

PUTTING COMMUNITY FIRST:

How Tulsa Forged a New Model of Community-Enhancing Economic Development

Richard Florida



TULSA HAS DEVELOPED A NEW MODEL OF PLACE-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THAT PUTS COMMUNITY FIRST

For much of the past half century and more, local economic development has meant the use of public incentives to lure factories, research centers, offices, and the like.¹ Amazon's 2018 contest for its HQ2 drew more than 250 communities into a bidding war in which the retail colossus was offered packages of tax breaks and subsidies worth billions of dollars.²

Starting around the turn of the millennium, a new and more effective model of local economic development began to emerge. Instead of wasting precious local resources luring corporations, communities shifted to attracting and retaining talent by investing in local amenities and building up their quality of place.³ But this talent-based approach came up against its own limits. The extreme clustering and concentration of high-priced talent in superstar cities like New York and leading tech hubs like the San Francisco Bay Area has shaped a new urban crisis of spiraling housing costs, worsening inequality, and declining quality of life.⁴ Once limited to a handful of coastal cities, this crisis spread to so-called "rise of the rest" cities like Miami and Austin in the wake of the COVID pandemic.⁵ The past few years have seen a shift to more inclusive "place-based" models of economic development that focus on extending economic opportunity to less advantaged communities and neighborhoods.⁶

The American city that has made the most significant progress toward defining and implementing this new model is Tulsa, Oklahoma, which has charted a path of economic development that is not only more inclusive but restores and strengthens its social fabric. I call it *community-enhancing economic development*.



How did this happen?

Tulsa's is a fascinating story of vision, civic pride, and clear-minded strategy driven by philanthropy. The force behind it is a dynamic team of changemakers at the George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF), who have launched a constellation of initiatives and organizations spanning talent attraction; innovation and entrepreneurship; arts and culture; parks and open spaces; and much more. Working quietly but with tremendous focus, they are reinventing the theory and practice of place-based development in ways that fortify, as opposed to undermine, their city's strengths. It is a story that other cities—across the nation and around the world—can learn from.

I was invited to Tulsa in the fall of 2018 by Ken Levit, GKFF's Executive Director. I had just given a talk at the original [Heartland Summit](#) in nearby Bentonville, Arkansas, when Levit approached me and self-effacingly asked if I would consider visiting Tulsa to see what the foundation was up to and maybe share some advice. Having already heard the buzz about Tulsa in economic development circles, I leapt at the chance.

When I arrived in Tulsa some six months later, I was shown around by Brandon Oldham, a senior program officer at GKFF who was born and raised in north Tulsa. Our first destination was the Greenwood District, once known as "Black Wall Street." As we walked its streets, Oldham told me the story of the horrific 1921 race massacre, when the entire district was literally burned to the ground. Then we joined Levit and others for a tour of one of the early childhood development centers the foundation has built. From there, we went on to meet with Tulsa's newly elected mayor, G.T. Bynum, and his energetic young staff. Only after taking all of that in, did I get to see and hear about the foundation's more recent initiatives in economic development—its award-winning park, the Gathering Place; the Guthrie and Bob Dylan archives; and Tulsa Remote, its pioneering program to attract remote workers to the city.

Although I did not realize it at the time, I was being exposed to what I would come to call "*Tulsa-ness*"—the deep and abiding sense of community that pervades the city's economic development efforts and the north star that guides the foundation's work.



Tulsa came into existence in the 1820s when the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Cherokee people were forced out of Georgia and Alabama and into the Oklahoma Indian territories. The Creek Nation designated a tree on a hilltop overlooking the Arkansas River as the seat of its government in 1836. The council oak is still alive and can be seen at 1750 South Cheyenne Avenue.

Tulsa began attracting large numbers of white settlers in the 1880s, after the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad, “the Frisco,” arrived. When oil was discovered in Oklahoma territory in 1901, Tulsa’s population had reached about 1,000. Six years later, when Oklahoma became a state, it had swelled to 7,000. And by 1912, when Tulsa began calling itself “the Oil Capital of the World,” its population had more than doubled to 18,000. Aviation emerged as another leading industry early on, as both airplane manufacturers and airlines opened facilities in the city.⁷ By the early 1920s, Tulsa was a bona fide boomtown with a population of more than 70,000, a growing downtown filled with corporate headquarters, and leafy residential neighborhoods.

Among those neighborhoods was Greenwood, the 35-square-block African American enclave that Booker T. Washington dubbed Black Wall Street because of its extraordinary number of Black-owned businesses. In 1921, after a Black man was falsely accused of molesting a white woman in an elevator, white vigilantes attacked the residents and set fire to the neighborhood. When the smoke cleared two days later, at least 300 African Americans were dead, 6,000 had been rounded up by the police and National Guard and held in internment camps, and nearly 10,000 were homeless. Witnesses reported seeing dynamite dropped on houses from civilian airplanes, making Tulsa the only American city to be bombed from the air before Pearl Harbor.⁸





Tulsa's boom economy was relatively short-lived. By the early years of the twenty-first century, the ups and downs of the oil and gas industry had taken a devastating toll. A 2002 story in the *Washington Post* entitled "[Tulsa's Desperate Times, Measures](#)" painted a bleak portrait. "In the past year, Tulsa has weathered about 6,000 layoffs—many in high-paying corporate executive jobs—with no imminent prospect of new development," it read. "A city of 390,000, Tulsa boasts its own opera, ballet, and philharmonic orchestra, but the orchestra is all but bankrupt. High-end houses sit empty as the residential real estate market stagnates. The restaurant business is flat, and hotel occupancy is down about 13 percent. More than 150 city positions have been eliminated, and city employees have been forced to accept seven furlough days a year to save money." Presciently, the article also noted that "Tulsa's struggle brings with it a unique story: that of a small city with a rich, century-old history of oil, wealth and philanthropy that rivals some of the nation's largest urban centers."⁹

