

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference



CEC Plenary and Breakout Session Biographies

Lyndsey Baxter - As the Executive Director of the Downtown Excelsior Partnership, Inc. and the Downtown Excelsior Springs Commercial Community Improvement District, Lyndsey M. Baxter has been a driving force in the revitalization of Downtown Excelsior Springs for over a decade. A lifelong resident with a passion for community development, she has spearheaded transformative projects, attracting private investment, increasing consumer spending, and fostering a thriving downtown economy. Under her leadership, Downtown Excelsior Springs has seen significant growth through strategic placemaking, innovative marketing initiatives, and strong partnerships with local businesses, city officials, and community stakeholders.

She plays an instrumental role in securing funding, developing improvements, and launching signature events that boost tourism and economic vitality. Lyndsey's commitment to civic engagement extends beyond DEP – she currently serves on the City of Excelsior Springs Capital Improvement Authority and Transportation Trust Commission, and the Clay County Tourism Board. She has previously served on the City of Excelsior Springs Historic Preservation Commission and remains an advocate for historic preservation and sustainable growth. Her leadership focuses on fostering community partnerships, driving economic impact through strategic initiatives, and positioning Downtown Excelsior Springs as a thriving destination. Through her work, she continues to strengthen the local business ecosystem, enhances visitor experience, and creates opportunities for growth and development.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/downtownesmo>
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/downtown_esmo/
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lyndsey-baxter-87244684/>
Website: <https://visitexcelsior.com/>

Susan Blaser – Susan is the owner of Casa Di Vite International Wine Café, a charming establishment nestled in the heart of historic downtown Excelsior Springs, Missouri. With a passion for revitalizing historic spaces, Susan transformed a former funeral home into a vibrant venue that offers a blend of international wines, Mediterranean-inspired cuisine, and an intimate setting for events. Her dedication to preserving the building's historic integrity while introducing modern elegance has made Casa Di Vite a beloved destination for both locals and visitors. Susan's commitment to community and hospitality is evident in every detail of the café, from its curated wine selection to its welcoming ambiance.

Website: <https://www.casadivite.com/>

Sunitha Bosecker - Sunitha Bosecker is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) and consultant who transforms workplace tension into momentum through expertly guided team conversations. Sunitha leads customized workshops and team facilitation sessions that move groups from avoidance to alignment. Her process helps leaders turn workplace conflict into a catalyst for deeper connection, stronger collaboration, and improved performance. As a therapist, she helps clients navigate – tough conversations with courage, curiosity, and a better understanding of themselves.

Sunitha values volunteering and community engagement and has served on several boards and nonprofit organizations. She also writes articles focused on community and new experiences in local magazines.

Outside of work, Sunitha enjoys traveling, listening to live music, reading nonfiction books, practicing yoga, savoring delicious meals, and exploring diverse people and cultures.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sunithabosecker/>
Instagram: @sunithalea



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Leigh Ann Brown - Leigh Ann is an experienced economic development professional with a passion for helping other leaders to develop and implement effective strategies to support local microbusiness development. She has served as a Main Street Director, Economic Development Director and Chamber Director, and so has lived experience with the challenges and varying demands these roles face day-to-day. She joined SmartStart to help others to meet their economic development goals with easy, turn-key solutions so it doesn't fall to the bottom of the task list.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/leigh-ann-brown-81552226/>
Website: <https://smartstartcommunity.com>



David Burton - has been a community development specialist with MU Extension for 23 years. He is nationally known for his speaking and research in the area of neighboring. He is the creator of Missouri Good Neighbor Week and the Engaged Neighbor program. Learn now these and other tools can help improve neighborhood and citizen engagement in your community.

David Burton and Laura Mize will co-present **Building Better Neighborhoods, Building Better Business** during the pre-conference programming on Wednesday, October 1, beginning at 9:30 a.m. at The Elms Hotel and Spa. David and Laura's program is brought to you courtesy of the City of Excelsior Springs.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/david-burton-5041728/>
Website: <https://extension.missouri.edu/programs/engaged-neighbor-program>



Janine Castillo - Janine is a busy, on-the-go mom who juggles chasing kids and pigs daily. Beyond her work with students, her expertise spans grant writing, nonprofit development, and direct service social work, including counseling. She thrives on connecting passion with projects, often starting with a big-picture vision, with the details falling into place over time.

