her took on even greater significance, especially as her platform grew alongside the Milwaukee Bucks' rise to the national championship.

"The thing that you get taught as an athlete is that as soon as you put on your jersey, people look at you differently," Nicols told Technical.ly. "People might know me as DJ Shawna, especially working with the Bucks. And it might sound ridiculous to quote Spider-Man's grandpa, but 'with great power comes great responsibility.' All I want to do is my part to make this world a better place."



Nicols grew up in Milwaukee where she became a star player at Pius XI High School. After high school, she was recruited to the University of Wisconsin–Madison to play for the Badgers, but her career there ended early due to repeated concussions. She eventually bounced back, playing for universities in Tennessee and Kentucky, until she landed a spot on a pro team overseas.

Along the way, Nicols listened to music constantly and spent her free time making mixtapes to play for her teammates and friends. But DJing wasn't something that ever crossed her mind.

When Nicols returned to the States, she was unsure of her next step. While out on the town at Walker's Pint one night, Nicols — who abstains from drinking alcohol — said she fueled her self-professed social awkwardness by connecting with the bar's DJ. The rest is history, she said.

"I honestly started hanging out with a local legend DJ Rock Dee [Roderick Schaeffer] and I never looked back," said Nicols, adding that he became a mentor and close friend. "It just continued to snowball." (Schaeffer died by suicide at the age of 40 in 2008.)

After purchasing her own set of ones-and-twos, Nicols navigated an uncharted path into the male-dominated industry. In the beginning, as she hauled her equipment back and forth and spent hours practicing between small gigs, she forced any negativity that came with being the rare woman DJ out of her mind. She focused on breaking her own mold — not someone else's.

She eventually got her big break. In 2016, she invested in hiring a manager and became the first official DJ to play for Marquette University, starting with the women's team. Since the university was hosting the Big East tournament that year, she got to play that, too. And just weeks before the women's Final Four, she cold-called the NCAA and asked if she could DJ. To her surprise, they said yes.

That was the same year the Milwaukee Bucks came calling, first for a handful of games, which eventually led to an annual contract. She's been the official DJ and producer for the Milwaukee Bucks ever since.

“I think that was when my family started looking at me, like this is a job, this is real,” Nicols said.

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For Nicols, DJing became a way of life. During the height of COVID, she was one of just four NBA DJs — and the only woman — sent to live in the “quarantine bubble.” While she admits living at the Disney World resort could feel isolating, it was still surreal to see the likes of LeBron James riding his bike around the grounds and playing two NBA games a day.

But the experience also served as a painful wakeup call: At the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, Milwaukee was experiencing a deep reckoning back home. And playing alongside the Milwaukee Bucks, which protested a game following the police-involved shooting of Jacob Blake, added a weight that brought Nicols to a halt. Nicols remembers watching the coverage unfold on TV and breaking down in tears behind her mask.

“No matter what I was going through or how I was feeling, I wanted to be the best I could possibly be and to stand up with these incredible players and support them in any way possible,” Nicols said. “That’s something I will carry with me for the rest of my entire life.”

As a proud gay woman, Nicols also wanted to use her newfound platform to inspire all people to “show up as themselves.” She followed the Bucks’ championship series by performing at the All-Stars game, opening for Lizzo at Summerfest, and headlining Pridefest. Music is one of the few things that bring people together, she said.

But living through the pandemic also shifted her perspective on life after DJing. Nicols said she is aiming to create something “bigger than herself.” Outside of regular performances, she volunteers for hunger alleviation causes, raises money for people experiencing homelessness, and is slowly easing into music production, motivational speaking, and content creation as she eyes her purpose beyond the booth.

Last year, she also released her first original song, “I Won’t Give Up.”

“I love playing music for people [because] it brings people together on so many levels,” Nicols said. “But hopefully I can share my story and it will inspire you to take that light that you have inside of you and make it bigger. My goal is to make this space feel like all of ours. That’s what keeps me going.”

Poor birth outcomes are a global problem. This doula is tackling it locally through an urban health department

💡 Nicole Miles of the Milwaukee's Birth Outcomes Made Better program is addressing disparities in healthcare and working to reduce infant mortality rates.

In the 21st century, with all of the medical advances and progress made throughout the decades, it's hard to believe babies are still dying at alarming rates. But it's happening across the globe and close to home alike.

A few years ago, Nicole Miles traveled with a group of women to the Dominican Republic to volunteer in a public hospital. She was on the island to provide doula support — comforting and coaching scores of women through the birthing experience, in a region where pain medication often was unavailable unless brought to the hospital by the patients themselves.

Miles was in awe of the strength displayed by the women, many of whom had traveled hours by bus, just to give birth at the facility.