Less than two decades later, the city was in the midst of a turnaround. In late 2023, a far different headline hailed Tulsa as a "[City for Creators, Dreamers and Doers](#)"—"a place where it seems they've thought of everything—and have the resources to make plans and ideas into reality."¹⁰

While GKFF was and is the animating force behind this transition, its path was anything but obvious at the start. The foundation's original mission was early childhood development, which was George Kaiser's passion. Born in Tulsa in 1942, Kaiser has a keen business mind and strong social convictions. Both his parents were Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Kaiser attended public schools and eventually earned a bachelor's degree and MBA from Harvard University. In 1966, he went to work at the Kaiser Francis Oil Company, the company his father and uncle founded, and which he would lead after his father died in 1969. In 1990 he bought the Bank of Oklahoma out of receivership from the FDIC.

In 2010, Kaiser signed onto Bill Gates' and Warren Buffet's so-called "[billionaires' giving pledge.](#)" In [an essay he wrote](#) for the occasion, he explained the ethos behind his giving:

I suppose I arrived at my charitable commitment largely through guilt. I recognized early on that my good fortune was not due to superior personal character or initiative so much as it was to dumb luck. I was blessed to be born in an advanced society with caring parents. So, I had the advantage of both genetics (winning the 'ovarian lottery') and upbringing. As I looked around at those who did not have these advantages, it became clear to me that I had a moral obligation to direct my resources to help repair that inequity.

And he continued:

No child is responsible for the circumstances of her birth and should not be punished for them in this life (I will leave the question of second chances to other pulpits). I have therefore developed my charitable focus around the concept of providing the greatest opportunity for self-fulfillment for each child, focusing on those who arrive in the least advantaged circumstances. ... That governing concept has led me to those initiatives which attempt to reverse the generational cycle of poverty, especially for very young children and their families: prenatal and family healthcare; early learning and development for at-risk kids, birth to three; teen pregnancy prevention; parenting skill development; job and income assistance for families with young children; a robust program to provide alternatives to incarceration for mothers who have committed non-violent crimes, et cetera.¹¹

Kaiser organized his foundation under the umbrella of the already existing, though considerably less well-endowed, [Tulsa Community Foundation](#). As Levit told me: "In a key decision, George situated George Kaiser Family Foundation as a supporting organization of the Tulsa Community Foundation, so the Tulsa Community Foundation is legally required to control the board of George Kaiser Family Foundation." This was a critical move that ensured the foundation's work would be tied to the betterment of Tulsa for the long haul.

To realize George Kaiser's vision, GKFF opened and continues to operate [16 state-of-the art early childhood education centers](#) in Tulsa's least advantaged neighborhoods, where they serve more than 2,000 kids. Later, the foundation brought [Teach for America](#) to the city.

From the outset, Kaiser insisted that the foundation systematically benchmark Tulsa's progress against other cities—not only to evaluate its programs' effectiveness but to ensure that they remain focused on the city's most critical problems. Two issues emerged as especially significant contributors to childhood poverty in Tulsa: its high rates of teen pregnancy and its high rates of female incarceration. Both "had devastating effects on families," Levit told me. "We put together a ton of work around those two areas." The foundation developed clinics, recruited doctors, and helped establish the School of Community Medicine at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa.

The foundation's experience with Teach for America led to a fundamental insight. Applicants to the program ranked the locations they were willing to move to, and Tulsa was consistently at the bottom of their lists. But as Justin Harlan, who now directs Tulsa Remote but earlier worked for Teach for America, told me, "When they came here, Tulsa had the highest retention of any region in the country."

He described this as a "lightbulb moment." "We realized that if we could just get people to come here, they would be very likely to stay," he said. "People have an idea of what Tulsa is like in their heads, but when they show up and see it for themselves, it's different."

That insight would shape [Tulsa Remote](#), the foundation's signature program to attract remote workers. The subject of considerable media attention during the pandemic, it actually began back in 2018.¹² A great deal of that attention focused on the \$10,000 relocation stipend it grants to remote workers who commit to living in Tulsa for a year. While the stipend is certainly a lure, it is not what compels participants to stay. What distinguishes the program and drives its success are its efforts to embed its participants in Tulsa's community. As a 2021 evaluation of the program concluded: "The success of Tulsa Remote to date is closely tied to both program design—emphasizing pro-social behavior in the application process with community support services upon arrival—and strong support from local institutions."