LinkedIn: <https://linkedin.com/in/janine-castillo-ms-lpc-59a6b84>
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61552350135180>



Becca Castro, Ed.D. - Dr. Castro is the director of KCSOURCELINK and MOSOURCELINK. Her work focuses on building an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, fostering sustainable growth, and connecting founders to key resources at every stage of their journey. She previously managed the LaunchKC Grants Program at the Economic Development Corporation of Kansas City.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/becca-castro/>
Website: <https://www.kcsourcelink.com/>



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Taylor Clark, M.Ed. - Taylor Clark works for MU Extension as a Community Development Specialist 24. She has experience in both public education and the non-profit sector, where she worked with community leaders to provide programs to disadvantaged communities. As the Community Development Specialist, she serves the counties of Scott, Stoddard, Dunklin, Mississippi, Pemiscot, and New Madrid. She is also on several statewide teams focused on empowering communities.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/taylorclark>



Courtney Cole - Courtney Cole is the Co-Founder of the Excelsior Citizen, a digital news service dedicated to keeping the Excelsior Springs community informed and engaged. She launched the Citizen in 2015 while serving as Chamber Director, starting with a Facebook community group that quickly became the go-to source for local news and discussion. Today, the Excelsior Citizen continues to be a trusted platform for hyperlocal reporting, community conversations, and business support.

A 5th-generation Excelsiorite, Courtney's passion for her hometown runs deep. Journalism is in her blood. Her grandfather, Joe Morgan, owned and operated The Excelsior Springs Standard for more than thirty years, while her parents, Kevin and Sonya Morgan, worked in the industry before founding Morgansites, the family's web design business.

In addition to her work with the Excelsior Citizen, Courtney serves as Business Development Manager for Morgansites, helping small businesses and organizations strengthen their online presence through strategic website design and digital solutions.

Courtney holds an associate's degree from Cottey College and a bachelor's degree in Theatre Education with a minor in Journalism from the University of Saint Mary in Leavenworth, KS. Her diverse career spans education, state politics, nonprofit leadership, and community development, including roles as Chamber Director, Director of the Excelsior Springs Educational Foundation, and Business Community Liaison for Excelsior Springs Job Corps. Bringing together her skills as an educator, communicator, and organizer, Courtney is dedicated to empowering the citizens of Excelsior Springs with reliable news, digital solutions, and community-driven initiatives to foster a more informed and connected hometown.

LinkedIn - <https://www.linkedin.com/in/courtneysummercole/>
Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/excelsiorcitizen>
Instagram - <https://www.instagram.com/excelsiorcitizen/>
Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=morgansites.com>

Jason Cole - Jason is a seasoned operations leader with extensive experience in strategic planning, business operations, and turnaround management. With a strong track record of driving profitability and operational efficiency, Jason has managed multi-million-dollar budgets and led diverse teams across industries including government procurement, manufacturing, and construction manpower. His expertise spans performance management, process improvement, and leadership development. Jason holds a master's in business education from Emporia State University and certifications in Change Management and LEAN Six Sigma.

Website: <https://sbdc.umkc.edu/consulting-services/>



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Elias Corpas - Elias Corpas is a Regional Director with Crump Life Insurance and has over 20 years of building teams, developing leaders, building strong community relationships and creating a quality client experience.

Elias is very involved in his local community. He serves on various Boards, has been named volunteer of the year along with STL Top 100 people to know to succeed in business among other recognitions. He is passionate about development and strives to help teams and individuals hit their full potential while leveraging goal setting and priority planning as the foundation to great execution.

Elias is originally from CO and moved to STL 9 years ago with his wife, two daughters, dog and cat.....He enjoys anything outside and GREAT bourbon!