“Some of the women had to come alone and go back [alone] with their baby,” Miles told Technical.ly. “I knew this work was necessary. There was a shift in us being there. I knew then this is what I am supposed to do.”

Miles is a certified birth and postpartum doula, certified lactation counselor and newborn care specialist. Outside of her private doula services, Miles currently serves as the doula program manager with Birth Outcomes Made Better (BOMB), under the Maternal and Child Health Division at the City of Milwaukee Health Department.

While volunteering as a doula in the Dominican Republic may seem like a far cry from Miles' work with birthing persons back home in Milwaukee, the city shares similarities concerning poor birth outcomes as the underdeveloped country — including high infant mortality rates, especially in communities of color.

A focus on birth outcomes

Nationally, there are an average of 5.6 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, according to the latest CDC data. But in Milwaukee's 53206 ZIP code — largely considered the city's most underserved neighborhood — these rates climb even higher.

In 2018, 53206 experienced an average of 23.4 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, a number par-on-par with the Dominican Republic. The island nation had an average of 23.5 infant deaths per 1,000 live births. Miles said while some deaths are inevitable — due to birth defects, sudden infant death syndrome, or maternal pregnancy complications — these are still staggering statistics. But they're hardly a surprise.

"People point out the ZIP code [53206] but this has been an issue for years," Miles explained. "It's not necessarily neglect. Sometimes transportation is an issue, someone may not have childcare. People who may be low income may not have access to jobs."

The rate of poor birth outcomes and infant mortality and the number of people experiencing poverty run in direct parallel, Miles added: "There are structural barriers to care."

Providing access to doulas of color is one strategy used to break down those barriers. In 2019, after the city declared racism a public health issue, Milwaukee County implemented legislation to fund the Birth Outcomes Made Better doula program.

The initiative was launched to improve maternal and infant mortality rates, as well as to provide a more diverse range of mothers' options to receive pregnancy and postpartum support, increase breastfeeding education and promote pathways to positive parenting experiences, socioeconomic stability, and healthy lifestyle behaviors, such as safe sleep practices and mental health.

Why doulas?

BOMB is hoping to serve at least 50 women across 53206 with new grant funding received from the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Service, though its team of six doulas continues to serve eligible women and families across the region.

Doulas guide birthing people through the prenatal process and beyond, though Miles said many people remain confused or unaware of a doula's role in the greater community. Definitely, a doula is a trained professional who provides nonclinical emotional, physical, and informational support for birthing people before, during, and after labor and birth. But to Miles, it's so much more.

She said the profession harkens back to a time when pregnant women gave birth surrounded by their mothers, grandmothers, and sisters. In earlier times, women were expected to “lie-in” after giving birth and bond with the baby. Today, many women are expected to snap back and often return to work, sometimes mere weeks after having their babies.

Now that most women have their babies at hospitals, the lines of communication surrounding pregnancy and childbirth have changed, Miles said. Her mission? To advocate on behalf of birthing people, help them reestablish autonomy around their bodies and birthing experience, and set them up for postpartum success.

“We help them ask questions and take onus for their care and body,” Miles explained. “People are still siloed. They may not always be aware of the resources available to them. We are trying to bring back that communal care.”

Maternal health at risk

Miles is passionate about women taking control of their prenatal and postpartum health, especially in communities of color. She said a long history of systemic abuses in healthcare systems has led many Black and brown women into silence around their birthing journeys. For example, many women who receive public assistance may feel like they don’t have a right to speak up, and wind up settling for sub-par care — or enduring a negative experience in the least. They’re issues celebrities Serena Williams and Allyson Felix have brought attention to in recent years.

Such experiences have resulted in women receiving early inductions, unwanted C-sections, episiotomies, formula feeding their babies when they wanted to breastfeed, or maternal patients ignoring their inner intuition when something is wrong, putting mothers’ overall health at risk.

Miles wants to change all of that.

“There’s a lack of information and a lack of transparency,” she said. “You go to a hospital and your doctor is an authority figure. Some people don’t know they can ask questions.”

Miles has worked as a doula for more than 10 years. In her current role with BOMB, she hopes to connect and collaborate with other community organizations and improve the availability of personalized, integrative care for women across Milwaukee.

“I think that doulas are a piece of the puzzle, but we are not going to be the answer to everything,” she added. “It’s a systemic issue, within the structure of healthcare. Having a doula is putting another eye on the experience. Women should get the highest level of care, and wraparound services. We should want better for ourselves and our families.”