That same evaluation enumerated the program's key achievements: "Tulsa Remote has brought more than 1,200 program members to Tulsa—a contribution that may seem small in a metro area of one million people—but one that is set to have a truly outsized impact," it found. "The median income of a Remoter stood at \$85,000 as of mid-2021 and the average was just over \$104,600. Fully 88 percent of program members have at least a bachelor's degree compared to 32 percent of Tulsa residents." Adding it all up, "the combined new employment in Tulsa as a result of the program—counting program members and locally created jobs—is projected to be upwards of 5,000 in 2025, while the new labor income in the local economy in 2025 alone is projected to reach approximately \$500 million."¹³

Randon Young, a 36-year-old African American tech recruiter, relocated to Tulsa from Los Angeles. In an interview with *Tulsa World*, he said that while the stipend played a role, he chose Tulsa over cities like Dallas, Houston, and Charlotte because of its affordability, its rise as an emerging talent and tech hub, the legacy of Black Wall Street, and its current commitment to Black entrepreneurship. "You have talent migrating here, and in the head-hunting recruiting space you have to follow the talent," he told the paper. "A lot of people may look at cities that have already boomed. If you have aspirations to be part of a city that's booming now, Tulsa is a good fit."¹⁴

To date, the program has attracted more than 3,000 remote workers to Tulsa, three-quarters of whom stayed on after their initial term was up.¹⁵ As of early 2024, Tulsa was one of the top ten cities that people from Austin and California were moving to, alongside tech hubs like Denver and Raleigh-Durham in North Carolina's Research Triangle; rise of the rest growth poles like Nashville, Dallas, and Charlotte; and lifestyle centers like Albuquerque-Santa Fe, Colorado Springs, and Asheville, North Carolina.¹⁶ With Oklahoma's largest share of new residents, Tulsa has helped Oklahoma turn a decade-plus of brain drain into a newfound brain gain, adding more than 10,000 college graduates in 2021 and 2022.¹⁷

Recognizing its outsized economic contribution, the State of Oklahoma created a new law that credits the foundation with a portion of the state income taxes paid by remote workers who stay. Within three to four years, the foundation will recoup all the money it's spent on the stipends, allowing the program to expand and recruit more remote workers.



LESSONS FROM TULSA REMOTE

“The \$10,000 grant is typically used to cover moving costs. What’s far more important are the efforts we make to integrate [participants] into the community. Our goal is to get people to plant roots here. We offer five to ten events every month that are social in nature, professional development opportunities, or volunteering in the community. We leverage Slack as a way to communicate across 200 different channels that are based on interest. So, you can find people that are into comic books or outdoor amenities or people that have kids and are interested in family-friendly activities.



“Now that the shifts in work environments have settled post-pandemic, we have a good sense of which companies are committed to a remote-first culture. This allows us to try new things as it relates to reaching our target audience. We have so many data points from all the applications to the program that we can create some predictive models about who is most likely to get into Tulsa Remote, and then who is most likely to accept and then stick around. About a third of our members come from Texas and California, typically based in markets with a high cost-of-living.”

Justin Harlan, Managing Director, Tulsa Remote

Tulsa Remote was built on an earlier initiative aimed at boosting the city’s cultural climate by attracting artists, the [Tulsa Artist Fellowship](#). Launched in 2015, “the program was born directly out of the interest the foundation had in artists and their workspaces being accessible to the community,” its director, Carolyn Sickles, told me. Over time, it became obvious that many of the artists liked the city and its unique arts ecosystem and wanted to stay after their fellowships were over. Their presence helped attract even more talent.





ATTRACTING ARTISTS

“We’re set up in a wonderful time where you can live anywhere, have a very sustainable studio practice, publishing practice, writing practice, or music practice. And in Tulsa, you can also still have what in many places you have to sacrifice. Do I want to have stable housing, or do I want to have this arts practice? Do I want to have an arts practice, or do I want to have a family? Artists repeatedly tell us that they never thought they could have an art practice and those other things. We know that Tulsa has offered these incredible benefits that were often seen as unobtainable, like owning homes and expanding their families.



“We have national and international prize winners living in Tulsa. Jennifer Croft is here. She won the Man Booker International Prize in 2018 and is now teaching at the University of Tulsa as a Presidential Professor of English & Creative Writing. She’s from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is living in her grandmother’s house with her children and husband, Boris Dralyuk, the award-winning Ukrainian translator who was the editor-in-chief of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and a 2024-2026 Tulsa Artist Fellow. Joy Harjo, who was also born here, returned because of the Fellowship. She became Poet Laureate of the United States when she was seven months into it.

“Significantly supported by the Fellowship, Tulsa has become a place where renowned translators continue to live and work. Oklahoma’s literary ecosystem has *World Literature Today*, which many people find surprising. Their sister publication, *Latin American Literature Today*, is also based in Oklahoma. At the helm is Fellowship alum Arthur Malcolm Dixon.”

Carolyn Sickles, Executive & Artistic Director, Tulsa Artist Fellowship

The foundation has also sought to leverage Tulsa’s deep musical roots and traditions. “One day we were talking about Oklahoma’s contribution to American music, and we started listing the musicians that came from here,” Levit told me. “The list was incredible: Garth Brooks, J.J. Cale, Vince Gill, Patti Page, Reba McEntire, Roy Clark, Gene Autry, Roger Miller, and Leon Russell. Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were the house band at Cain’s Ballroom downtown in the 1930s. More recently, a local guy named Zach Bryan became one of the biggest stars in country music.” But not a lot of people outside of Tulsa seemed to recognize this, and so it formed the seed of another opportunity. “Woody Guthrie was an Oklahoman,” Levit continued. “So, one day I mentioned to George that I’d like to reach out to the Guthrie family in light of Woody’s Oklahoma roots and the way our work at the foundation converges with his message. Why should other cities capitalize on his materials and legacy? George gave me the green light.” By 2008, the foundation had negotiated the purchase of Woody Guthrie’s archive, which led to the creation of the [Woody Guthrie Center](#) in the refurbished industrial building that anchors the city’s burgeoning [Arts District](#).