LinkedIn Elias: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/eliascorpas/>

Luke Dietterle - Luke analyzes regional economic development issues, food systems, and conducts applied industry and economic impact studies. Prior to MU Extension, he worked in state and regional government for five years — doing legislative and budgetary analysis, advancing infrastructure and community development projects, and managing a revolving loan fund for small businesses. He holds degrees in public policy and English, and a certification in Geographic Info. Science and Cartography. He is also a certified Strategic Doing™ practitioner.

<https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/muexceed/>
<https://www.facebook.com/muexceed/>

Deana Dothage - Deana is the Extension and Engagement Specialist and Field Specialist in Community Development for MU Extension in St. Charles County.

July 1, 2025, is Deana's three-year anniversary with MU Extension. She formerly served MU School of Medicine, ThinkFirst Missouri January 2017 through June 2022.

Deana connects with people from all walks of life making it easy to communicate and relate both on a professional and personal level. She brings experience in health education, insurance, law enforcement and volunteer management. Deana serves on the planning team of the Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities conference. She delivers sessions in multiple Community Development programs, including the Engaged Neighbor program. She has a B.S. in Administration of Justice – Policing Option from University of Missouri St.

Louis and a master's degree in public Affairs from University of Missouri Columbia with a Graduate Certificate in Nonprofit Management.

She is dedicated to Extension's goal to improve the quality of life by delivering the educational resources of the University of Missouri.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MUExtStCharlesCo>
Website: <https://extension.missouri.edu/counties/st-charles>



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Marci Goodwin - Marci is an entrepreneur with over 14 years' experience growing successful businesses through digital marketing, content creation, influencer marketing, and small business consulting. In 2022, this culminated in the creation of SmartStart, a train-the-trainer toolkit of microbusiness development curriculum to accompany a business journey platform to help rural leaders support and develop a pipeline of sustainable microbusinesses for thriving main streets and town squares.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/marcigoodwin/>
Website: <https://smartstartcommunity.com>

Natasha Harris - Natasha is a wife, mother of four, entrepreneur, trainer, author, and speaker dedicated to helping business owners transform challenges into growth opportunities. With expertise in financial management, systems creation, and personal resilience, she empowers entrepreneurs to turn their struggles into triumphs.

After navigating her own journey of burnout, financial setbacks, and entrepreneurial obstacles, Natasha developed a powerful framework for building sustainable success. She guides entrepreneurs to identify their purpose, reignite their passion, and implement systems for long term growth. As the founder of Victory Finances LLC, she focuses on equipping small business owners, especially women and underrepresented communities, with financial tools to break barriers and make a meaningful impact.

Currently pursuing a Doctorate in Business Administration focusing on Business Intelligence, Natasha blends real-world experience with the latest research to provide actionable insights for navigating the ever-evolving business landscape.

Her academic studies equip her with cutting-edge strategies to help entrepreneurs thrive. A sought-after speaker, Natasha has been featured in various speaking engagements around the world and is known for connecting with audiences through relatable stories, humor, and practical advice. Her goal is to inspire entrepreneurs to shift their mindsets and overcome obstacles, leading to breakthroughs in their personal and professional lives. Through her work, Natasha continues to inspire others to reclaim their entrepreneurial spark and build businesses that align with their true passions and purpose.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/natasha-harris-mba-370048244/>
YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@thefaitgoalcfo3992>
FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/nh.7568596>
Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/thefaitgoalcfo/>

Heather Heckroot - Heather is a seasoned event and community space manager with over 15 years of experience in event planning, venue operations, and collaborative workspaces. As one of the founders of The CO-OP at Shoal Creek, she has built a dynamic coworking and event space centered on community, creativity, and growth.

With a strong background in event management, she helped open and then spent five years managing events at LEGOLAND and SEA LIFE, where she led operations and immersive guest engagements. She then transitioned to Sporting KC, where she curated memorable fan and corporate experiences. Her expertise in coworking management grew through three years at iWerx and The Grid, where they fostered entrepreneurial ecosystems and professional networking opportunities.

Beyond venue and event management, Heather has a deep passion for mentorship and STEM education. For over a decade, she has coached an FRC Robotics team - including an all-female team, guiding students in engineering, leadership, and teamwork while fostering innovation in the next generation of creators.