We need ‘bold leaders and a different mindset’ to tell a new story

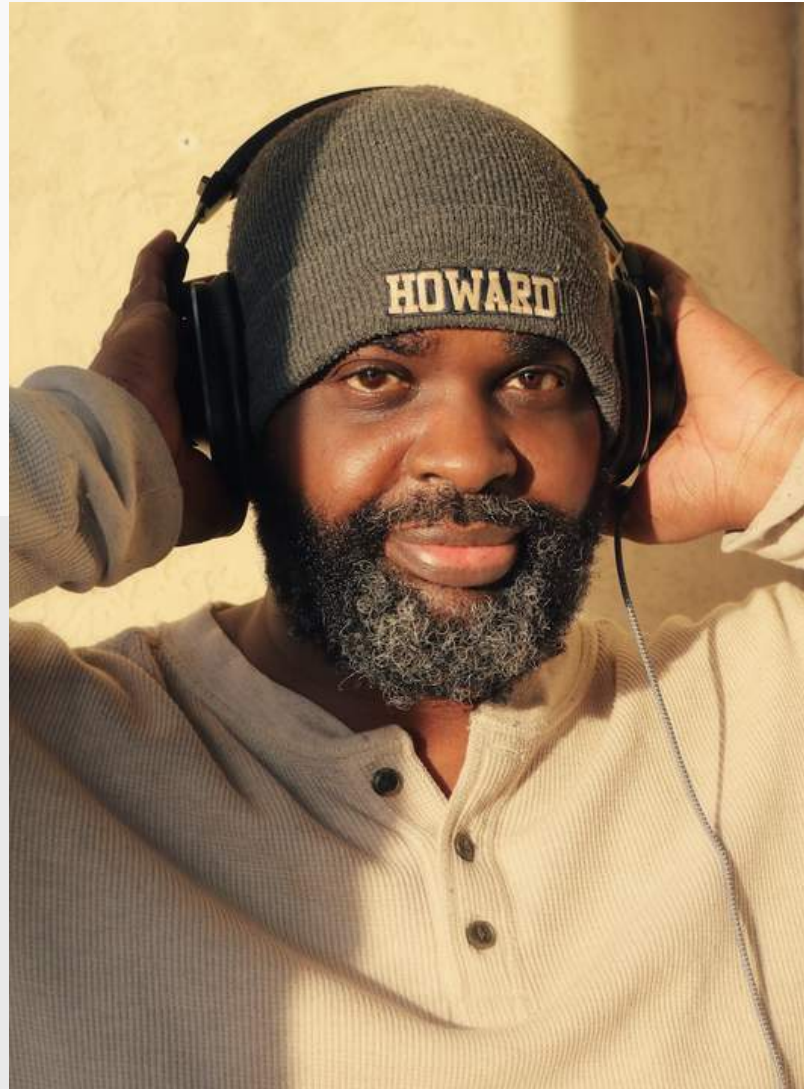


88Nine Radio Milwaukee's program director Tarik Moody says we need to tell and amplify new stories to change our narrative.

Representation matters, in tech and media alike. Milwaukee's Tarik Moody is working on diversity in both.

Long before Amazon and Facebook became household names, Moody was pondering the possibilities of tech. Growing up in Atlanta in the '80s, he says he dabbled with HTML for fun and attended a computer programming camp when many of his peers were only just discovering the Oregon Trail. That early exploration laid the groundwork for future careers in architecture and radio.

“I've always had love” for technology, Moody told Technical.ly. “Because of that, it gave me opportunities I maybe wouldn't have had. It became part of my core.”



Somewhere along his journey, Moody realized he wanted to share that passion with others. While building his career as an architect in Minneapolis, he began working as a radio DJ on the side. When 88Nine Radio Milwaukee caught wind of his talent, they presented him with an opportunity to combine his passion for technology, radio and community stories as the station's first digital director and musical host.

That was 15 years ago. Today, Moody serves as program director and content producer for the alternative radio beacon, which aims to be a “catalyst for creating a better, more inclusive and engaged Milwaukee.” Among the many hats he wears there, Moody also co-hosts Rhythm Lab Radio; This Bites, one of Milwaukee's longest-running podcasts; and Diverse Disruptors, which discusses on the underrepresentation of people of color and women in tech, startup, innovation and entrepreneurial spaces.

“It wasn't just that ‘We're a radio station,’” Moody said of his tenure at the station. “It was about impact. It was about reaching an audience that looked like me.”

Moody will be reaching an even bigger audience when he launches a brand new, still unnamed urban alternative channel this summer. The channel will offer “an eclectic radio experience, celebrating the full spectrum of Black music and the power of public radio,” according to the fall announcement. The new channel is slated to launch on Juneteenth, the holiday commemorating the emancipation of enslaved people.