Across the street from the Center, the foundation created a signature public park, [Guthrie Green](#), which hosts concerts and events and helps anchor the revitalizing neighborhood. And in 2016, the foundation acquired Bob Dylan’s extensive archive, which is now housed in the [Bob Dylan Center](#) that opened in the Arts District in May 2022.

In 2024, the Center inaugurated an annual songwriting fellowship in partnership with Universal Music Publishing Group. “We’re eager to discover and support the next generation of great songwriters,” Center Director Steven Jenkins told me. “We want to help foster talent. The fellows will spend time with us here in Tulsa, interact with other artists, and take part in recording sessions at the Church Studio. We look to the Tulsa Artist Fellowship as a model we can emulate with this program.”

While the foundation’s initiatives have been a crucial spur, Tulsa’s affordable real estate prices have also played an important role in its ability to attract talent. Young families who are priced out of housing markets in other parts of the country can afford to buy homes in Tulsa’s historic neighborhoods. Aspiring small business owners can and do take

advantage of the city’s incredible stock of old buildings to house their new restaurants, cafes, music venues, galleries, maker spaces, and boutiques—amenities that lure still more talent. High-tech entrepreneurs and venture capitalists house their startups in the city’s former industrial spaces, and civic entrepreneurs use them to house their social ventures. All of this is a real-world demonstration of Jane Jacobs’ famous maxim: “New ideas must use old buildings.”¹⁸



The foundation's biggest capital investment is the [Gathering Place](#) along the Arkansas River, a 65-acre, \$465 million park it gifted to the city, whose design and construction it managed. "It grew out of George Kaiser's vision that all great cities have these iconic parks and civic spaces, and Tulsa needed a central gathering place where everyone from all over the city would feel welcome and interact together," Jeff Stava, who stewards the foundation's placemaking efforts and serves as COO of the Tulsa Community Foundation, told me. "Tulsa lacked that. We had a ton of parks, more than 200 of them. But this would be more than a neighborhood park. It would provide a truly meaningful experience for all Tulsans. Michael Van Valkenburgh and his team took that spark and turned it into what it is today: a park for all. GKFF also created an operations endowment that it and dozens of other Tulsa corporate and philanthropic partners funded."

Since its official opening in September 2018, the Gathering Place was named the Best City Park in the Country by *USA Today* and received the Urban Land Institute's global award for excellence.¹⁹ It meets the foundation's core mission by providing everyone—especially disadvantaged children—access to world-class experiences and educational opportunities in a vibrant and inclusive community space.

The foundation provided additional support for developing the adjacent part of the Arkansas River. A new low water dam was built to create a community lake with a wave park and white-water flume for kayaking and water sports, including surfing.²⁰ And a pedestrian bridge was added to provide access to parkland on the other side of the river and prime that area for further development. *The New York Times* cited the bridge as one of the leading architectural marvels that are transforming the nation's downtowns [and wrote](#): "The new bridge, its 11 arches built of weathering steel, will connect the Gathering Place with the west bank while tying into the larger Midland Valley Trails network. It also seems likely to solidify Tulsa's spot on the shortlist of American cities worth visiting for the design ambition of their civic infrastructure."²¹

"Look out there," the Gathering Place's Executive Director Julio Badin exclaimed, as we sat in one of the park's glass-walled pavilions. "Look at the families who are using this space! We have extensive education and programming and it's all free and it's all designed to appeal to the community, which is defined as anybody who lives here. We spent a lot of time on that, but also on the quality and the level of detail." Badin then pointed out that "it's about lifting up. If you think back hundreds of years ago, what was the place that everybody was able to go to? It was a cathedral—they were the communities' centers. One of my favorite things I see when I walk through the park is Tulsans pointing out its features to their out-of-town family and friends. They can't wait to show them what their city—what *they*—have here."

In its early years, the foundation avoided getting too involved in the nuts and bolts of economic development, seeing that as the responsibility of the public sector. But it increasingly came to recognize that the social problems it was trying to address were embedded in a deeper fabric of social and economic disadvantage, and so began to orient more of its work toward providing more equitable access to what Harvard's Robert Putnam long ago dubbed the community's "social capital."²²

"As late as even five years ago," as Jeff Stava put it, "we viewed our civic efforts around place making, economic development, the arts, and housing as tangential to GKFF's mission of providing equal opportunity for young children. Complementary, but definitely secondary. However, as we began to see how our primary and secondary work intersected, we learned how integral they all are to ensuring that Tulsa is both economically vibrant and inclusive of all Tulsans. What all the foundation's initiatives ultimately reflect is George Kaiser's fundamental belief that the most efficient use of resources is not to alleviate the symptoms of poverty but to address its root causes."



And that is the nub of community-enhancing economic development, which works to combat poverty by building an economy that extends economic opportunity to disadvantaged people and neighborhoods. To that end, the foundation embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive innovation economy. It launched an incubator and co-working space, [36 Degrees North](#), in a rehabbed warehouse space in the city's Arts District. It created [Tulsa Innovation Labs](#) to build and support the city's high-tech ecosystem. It retained McKinsey & Company to identify its leading industry clusters. Led by a former Tulsan who grew up with GKFF's Levit, McKinsey's study, "[Tulsa's Tech Niche](#)," documented the region's strengths in the fields of advanced energy technology, cybersecurity, drone operations and testing, virtual health, and data analytics.