Now at The CO-OP, she brings all these experiences together, crafting an inclusive, productive, and inspiring space. Their focus on well-being, diversity, and collaboration has earned The CO-OP multiple nominations in The Pitch Weekly Best of Kansas City, solidifying its reputation as a premier coworking and event venue. When not managing events or mentoring young engineers, she enjoys spending time with her husband and their five kids, reading, spending time at the lake, and always seeking new ways to build connections and elevate the Kansas City community.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/heather-heckroot-497034235/>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100093980342678>



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Tiffany Henry - Tiffany works at ACC Capital, a non-profit community development financial institution that empowers entrepreneurs and stimulates regional economic development among underserved communities. She leads the EDGE Initiative: Education to Develop and Grow Entrepreneurs, which aims to increase entrepreneurship at higher education institutions and rural communities. Tiffany has served as an ESHIP Champion with the Kauffman Foundation, co-State Coordinator for Global Entrepreneurship Week Arkansas, and was the founding board member of 1 Million Cups Russellville. She also served on the provisional council of the Ecosystem Builders Leadership Project, a national initiative working to formalize the profession of ecosystem building.



LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tiffanyhenryar/>
X: <https://x.com/TiffanyHenryAR>

Deana Imhoff - Deana is a dedicated agricultural consultant, coach, and successful farm owner with a passion for helping others grow and thrive. Her journey—from living in a small trailer on 2 acres to managing a flourishing 100-acre farm—is a testament to resilience, faith, and hard work. Guided by her core values—God first, family second, and career third—she believes true success is built on a strong foundation of faith, relationships, and purposeful living. In addition to her deep knowledge of agriculture, she specializes in raising livestock, homesteading, homemaking, personal development, and building meaningful connections. Whether she's coaching aspiring farmers, mentoring business owners, or empowering individuals to overcome challenges, she is committed to fostering growth in both agriculture and life.



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Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/imhofffamilyfarm/>
Website: <https://imhofffamilyfarm.com/>

Dwayne T. James, P.E., Ed.D. - Dr. James serves as the statewide Director of Access and Inclusion and the Community Development Specialist in St. Louis County for the University of Missouri Extension. As the County Engagement Specialist, Dwayne co-facilitates leadership programs such as the Neighborhood Leadership Fellows and Youth Empowerment Program. Dwayne is a trained facilitator in Strategic Doing and Navigating Differences. He is also a certified Clifton Strengths Coach.



LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dwaynetj>

Sarah Kennedy - Sarah is a public health professional with nearly 15 years of experience. She is a systems change agent who specializes in epidemiology, data and evaluation. She enjoys using data to engage individuals in conversations about health inequities and disparities. Her experience has been in various coalition settings engaging multi-sector stakeholders to align their goals. This includes building bridges between community members and organizations. Most recently, Sarah was at Generate Health and worked to eliminate racial disparities in infant and maternal health in St. Louis. Sarah also has worked in collaborative spaces focused on asthma and employee health care.



Website: <https://extension.missouri.edu/people/sarah-kennedy>

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Dr. Kasi Lacey - Dr. Lacey is a psychologist, executive coach, and workplace confidence strategist who specializes in helping HR leaders, non-profits, executives, and teams build thriving, high-performing workplaces.

As the Founder & CEO of H & L Legacy Consulting, she has spoken at major conferences such as Women in Energy, Women in Nuclear, the Missouri Chamber of Commerce, and SHRM-affiliated events, delivering powerful, psychology-driven strategies that improve leadership effectiveness and employee well-being.

With a distinguished career spanning 15+ years in higher education and C-suite leadership, Dr. Lacey brings deep expertise in leadership development, workplace psychology, and organizational success. She has served on multiple boards and committees, including the YMCA Callaway County Board, United Way Board, Rotary, Coalition Against Rape & Domestic Violence, and various DEI and strategic planning initiatives.

Dr. Lacey earned her Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from Texas Tech University and has worked in diverse settings, including cancer hospitals, community mental health agencies, and universities. She is a sought-after speaker at conferences, businesses, and community events, delivering high-impact presentations on leadership, confidence, and career growth.