Moody said the channel was the perfect opportunity to step outside of his comfort zone to lead and build something new — but it's also a call to action for the Milwaukee region to do the same. A longtime advocate for the area's emerging tech scene, Moody said it's high time for Milwaukee to move beyond the status quo.

In his eyes, Milwaukeeans are too timid to invest in big ideas, and too conservative when it comes to investing capital. If an entrepreneur had presented an idea like Uber or Clubhouse, for example, he isn't confident the pitch would fly here.

Moody believes bringing in fresh faces and ideas will help Cream City not only compete with emerging startup cities with a growing concentration of venture capital, such as Baltimore, Atlanta or Minneapolis, but also across the global economy. But that work would require loosening the reins on legacy industries like manufacturing and embracing risk. (“The first word in ‘venture capital’ is ‘venture’ after all,” he said.)

“We're losing talent to other cities — we gotta face that,” Moody added. “Things are really moving fast and we're sitting on the sidelines. There's a lot that's missing. We need bold leaders who are not ‘legacy leaders’ and a different mindset.”

These Latinx software engineers didn't see themselves represented in tech. So they built something new

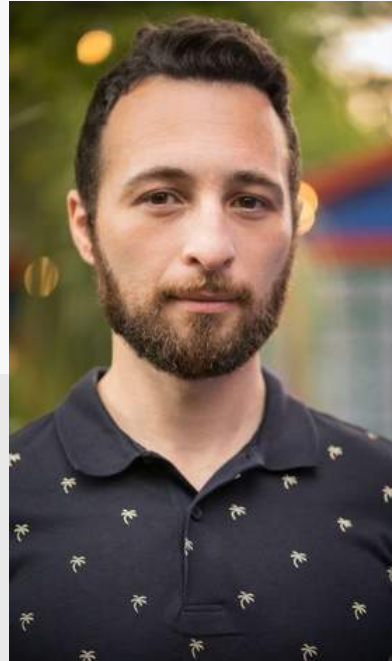


With Latinos in Tech, Carlos Vasquez and Ben Juarez want to bring more visibility to professionals like them in tech communities, starting with Milwaukee.

Like many young Latinos living in Milwaukee, Carlos Vasquez's plan for life after high school was already laid out. Following graduation, he would put up his diploma and follow his family's footsteps into manufacturing. No questions asked.

"I graduated on a Friday, and by Monday I was working at a factory," Vasquez told Technical.ly. "I had my life set up. Just like my cousins, uncles, everyone from a Latino family, that's how it's set up."

Vasquez spent more than two years working as a polisher at the countertop factory, passing the time at work on YouTube. While his coworkers listened to music, he was streaming technology podcasts. He became a huge fan of engineer-turned-billionaire entrepreneur Mark Cuban, who piqued his early interest in coding.



Vasquez quit his job soon after. But it wasn't easy to find resources in Milwaukee to fuel his curiosity and turn it into a full-time career. Plus, he said, no one looked like him.

Latinx professionals make up a tiny share of the workforce in the tech sector. A federal Diversity in High Tech Report found Latinx employees hold roughly 8% of jobs in high tech jobs — such as roles in computer science or engineering — a far cry from the 68.5% of white workers in similar fields. There are half as many Black and Latinx pros in tech as there are in the rest of the private sector, overall.

For Vasquez, his dreams of working in tech were feeling more and more futile.

“There were some community resources, but they wouldn’t grant me success,” he said. “It was more like, ‘Here’s a membership and now [go] learn programming.’ And that’s it. They didn’t really help me out or tell me how to get started.”

Eventually, Vasquez landed an internship at i.c. stars Milwaukee, which provides leadership training and a technology-based curriculum to underrepresented young adults to jumpstart their tech careers. That’s where he met his mentor, Ben Juarez, who was working as a technology training manager at the time.

It wasn’t long before the two Latino tech enthusiasts bonded over their unconventional paths into the industry — and griped about the lack of representation in the local scene.

While Juarez transitioned into tech following a successful career in public policy, he stumbled into the same roadblocks as Vasquez when he chose to channel his love of video games into learning code at the age of 30.

“Nobody ever told me that I could do this,” Juarez said of building his technology career. “Kids in our neighborhoods are not given the opportunity or even told they have the opportunity. I want to be there for people so they can get started on that journey.”

Juarez and Vasquez consider themselves among the lucky ones. Today, Juarez works as chief technology officer at Like | Minded, and is a cofounder of Cream City Coders, providing computer science training to central city youth. Vasquez works as a full-stack engineer at Northwestern Mutual. He is also the founder of Habla Code, where he hopes to break down technology barriers by translating English technology resources, such as coding tutorials, for Spanish speakers.