GKFF's efforts to build Tulsa's innovation economy was accelerated by something of a happenstance. In late 2017, a young tech visionary and political activist, Michael Basch, visited friends in Tulsa. Raised in Los Angeles, Basch had received his BA and MBA from the University of Southern California, run a number of startups, participated in Hillary Clinton's ill-fated 2016 presidential campaign, and mounted a brief run for New York City's mayoralty. After meeting with Kaiser, Levit, and other members of the foundation, he decided to move to Tulsa to partner with GKFF around early-stage investing and talent-based strategic initiatives. Two years later, he opened his venture capital firm, [Atento Capital](#).

CHANGE CATALYST

“I was born in San Francisco, raised in LA, lived in London, Tel Aviv, New York. Now Tulsa: I have been here for six and a half years. My wife’s from Argentina and Tel Aviv. Now 13 members of my family live here.

“I started working in a coffee shop at age 16. I worked my way up and became the manager and opened a bunch of stores. I completed my undergraduate degree at USC at age 20 and business school at 24. I started a company with some friends to invest in real estate and as an angel investor in start-ups. I later joined the Israeli company that launched the dating app Bumble.

“I left in 2016 to work with the Hillary Clinton campaign in Wisconsin, where we lost by 11,000 votes. One of the big lessons was when you drive around Wisconsin, you see so many beat-up homes and empty factories. Their best days were behind them. Afterwards I briefly ran for mayor of New York City on a social and economic justice and generational platform. I dropped out after four months.

“Then I visited some married friends in Tulsa. They’d met at Summit at the Sea in Miami. The girl was from Tulsa but living in LA; the guy was from Houston and living in New York. Now they have four kids. When I visited, I got connected with George Kaiser and Ken Levit. At the time, 99 percent of their philanthropy was trying to address intergenerational poverty. They were a year away from opening the Gathering Place. I started doing some programmatic work with the foundation, as well as some investment work on the venture capital side.

“Fast forward to November of 2017, I hosted a trip to Tulsa with 58 of my friends. When I asked them if they’d consider moving here, 85 percent said they would. A bunch of us tried, and in the end, seven of us did, me and my cousin and five others. That showed, *wow, if you bring people to Tulsa, some percentage of people will consider staying here.*

“At the time, I was living above 36 Degrees North in an apartment that was for the art fellows. They were between cohorts; eight of the 23 apartments were empty at the time. So, they basically said, you can give them to your friends if they’re willing to check out Tulsa. So, I had seven more friends move in. I invited them over for Shabbat dinners and introduced them to people. I was like, ‘Whoa, if I just give you an apartment, introduce you to community, and just make it easy for you, you will come to Tulsa.’ That was an aha moment.”

Michael Basch, Founder of Atento Capital



To buttress and build its emerging high-tech clusters, the foundation began investing in local colleges to build up their research capabilities. It helped create a [cyber-security program at the University of Tulsa](#) and explored the idea of luring a leading research university to Tulsa. As a result, NYU will open its newest global affiliate, [NYU-Tulsa](#), alongside the ones it has in cities like London, Paris, Shanghai, Abu Dhabi, Buenos Aires, and more. The foundation also sought to forge a partnership between the University of Tulsa and Carnegie Mellon's fabled Robotics Institute to enhance the region's capabilities in cyber, advanced energy technology, and autonomous transportation systems.

Mindful of its commitment to the less advantaged, GKFF quickly realized that the innovation economy is not just about techies, entrepreneurs, and knowledge workers; it offers better jobs and career pathways for less skilled and underemployed workers as well. To create on-ramps for them, it invested in new STEM programs at local colleges, including a seamless four-year degree program that students at [Tulsa Community College](#) could immediately enroll in. And it created the [Atlas School](#) to train Tulsans in coding and software development.



UPSKILLING TULSANS FOR HIGH-TECH JOBS

“Half of the job postings for developers go unfilled annually in our city,” says Libby Ediger, a native Oklahoman who’d founded a successful startup in Washington, DC, before moving to Tulsa. “That, coupled with the boom over the last five-plus years of technical jobs being able to be filled by non-degree students, showed us that tech has tremendous economic opportunity. We want to be able to capture three buckets of students. The first group is ages 18 to 24, doesn’t want to go to college or can’t afford to. We want to capture them, show them that they can get trained for a good job in under two years. The second group is those who want to pivot their careers. And the third bucket is people who want to stay in their industry but upskill. The other role we play is to support companies who might want to move here. I spend a significant part of my time meeting with the founders and leaders of companies that Tulsa Innovation Labs, a venture capital fund, or the Chamber has brought in.”



Libby Ediger, CEO, The Atlas School

Whether the aim is to attract major high-tech employers to Tulsa’s downtown or generate greater economic opportunity in east Tulsa, Kendall Whittier, and north Tulsa, all of the foundation’s efforts reflect the deep personal ties and relationships that define its irreducible *Tulsa-ness*. Levit, like Kaiser, was born and raised in Tulsa. After attending Brown University and Yale Law School, he worked for Oklahoma’s then-senator David Boren, and later served as special counsel for the CIA, under its then-director George Tenet. “When I was in college, I was not fully aware of the way that Tulsa and

Oklahoma shaped me,” Levit told me, “While working for Boren, I got to travel back frequently and visit not just Tulsa and Oklahoma City but so many small towns and rural areas across the state. It gave me a new appreciation for the place and helped me recognize that I could make a difference.”