Dr. Lacey's dynamic, interactive speaking style ensures that attendees leave inspired, equipped, and ready to create meaningful change in their organizations.

Website: <https://www.kasilacey.com/>
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-kasi-lacey-207815110/>
Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/drkasilacey/?next=%2F>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/drkasilacey>

Mel Lambert - Mel strengthens St. Louis' entrepreneurial ecosystem by equipping small businesses with the data and tools they need to grow, hire, and thrive. An advocate for libraries as key resources, she now offers free support to small business owners using data and resources at the Kirkwood Public Library.

Previously, Mel spent 13 years in advertising, eventually founding her own agency to help startups and small businesses with marketing strategies. She later embraced the opportunity to support entrepreneurs through library resources.

Mel volunteers with the Balsa Foundation, which provides grants to small businesses, and is a member of Beta Phi Mu, recognizing leadership in Library and Information Studies. She enjoys exploring St. Louis eateries and spending time outdoors with Dale and her dog, Truman.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lambertmel/>

Bob Martin - Flaunting more than four decades of experience in business development, brand building, and corporate communications, Bob has navigated a career comprising start-ups, established companies and turnaround challenges. He's worked within fragmented industries as well as developed enterprises across the globe. He has a track record of imparting insightful guidance, building sustainable growth and molding positive change. He is a megaphone for entrepreneurs and small businesses. He is Co-Founder of iWerx, designWerx, EnCorps45, The Co-op at Shoal Creek, Digital Legacy and Flair Wear. He is a management advisor to Birch Creek Innovations, CAPE Industries, AdvoTek, KC Fiber, NOCIX.

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Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mcplsquareone>



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Melinda Mehaffy - Melinda has dedicated over 30 years to strengthening communities across Clay County, Missouri, through strategic economic development. For the past 8 years, she has served the City of Excelsior Springs, where her work has focused on supporting small businesses, launching impactful programs, and fostering a strong sense of place. Melinda has been a key member of a collaborative grant writing team, securing critical partnerships and funding to drive meaningful, lasting change in the community. Her deep experience and passion for community development make her a valuable voice in the conversation around grant writing and sustainable growth.



Heather Mincer - Heather is a NY native turned Missouri entrepreneur! She, her husband, and son are loving life on their pasture-raised chicken farm, Naked Chicks Pasture. As the owner of Yes Honey, she is leading the way in innovation with her honey-sweetened soda company. After being diagnosed with alpha gal syndrome in 2022, which forced her to change her diet, she decided to turn her negative experience into a positive and made it her personal mission to offer safer, healthier alternatives to everyday products, choosing honey and natural ingredients - kicking corn syrup, sugar, and artificial ingredients to the curb.



Facebook: @yeshoneybrand
Instagram @yeshoneybrand
LinkedIn @Heather Mincer

Laura Mize - Laura is the Neighborhood Specialist for the City of Excelsior Springs. She manages several programs on behalf of the city that improve neighborhoods and promote neighboring. These include Neighbors Helping Neighbors, Snow Angels, the Minor Home Repair Program, the Tax Abatement program, the Neighborhood Engagement Team, and a Vacant Residential Property program. She is the liaison for the Communities for All Ages program and serves as chair of the Silver Prom committee. Laura and her husband Jeff have lived in Excelsior Springs for 5 years. She has taught Sunday School for 30+ years, and is an Army mom with 5 grandchildren.



In addition to her Breakout Session panel, Laura Mize will co-present **Building Better Neighborhoods, Building Better Business** with David Burton during the pre-conference programming on Wednesday, October 1, beginning at 9:30 a.m. at The Elms Hotel and Spa. David and Laura's program is brought to you courtesy of the City of Excelsior Springs.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069344403981>
<https://www.facebook.com/cityofesmo>
<https://www.facebook.com/downtownesmo>
Website: <https://cityofesmo.com/development/index.php/neighborhoods/>

Savanna Nave - Savanna is the visionary behind Solana on Broadway, a multifaceted boutique, event space, and vacation rental located in the heart of downtown Excelsior Springs, Missouri. Embracing a "bougie on a budget" philosophy, Savanna curates a selection of high-end home décor, accessories, and loungewear at accessible prices. Beyond retail, Solana offers a charming event venue and a beautifully renovated five-bedroom vacation rental, providing guests with a unique and immersive downtown experience.