Fostering the next generation of Latinx tech professionals is just one of the reasons why Juarez and Vasquez joined forces to launch Latinos in Tech in 2019. The organization aims to “get Latinos in the field together to support and develop one another” through resource-sharing, special events and professional development workshops. The goal: to help Latinos meet the projected 13% growth of technology occupations by 2030.

But it’s also about providing visibility to Latinos pursuing career tech careers, and for those who never considered tech a viable possibility.

“Everything that LIT has implemented is [based] on experiences that Ben and I’ve encountered in the community,” Vasquez said.

Technical.ly sat down with the cofounders of Latinos in Tech to learn more about the inspiration behind the organization, and how Milwaukee can get better at supporting Latinx tech founders and technologists to improve representation.

If Milwaukee wants a more equitable economy. Innovation must play a role.



Milwaukee's Black population is far poorer than the rest of the city. Economic growth powered by new skills can be an equalizer.



What does the headline for Milwaukee look like in 10 years?

That was debated at a roundtable event hosted by Technical.ly as part of this series. The result was an enthusiastic and wide-ranging conversation examining the city's journey to becoming a vibrant innovation hub — where economic growth is dynamic and equitable.

But what does equity actually look like for a post-industrial, regional city's economic strategy? And when will we make quantifiable gains?

In Milwaukee, Black households earn half as much as their white counterparts, and hold less than 15% of the wealth, according to a landmark analysis from The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

Between 1949 to 2016, the analysis found that “no progress [had] been made in closing the black-white income gap.”

An equitable Milwaukee means exposure and access alike

In October 2022, Technical.ly gathered two-dozen business and civic leaders at Northwestern Mutual's Cream City Labs. The event was part of Milwaukee Tech Week, a weeklong celebration of tech led by Milwaukee Tech Hub Coalition designed to celebrate innovation in Southeast Wisconsin. The summit was unusual for the week, bringing startup founders, students, activists business leaders and nonprofit pros together in one room. Economic growth to benefit all was a theme.

Ahead of a roundtable discussion with all summit attendees, several past subjects of this series were invited onstage. That included Nikki Purvis, president and CEO of the African American Chamber of Wisconsin; Quentin Prince, executive director of Milwaukee Youth Sports Alliance; Teresa Esser, managing director at ESG Financial Inc.; and Tarsha Wiggins, founder and CEO at Speak Wellness Behavioral Health Consulting; as well as Shakkiah Curtis, manager of member engagement at the Milwaukee Tech Hub.

The panel brought to life several emerging themes from this series.

Kicking off the talk, panelists were asked to define what an equitable future looks like in Milwaukee. The wealth creation made possible by technology, entrepreneurship and innovation was seen an opportunity — and risk. The first step toward strengthening Milwaukee’s innovation economy is to get more diverse voices to the table, Purvis said.



“If there is equitable, representation of diverse backgrounds in all of these things, then we don’t have to have these conversations anymore,” she said. “That takes energy, that takes a willingness to give up power when you’re in a higher position, and understanding that when there is diversity and equity that we will have the outcome that we want to see.”

Exposure, mentorship and partnerships are also key, Curtis added. As a young woman growing up in the central city, Curtis credits programs such as the Chapter 220 initiative for showing her opportunities outside of her neighborhood’s limited purview. Still, extending those opportunities across the city are necessary, she added.



Esser pointed out that social determinants, such as homeownership, need to be addressed in tandem with the region's business initiatives. Milwaukee's Black homeownership rate hovers at 26%, for example, while White homeowners in the city top 75%, she said. The housing gap and high rental rates among Milwaukee's marginalized groups is a result of structural racism, she added.

"A person who does not own their own home cannot benefit from inflation, they can't benefit from the [equity] structure," Esser said. "Equity means making the structure fair for everybody."

We don't know what it looks like, but we have to be willing and intentional in our path toward [equity]," Prince said. Later, he sought to clarify his thoughts on what equity could look like. After the event, he started a conversation in a LinkedIn post: "In my head, I wanted to say 'I don't know – I've never seen it.' We can all imagine what it would look like, where we need the intentional focus to be, is in the process. A mentor once told me 'in your mind, your business idea is perfect, that's where you need to live.' Let's live out equity. I want to walk out my front door and point it out in every space."



To Wiggins, the city's businesses and organizations must reach beyond opportunity exposure.

"Now that we know what opportunities are out there, can we access it?" she asked. "Those two things [exposure and access] must be present if we're going to talk about how to make things more equitable."

Milwaukee needs job creation – and a rebranding

Creating equal and fair access to opportunity was a central theme as summit attendees brainstormed solutions to the following questions during a breakout session:

- What is the best way for the Milwaukee business community to come together to solve pressing social issues?
- What steps are needed to attract new talent and build a more diverse pipeline in the city?
- How can we get better at telling our own story?