It is something I would hear time and time again, not just from native-born Tulsans, but also from those who came to the city from elsewhere; what drew people back to the city was the opportunity to get involved, to contribute and make a difference.

“I was not born here, but I have been in Tulsa since I was five or six years old. This is truly the place that made me,” Ashli Sims, the Managing Director of [Build in Tulsa](#), a GKFF-funded initiative to spur Black entrepreneurship, told me. Sims graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in broadcast journalism. In 2002, she joined KOTV News as an assistant producer and worked her way up to field producer and on-air reporter for the 10 o’clock news.

In 2021, when Sims was offered the opportunity to join Build in Tulsa, she was eager to do so. “What struck a chord was this idea of resurrecting, highlighting, and amplifying the spirit of Black Wall Street, Black excellence, and entrepreneurship,” she told me. “This idea that we were going to tap into not only this history but be part of the future of it. Build in Tulsa is now a network of 400 entrepreneurs. They’re taking classes, getting coaching, moving their businesses forward.”



BUILDING BLACK ENTREPRENEURSHIP

“Running a non-profit isn’t that different than being a TV news personality,” Ashli Sims told me. “It’s all about storytelling.” When I asked her to share one of Build in Tulsa’s success stories, she told me about [Arbit](#), the leading price-prediction app for buying and selling sneakers.

“Venita Cooper is, or was, the owner of Silhouette Sneaker Shop on Black Wall Street,” she began. “The spot used to be home to a shoe shop in the twenties. She does resale sneakers, fancy sneakers. It’s trendy, but it’s still very quintessential Main Street.

“But Venita had a problem. There’s lots of volatility in the sneaker market and the secondary sneaker market. A shoe comes out, you could pay \$1,500 for that shoe, and then three weeks later the shoe goes for \$500. It was hard for her to figure out what she should pay for the shoe, how many of these shoes she should buy, and at what cost. She’d been thinking about this problem, marinating on this problem.

“She had a conversation with Brian Brackeen from [Lightship Capital](#) [a venture fund that specializes in startups led by founders of color, LBGTO+ people, women, and people with disabilities], and he told her, ‘You should build an app for that.’ And she says, ‘I don’t know.’ But when you’re in this community, you start seeing people innovating and inventing things and coming up with apps and seeing them actually achieve it. You start to think maybe I could do this too. And that’s exactly what happened with her.

“She went through a bootcamp with Lightship. But she still wasn’t sure. I remember talking to her in her shop one day. ‘I’m not really tech,’ she says. ‘I just sell sneakers. I don’t really care about getting rich.’ I said, ‘But do you care about economic freedom?’

“So she took the leap of faith and joined [Act Tulsa](#) [an accelerator for minority startups housed at 36 Degrees North]. Her company was a younger company compared to those we normally take, but she was part of the community, she’d been working with all of us. By the time she finished our six-month program, she’d hired a guy who worked at Nike to be a co-founder. A couple months later, she received a half-million-dollar investment from Lightship and a half-million-dollar investment from Atento Capital.

“That’s one million dollars. And for a black woman founder, that’s a feat. Overall, black women receive less than one-half of one percent of VC dollars. Changing that is what this is all about.”

Ashli Sims, Managing Director, Build In Tulsa



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AS RELATIONSHIPS

“I spent six years at the chamber and then came over to the city about a year into the mayor’s administration,” Kian Kamas told me in one of our several meetings over coffee. “I was five months pregnant, and it was a bit of a leap to make a move to a lower-paying job. I was Deputy Chief, and then I moved up as Chief of Economic Development for the city. When I came over, the mayor had this vision.



“The city had really ceded all economic development territory to the chamber, as had most of the entities like GKFF, and it was predominantly a traditional economic development approach of business attraction. The city had an anemic public economic development function. It had been under-invested in. Good staff, but they had never had the resources that they needed. We took the Industrial Authority, the Parking Authority, the Economic Development Commission, the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development, and our Urban Renewal Authority and effectively merged them all together with the goal of creating this entity that had sustainable revenues. We had some industrial facilities and a legacy portfolio of real estate from Urban Renewal Authority. Our goal was to really leverage those assets to generate operating revenue.

“Things are different now. GKFF is a good part of that. They’ve set a compelling vision that makes economic sense. It’s grounded in data; it’s grounded in reality. I also think a good part of it is just that we’re small enough to have really deep and meaningful relationships.”

Kian Kamas, former Executive Director of Partner Tulsa

Kian Kamas has played a central role in economic development in Tulsa over the past decade or so. Hailing from a small rural hamlet outside of Oklahoma City, she came to Tulsa in 2009, joined the Tulsa Regional Chamber in 2011, and took over leadership of its business attraction activities in 2014 before signing on as head of economic development for Mayor G.T. Bynum’s team in 2017. In 2021, she became Executive Director of [Partner Tulsa](#), which combined a series of separate economic development agencies and initiatives in an umbrella organization devoted to achieving shared economic prosperity and racial equity.

Brian Kurtz came to Tulsa in 2018 from Pittsburgh, where he had worked in that city’s downtown organization. He was recruited by Mayor G.T. Bynum to help create a similar organization for Tulsa’s downtown. “I was attracted by the transformational attitude and initiatives that the mayor was putting in place and wanted to be part of that,” he told me. “At the time, the downtown improvement district was managed by the City of Tulsa, with little accountability to ratepayers and not utilizing industry best practices. The decision had been made among community partners and the city to explore establishing a separate, not-for-profit place management organization that would be laser-focused on improving downtown.” In the summer of 2021, after three years in the mayor’s office, Kurtz took on the leadership of the newly created [Downtown Tulsa Partnership](#).