Savanna's commitment to community and her passion for creating inviting spaces make Solana on Broadway a great destination for both locals and visitors.

Website: <https://www.solanaonbroadway.com/>

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Paula Neth - Paula Neth is the President & CEO of The Family Conservancy. Neth is a passionate and committed advocate in building strong, equitable systems for all families and their young children. With over 20 years of experience at both the state and local level, Neth is experienced in quality rating and improvement systems, management and support systems, professional development and career management systems for early childhood educators, and public policy. Neth also brings an understanding of working parents in the corporate setting, having provided leadership on Google's global childcare strategy. She currently leads TFC, helping to create equitable opportunities for children in the KC metro to thrive and experience wellbeing throughout their lives, because the first five years of life represent the most important period of human development.

Website: <https://thefamilyconservancy.org/>

Richard Proffer - After 16 years with University of Missouri Extension, Richard Proffer joined Illinois Extension in 2022. His background in rural communities allows him to tailor his programming to each community's needs. He brings a background in business retention and expansion work, small business development, economic development, and strategic planning – all aimed at helping to grow the community.

He started his extension career as a business development counselor. He was able to share his private sector experience by counseling his small business clients. He also developed several classes on marketing and small business issues that were well-received in the small business community. He received numerous awards for the impact he generated based on his client's results. He served 18 counties in SE Missouri and many strategic planning committees statewide.

Then with restructuring in the Business Development Program, he became a community economic development field specialist for the SE Missouri Region and continues as a community and economic development (CED) educator with Illinois Extension. He specializes in rural town development ranging from leadership, tourism, economic and community development and social issues like the unhoused. Through an interview process with town leaders, he has developed a needs chart and works to provide solutions to those needs through programing ranging from campus involved projects, out/instate specialists. He serves the counties of Fulton, Mason, Peoria and Tazewell and chairs the CED program's entrepreneurship and succession planning committees. He is also active with the Illinois Broadband Project serving as a community coach for the BEAD process.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/richard-proffer-4562a135a/>
Website: <https://extension.illinois.edu/fmpt/staff/richard-proffer>

Mallory Rahe, Ph.D. - Dr. Rahe is an Associate Extension Professor at the University of Missouri who works at the intersection of rural development and value-added agriculture. She strives to support communities, farmers, and agricultural businesses with access to data, decision tools, and best practices.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mallory-rahe-452b6517>



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Phil Scherer - Phil grew up in a rural farming community in Southeast Iowa before moving to Kansas City as a young man to pursue his passion for writing and performing music. However, his small-town roots quickly led him down a more predictable path. He began a career in the hardware industry as a sales and service representative for various manufacturers, traveling extensively throughout the Midwest. Eventually, he became the territory director in Grand Rapids, MI.

Upon moving to Excelsior Springs, Phil unexpectedly discovered a newfound excitement and passion for the community, particularly downtown. This inspiration led him to create a gravel-specific bicycle race called Opal Wapoo. In 2023, he was presented with an opportunity to become a co-owner of a local business in downtown Excelsior Springs. After 15 years with Home Depot, Phil resigned and fulfilled his dream by becoming the co-owner of Other Trails Coffee and Goods.

Website: <https://www.other-trails.com/>



Alan Spell - Alan is an Assistant Extension Professor at the University of Missouri, where he specializes in industry, workforce, and economic analysis. His work includes publishing the monthly Missouri Economy Indicator briefs and conducted data training workshops. Before joining MU, Alan spent two decades at the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC). Alan has worked in economic development research for over 25 years and is a certified Economic Research Professional.