Some ideas that emerged: Centralizing resources for emerging startups, adapting to new educational models focused on tech outside of traditional higher education and extending opportunities to business capital — including accelerating startup investments in early-stage ventures — could help eliminate persistent gaps in the city’s entrepreneurial landscape.

Building a viable technology ecosystem could also be the key to breaking down many of the city’s barriers. Besides contributing to social innovation initiatives, the rise of good-paying remote tech jobs removes hurdles such as transportation, potentially opening up the opportunity for a bigger, diverse group of people to take advantage.

Many attendees also pointed to the need to rebrand Milwaukee from its longstanding reputation as the home of the beer, cheese and the Green Bay Packers — or being another loop in the Rust Belt. It’s great that we have so many breweries, one attendee noted, but our city’s tourism marketing misses the mark when it comes to highlighting the diverse number of businesses, cultural amenities, and people who make Milwaukee an attractive and unique destination.

Despite the city’s challenges, panelists and attendees alike said they were energized by the work being done to change the narrative of Milwaukee — and felt inspired to play a role in embracing innovation across the region.

“It’s the innate hustle of entrepreneurs and the path to success that I’ve been able to witness over so many years,” Purvis said. “That’s what keeps me motivated. Knowing that from those entrepreneurs comes job creation, comes a boost to our economy ... it’s just really inspiring.”

So, what does the headline look like for Milwaukee in 10 years? If any of the attendees at the This Week in Milwaukee Rising Summit have a say, it won’t look like the one running today.



This Week in Milwaukee

Rising: the full series

- Poor birth outcomes are a global problem. This doula is tackling it locally through an urban health department
- Why does representation matter for community spaces? 'Culture is the foundation for everything'
- The lesson that made this longtime business exec pivot to nonprofit education
- Why this extroverted engineer launched a coworking space for BIPOC entrepreneurs
- 'Where you put your money matters': Angel investor Teresa Esser explores new ways to drive social impact home
- Authenticity, not assimilation: How to make conversations about race 'a learning journey for everybody'
- A 'blueprint' to break down barriers to economic opportunity via the blockchain
- A lifetime in the arts led this entrepreneur to help independent artists find 'opportunities beyond the stage'
- 'Innovation is really about people': John Knapp's collaborative approach to Marquette's new innovation project
- Guess which Midwest city is the water technology capital of the US
- Why incubators mean community for early-stage founders
- Can entrepreneurship reduce community violence?
- Facing a pandemic shutdown, this restaurateur pivoted to fighting food insecurity
- What does it take to thrive in Milwaukee — and for Milwaukee to thrive as an innovation hub?
- Jamar Jones shared stages with big-name rappers. A musical crisis led him to entrepreneurship
- This founder uses 'trap therapy' to show the importance of culturally relevant mental health care
- 'Every startup founder I ever talked to has meaningfully struggled with selling the company — I didn't'
- Could an app bring community-based mental health services with the ease of a swipe?
- A popsicle shop grows up
- Parks are 'an indicator of our collective health.' Where does equity fit?
- Amid a loneliness epidemic, remote workers are craving connection. Could an app help?
- 'I didn't want to give up on this city': Youth sports keep this pro fighting for Milwaukee
- Milwaukee Bucks DJ-turned-entrepreneur Shawna Nicols finds purpose beyond the booth
- What can VR can be used for? Gaming, of course — but also, STEM education and storytelling
- Jobs training program Street Keepers is building community from the ground up
- 'Homeownership in the Black community is a mental health issue'
- 'You have to build culture': MKEsports Alliance's founder talks esports' potential
- Supporting Black businesses 'is long overdue.' This Milwaukeean is tackling the disconnect in Wisconsin
- Technical.ly is participating in Milwaukee Tech Week. Here's why
- If Milwaukee wants to become the next big tech hub, this is what needs to change
- The cost of domestic violence
- This longtime civic leader knows: Violence prevention is a matter of public health
- One way to shrink the national labor gap? Reimagine the 'ideal' job applicant

How this Milwaukee entrepreneurship hub created opportunity out of the ashes

In a building that formerly housed a bank set ablaze in civil unrest, the Sherman Phoenix is a center of Black-owned businesses. Its transformation offers lessons at the intersection of economic development and community.



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Why Milky Way Tech Hub's Nadiyah Johnson is creating new tables for Milwaukee's BIPOC entrepreneurs

The Milwaukee hub's concierge startup services and accelerator have served as a launching pad for dozens of startups and awarded more than \$100,000 in funding, with a focus on racial equity. "I didn't want to see a 'Tale of Two Cities,'" Johnson told Technical.ly.