Jennifer Hankins is Managing Director of [Tulsa Innovation Labs](#), the GKFF-supported initiative responsible for building the region’s innovation economy. Under her leadership, Tulsa did what many thought impossible for a city without a major research university. In early summer 2024, Tulsa’s proposal to make the region a world-class center for autonomous transportation won a \$51 million award from

the federal government’s über-competitive “Tech Hub” program—making Tulsa one of just 12 winning communities out of the more than 350 that applied.²³ Instead of trying to create the next Silicon Valley from scratch, the proposal leverages the foundation’s investments in tech and the region’s rich legacy in aerospace, energy technology, and advanced manufacturing to transform its existing industries with a new focus on autonomous transportation systems—self-driving vehicles, unmanned aircraft, and more.

Tulsa Innovation Labs reflects the foundation’s unwavering commitment to community-enhancing economic development. In addition to the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma State University, Tulsa Community College, the Tulsa Economic Development Corporation, and local tech businesses and venture capitalists, the initiative also includes partners from the African American and indigenous communities, such as Black Tech Street and Cherokee Nation Businesses, and is focused, as Hankins told *Tulsa World*, on “increased opportunities, especially for women and our communities of color.” GKFF’s Levit echoed the sentiment: “This investment in Tulsa’s regional economy will amplify our local efforts to ensure Tulsa is a thriving community that affords opportunities to all.”



One of the programs the initiative supports is the new Greenwood AI/AS Center of Excellence (G-ACE), which is located on the site of the historic Moton Hospital in the neighborhood that was once Black Wall Street. Operated by Black Tech Street, it will offer companies, startups, individuals, and public sector agencies access to leading AI technologies and expert support.

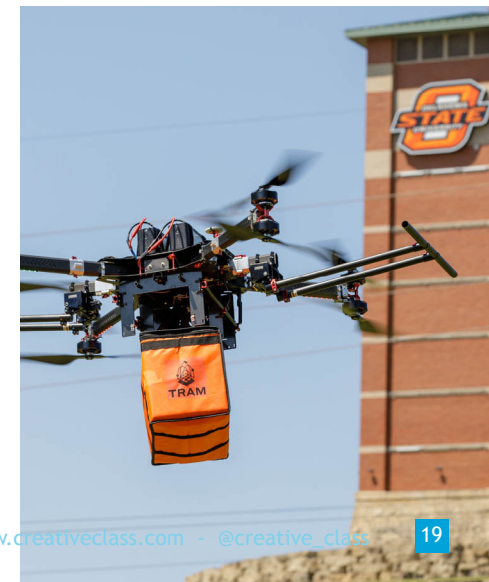
Hankins also spearheaded the efforts behind Tulsa's successful bid for a separate federal [Build Back Better](#) grant in 2022 that was also focused on building up the region's capabilities in [advanced mobility](#). Hankins refers to these two projects as critical "building blocks" for Tulsa's future economy, with the Build Back Better grant moving the city onto the "national playing field" and the Tech Hubs award elevating it onto more of a "global playing field."

When I asked Hankins how she accomplished these veritable moonshots, she did not point to breakthrough technologies, visionary entrepreneurs, or institutions, but credited the Tulsa community. "In our community, it's really important that we arrive at decisions together and have consensus from stakeholders who represent many different pieces of the puzzle," she told me over coffee at a trendy cafe in Tulsa's Arts District. "Our role at Tulsa Innovation Labs is to cast the vision. But that vision is nothing without others being a part of it and seeing themselves in it. So, we take a lot of time to craft genuine engagement by asking questions, understanding unmet needs, and helping find unique solutions to systemic challenges. Our mission is not one that can be achieved on an island unto ourselves, so taking the time to thoughtfully engage the community is imperative."

She can do so because of the deep relationships she has built with the city's business, academic, political, economic development, and civic communities. "In Tulsa, it's all about the relationships we have with one another," she said. The way she developed these relationships is a window into Tulsa's special sauce. Hankins hails from Kansas City and went to school at Oklahoma State University. Upon graduating she went home to start her career, working for the Catholic Charities of Kansas City and then recruiting businesses for the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. She moved to Tulsa in 2017 to lead the Tulsa Chamber's efforts to spur entrepreneurship, and she joined Tulsa Innovation Labs on the eve of the pandemic in January 2020, becoming its Managing Director in August 2023.

For Hankins, innovation is not an end in itself. Having seen the damage that the untrammelled pursuit of high-tech growth has caused in places like San Francisco and Austin, she is charting a different path. "We are trying to flip the script and use technology and innovation as a path to more inclusive development." The commitment to reparation, she adds, is a paradoxical consequence of Tulsa's long history of racism. "It's Tulsa's curse and blessing," is how she put it. "This is Tulsa's moment of redemption. It's how we break the cycle of the past—where our industries and wealth were created through means of destruction—and forge a new era which gives citizens more ownership in the creation of their economic future."

For all their variety, each of the foundation's initiatives in placemaking, arts and culture, education, innovation, and inclusive economic development is imbued with a deep and overriding commitment to community. Grouped together as part of the foundation's "[Vibrant & Inclusive Tulsa](#)" initiative, each reflects its ultimate mission. As the foundation puts it: "Providing equal opportunity to all children requires a vibrant and inclusive environment where opportunity is abundant. By making Tulsa a better place to live, work, and visit, GKFF attracts new business and talent that, in turn, creates new jobs, supports economic growth, and helps promote a safer, more prosperous environment for children and families."