<https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/muexceed/>
<https://www.facebook.com/muexceed/>



Mark Spohn - Mark is the Mayor of Excelsior Springs and a dedicated advocate for community growth and historic preservation. As the owner of Payne Jailhouse Bed & Breakfast and The Bates/Jewell House in Downtown Excelsior Springs, he has played a key role in revitalizing the city's historic spaces. With a passion for economic development and tourism, Mark works to enhance downtown's appeal, fostering investment and business success while preserving its rich history. His leadership and entrepreneurial vision continue to shape Excelsior Springs into a thriving destination for residents and visitors alike.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mark-spohn-36036443/>
Website: <https://cityofesmo.com/>
Personal: paynejailhousebandb.com



Toni Sturdivant, Ph.D. - Dr. Sturdivant is the director of the Early Learning department within the Mid-America Regional Council. She earned a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching with a cognate in Early Childhood Education, a master's degree in early childhood and Elementary Education with a specialization in Child Development and a BA in Linguistics with a minor in African and African American studies. Dr. Sturdivant is a career-long educator having taught Head Start, Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten in both urban and suburban as well as district and center-based settings. Additionally, Dr. Sturdivant has served as a trainer for early childhood teachers, a professor, and a researcher. Her research, which focuses on identity development in young children as well as culturally relevant teaching practices, has been published in several scholarly journals and books. Dr. Sturdivant is a current board member for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), as well as a Consulting Editor for NAEYC articles and books. Sturdivant is passionate about increasing access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate early learning experiences so that children and families can reach their full potential.

Website: <https://www.marc.org/>



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JeT'aime Taylor - JeT'aime Taylor is the Executive Director of Starting Early. JeT'aime is committed to structure and systems. Her mission is to empower people with knowledge, enabling them to steer their own lives. Her purpose is to unveil the necessary information and resources that enable individuals to fulfill their destiny.



Gus Wagner - Gus is a seasoned marketing professional with 24 years of experience leading The Rocket Group, a firm specializing in communications, branding, and digital strategy. As a dedicated advocate for Downtown Jefferson City, Inc., actively contributing to the revitalization and growth of the city's historic core. His commitment extends beyond strategy—his hands-on involvement in local initiatives has helped shape a vibrant, thriving downtown community. In this presentation, Gus will share how his personal and professional dedication to Downtown Jefferson City has created a win-win scenario for local businesses, community organizations, and economic development efforts.



Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/rocketgroup>
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/guswagner/>
Website: <https://MeetGusWagner.com>

TaylorAnn Washburn - TaylorAnn Washburn seeks to meet audiences in the moments that matter – a concept she also teaches farmers, ranchers, business owners and value-added producers as they strategically market their products and services. Washburn is a communications and program strategist with the University of Missouri Extension, where she offers applied research, marketing and communication expertise to support value-added agriculture and small businesses. She also offers public relations and communication assistance to the MU Extension Agricultural Business and Policy Extension group and the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute (FAPRI) to drive economic growth for farmers, ranchers and businesses through informed decision-making. Washburn has also assisted value-added producers through the Missouri Agriculture, Food and Forestry Innovation Center (MAFFIC) and instructed undergraduate students on marketing and communication fundamentals.



Prior to joining MU Extension, Washburn's career focused on strategic marketing and content development for agricultural companies and government agencies in the Midwest. Most recently, she led digital strategy and client multimedia marketing efforts for Brownfield Ag News/LEARFIELD News and Agriculture.

Washburn is a northwest Missouri native and holds a B.S. in agricultural journalism from the University of Missouri, as well as an M.S. in agricultural communications from Texas Tech University.

Facebook (Agricultural Business and Policy) @AgBusiness
MU LinkedIn (Division of Applied Social Sciences) @mudass
LinkedIn (personal) @taylorann-washburn

Ryanne Wilkins – Ryanne is the creative force behind Style By Ry, a boutique located in downtown Excelsior Springs, Missouri. With a keen eye for fashion and a passion for empowering individuals, Ryanne curates a collection of clothing and accessories that blend contemporary trends with timeless style. Her boutique offers a personalized shopping experience, ensuring that each customer finds pieces that reflect their unique personality and lifestyle. Ryanne's commitment to community and her dedication to helping others express themselves through fashion have made Style By Ry a cherished destination.



Website: <https://www.shopstylebyry.com/>