The Way Out is working to break the cycle of incarceration through career opportunities

Founded by Ruben Gaona and Eli Rivera, the Milwaukee startup offers an anti-bias job platform and services aimed at reducing barriers to hiring for the formerly justice-involved.



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Milwaukee's tech scene is still young. Its growth will depend on collaboration and 'getting people to buy into a vision'

Here's Milwaukee Tech Hub Coalition CEO Kathy Henrich's blueprint for getting the region out from under the shadows of bigger emerging markets.

Why talking about tough topics at work matters

Technical.ly asked DEI pro Beth Ridley, whose home state of Wisconsin has been dealing with the fallout from both the Rittenhouse verdict and tragedy at a public holiday event, how companies should respond when tragedy strikes.



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How to fix a fragmented startup community? Here's what a Rust Belt city's stalwart organizer says

Entrepreneur Matt Cordio knows Milwaukee tech has momentum. But it needs more people fighting "a long-held resistance to new ideas" and "championing the growth of the ecosystem" to grow to its potential.

A startup accelerator and intuition brought this Forbes 30 Under 30 honoree from the Northeast to Milwaukee

Fiveable COO Tân Ho's early life and career were stuck in "survival mode." A chance encounter on Reddit led him to cofounding a nationally recognized venture — but he's still bullish on the Rust Belt city's startup community.



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Social entrepreneurs need more resources, especially founders of color. Cue: Milwaukee's Mfoniso Ekong

As the director of social impact at gBETA, an offshoot of national accelerator gener8tor, Ekong is demystifying the venture capital process for early-stage companies looking to make change.

Cream City Conservation founder August Ball is uprooting bias in the green sector

The Milwaukee entrepreneur is tackling environmental organizations' diversity gap by introducing young people of color to conservation work.



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Storytelling can spark social change from behind a mic. Just ask Ex Fabula's Megan McGee

The Milwaukee arts nonprofit sparks social change by asking whose stories aren't being told, and then convening a diverse community around them. "Stories allow us to see each other," its executive director says.

Accessibility means opportunity. This founder is bringing both to Milwaukee's public spaces

The Ability Center founder and CEO Damian Buchman applies his experience as a childhood cancer survivor to the mission of adapting beaches, parks and other spaces for more people: "The things you desire don't just change because you have a disability."



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This programmer and former refugee combined his love of beats and tech into an African music streaming startup

Leonard Novati has bootstrapped AfroCharts while working full time as a programmer analyst in Milwaukee. Despite a lifetime of barriers, he says: "I still think I can make it here."

‘We need to think about diversity differently’: Morgan Phelps on talent recruiting

After getting sidelined amid a career shift, the PR pro started digging into why Black representation stagnates in the higher ranks of the white collar workforce. Then, she became an entrepreneur to tackle the challenge.



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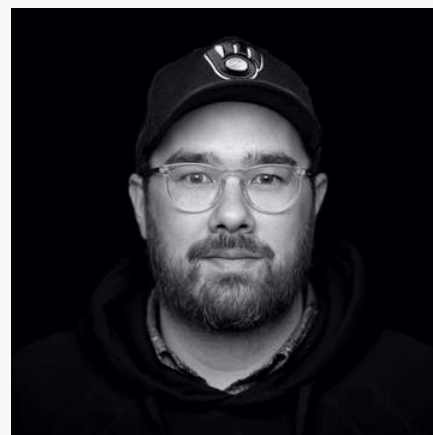
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This journalist-turned-entrepreneur is bringing ‘positive’ news to Milwaukee and beyond

Nyasha Stone launched Carvd N Stone because she knows representation in the media matters: "Journalism opened up what I can give to the world."

How this ‘shapeshifter’ made a career of uniting a diverse and divided city

Adam Carr combines media, activism and storytelling to lead Milwaukeeans to common ground: "We lack imagination for what others can be."



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Why does representation matter for community spaces? 'Culture is the foundation for everything'

Milwaukee Public Museum's new diversity and inclusion director sat down with Technical.ly to explain his plans for building a community bridge in the Midwest city. Watch the conversation here.

The lesson that made this longtime business exec pivot to nonprofit education

In 2018, Marikris Coryell stepped into her position as president of St. Joan Antida, a small high school in the heart of Milwaukee. She delves into the challenges of urban education and the realities of the achievement gap.



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Why this extroverted engineer launched a coworking space for BIPOC entrepreneurs

"We've been left out of the conversation": Amid the rise of remote work and need for more diversity in coworking, Ambition Center MKE CEO Marcell Jackson aims to connect underserved professionals with the new space on Milwaukee's North Side.

‘Where you put your money matters’: Angel investor Teresa Esser explores new ways to drive social impact home

Amid an explosion of consumer interest in ESG funds, the VC is focusing her investing on reducing inequities in Milwaukee, starting with home ownership.



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Authenticity, not assimilation: How to make conversations about race ‘a learning journey for everybody’

FUEL Milwaukee’s Corry Joe Biddle on the power of community dialogue and "showing up as you are" in an era of reckoning.

A lifetime in the arts led this entrepreneur to help independent artists find ‘opportunities beyond the stage’

With an eye toward equity and awareness of the community value they bring, "we can all contribute to making sure more creatives are visible on the scene," Kennita Hickman says. Here's how she's doing it in Milwaukee.



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Guess which Midwest city is the water technology capital of the US

Dean Amhaus leads The Water Council in Milwaukee. Here's why he thinks this tech sector is so exciting — and urgently needed.

Why incubators mean community for early-stage founders

"We have to build more opportunities": The Commons and FOR-M Program Director Joe Poeschl on creating an open door to Milwaukee's tech ecosystem.



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Can entrepreneurship reduce community violence?

LaShawnda Wilkins highlights the power of partnerships and positivity with the launch of SpeakLife Studios, her new "opportunity space" offering room for business development resources, coworking and events in Milwaukee.

Jamar Jones shared stages with big-name rappers. A musical crisis led him to entrepreneurship

Following numerous career pivots — including a "miserable" stint in corporate life — the Wisconsin-based founder of Foureva Media infuses positive energy to connect people and unlock businesses' full potential.



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'Every startup founder I ever talked to has meaningfully struggled with selling the company — I didn't'

In this Q&A, Frontdesk CEO Kyle Weatherly recounts his journey from nonprofit worker to entrepreneur who may just be Milwaukee's biggest startup success.

Could an app bring community-based mental health services with the ease of a swipe?

HouseCall Wisconsin founder and CEO Montréal Cain discusses MERA, the startup's crisis intervention app giving families peace of mind amid mental health challenges.



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A popsicle shop grows up

Beloved frozen fruit pops startup Pete's Pops is a positive force in Milwaukee. As it grew over the past nine years, founder Pete Cooney had to transition from goofy hustler to serious — yet still fun-loving — entrepreneur.

Parks are 'an indicator of our collective health.' Where does equity fit?

Milwaukee Parks Foundation ED Rebecca Stoner is building up the parks system by putting people first. Her work is a microcosm of national challenges.



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Amid a loneliness epidemic, remote workers are craving connection. Could an app help?

"There's a disconnection of culture": Like|Minded CEO Jeremy Fojut aims to combat loneliness in the workplace in the face of a hybrid future.

'I didn't want to give up on this city': Youth sports keep this pro fighting for Milwaukee

Inspired by local racial justice movements from community members and basketball teams alike, nonprofit advocate and entrepreneur Quentin Prince aims to level the playing field for his hometown's young people.



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<https://bit.ly/3v4NzYT>

What can VR be used for? Gaming, of course – but also, STEM education and storytelling

As Milwaukee-based Foresight Studios' founders look to bring their ElectroSwing virtual reality game to the Oculus Quest Store, they're also looking to the future of the metaverse – which includes the next generation of its builders.

Jobs training program Street Keepers is building community from the ground up

Milwaukee's Havenwoods State Forest has become a breath of fresh air to the diverse neighborhood – and a bright spot of opportunity for residents looking for a fresh start.



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‘Homeownership in the Black community is a mental health issue’

Acts Housing narrows Milwaukee’s homeownership gaps with a focus on community empowerment and wealth building. VP of Programs Deatra Kemp explains why the nonprofit’s work is necessary.

‘You have to build culture’: MKEsports Alliance’s founder talks esports’ potential

With MKEsports Alliance, founder Brandon Tschacher envisions a future in which a more unified esports scene gaming can bring millions of dollars and equitable STEM opportunities to Milwaukee.



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Supporting Black businesses ‘is long overdue.’ This Milwaukeean is tackling the disconnect in Wisconsin

“Whatever capacity anyone can support Black businesses, know that people are out here hustling”: Here’s the African American Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin’s new president and CEO, Nikki Purvis, on why the resources her org brings are needed.

The cost of domestic violence

Sojourner Family Peace Center spotlights the economic impact of domestic violence in Milwaukee amid a global rise in incidents. Here's how resources can lead survivors to a new path of opportunity.



<https://bit.ly/3jIYllq>



<https://bit.ly/3WhJvQQ>

This longtime civic leader knows: Violence prevention is a matter of public health

Milwaukee's Reggie Moore says more investment is needed to stem the tide in violence: "The timing and the urgency is front and center," even if the results aren't immediate.