KEY TAKEAWAYS AND NEXT STEPS

Tulsa is not Nirvana. Like all American cities, it has its share of challenges—poverty and racial inequity; social and economic division; industrial decline. But thus far it has avoided the runaway housing inflation that has wracked so many other American cities on the rise. Part of this is because while it has reversed its decline, its economic growth is still modest. But it's also because the GKFF and the city's other place-makers have pursued economic development as inclusively as possible.

The role that GKFF plays in Tulsa is by no means unique. Philanthropies have become the prime movers in economic development in many American cities. I saw this first-hand when I taught at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh in the 1990s, where the Heinz Endowments, the RK Mellon Foundation, and other philanthropies played crucial roles in the city's turnaround. Similarly, the Lilly Endowment Inc. has been a prime mover in Indianapolis's ongoing economic transformation, and a coalition of local and national foundations have invested in sports, culture, and innovation initiatives in and around downtown Detroit. Locally committed foundations have become so central to the economic revitalization of older industrial cities that I often say it is almost impossible to imagine it occurring without them, it's not just philanthropies. Anchor institutions like universities and medical centers—so-called “eds and meds”—have played increasingly important roles.



It's a fundamental shift. Not that long ago, economic development was the sole province of the mayor and a handful of corporate leaders. Pittsburgh's original revitalization efforts during the 1950s and 1960s were the result of the fabled partnership between its long-serving Mayor David Lawrence and the industrialist Richard King Mellon. Their efforts led to the creation of the business-led Allegheny Conference on Community Development, which served as the driving force behind the city's revival.

But globalization has dramatically reduced both the ranks of large businesses headquartered in cities and their capacity and willingness to invest in local communities. Since cities don't have the revenues to support leading-edge economic development efforts on their own, foundations and other anchor institutions are picking up the slack.

The result is a more responsive and flexible model for economic development. "One of the reasons that philanthropic partnerships are so impactful at the municipal level is that they can challenge the status quo and spark—or scale—solutions that bring community members to the table," is how Indianapolis Mayor and Harvard Kennedy School professor Stephen Goldsmith sums it up. "Philanthropic capital is often the best way to take risks on the sort of cross-sector solutions required to address these grand challenges."²⁴

So, what's next for Tulsa? How can it continue to meet its current challenges and those that are likely to confront it in the future?

First and foremost, it's important to recognize that Tulsa's greatest asset is not an industry or cluster or a specific program or initiative. It's the over-arching priority it places on community. It's the pursuit of economic development in ways that enhance rather than corrode its social fabric. It's the attention it pays to ensuring that its efforts to attract talent and build the innovation economy confer economic opportunity widely and equitably. At bottom, it's its Tulsa-ness, and it must do all it can to protect it.

This will almost certainly become more difficult as the city's continuing success attracts more outsiders. I have seen this happen to plenty of other cities—not just to tech hubs like Austin, but smaller places like Bentonville, Arkansas, just two hours down the road from Tulsa. In a visit there in 2017, I told its business, political, and philanthropic leaders that they needed to start thinking ahead to what might happen when their investments in outdoor recreation and arts and culture start to pay off. Less than five years later, I was invited back to help design an affordable housing strategy—a much-needed but belated response to its sharply rising real estate prices.²⁵ Tulsa's looming challenge is to avoid the downsides that occur when the flywheel of urban success kicks in.

Business leaders frequently tell me that Oklahoma's conservative postures on everything from women's and LGBTQ rights to religion in schools makes it harder for them to attract talent. Tulsa must do all it can to preserve its status as a place that welcomes diverse viewpoints and political perspectives. Fortunately, Tulsa's people are more welcoming and open-minded than the state's politics might suggest. Participants in Tulsa Remote, who overwhelmingly hail from liberal coastal cities, frequently say that getting out of their "bubble" and being able to mix with people with a wider range of political and cultural perspectives is among the things they most appreciate about Tulsa.²⁶ Protecting and promoting Tulsa's reputation as a place where both sides of the political spectrum can coexist civilly is important.²⁷

At the same time, Tulsa must double down on its efforts to build its innovation economy. This means continuing to bolster its high-tech clusters, attract federal funding, forge deeper university-industry partnerships, and spur high-tech startups.

City and regional stakeholders have been engaged in a long-running conversation about whether they also need to attract a leading-edge research university, a high-risk undertaking that is based on an assumption that's only partly true. While it goes without saying that Stanford, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon had much to do with the success of their respective regions, it wasn't those universities writ large that drove innovation and economic growth, but a relatively narrow and focused core of their research activities.

The idea of orienting high-tech development around focused “steeple of excellence” was pioneered at Stanford by its transformative engineering dean and provost [Frederick Terman in the 1940s and 50s](#). Terman saw that fields like electrical engineering could both attract federal research funding *and* create spinoff companies that would build the local economy and keep top talent close to home. He was a prime mover in the creation of the [Stanford Research Park](#), where two former students, Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard, launched their [eponymous company](#).

Business and academic leaders in Boston and Cambridge developed a similar strategy, creating the nation’s first venture capital company, American Research and Development, to turn focused research in electrical engineering and computing into startups. Later, this model would be extended to biotechnology with the creation of research centers like the Broad and Whitehead Institutes. A similar approach was employed in Pittsburgh, where high-tech clusters grew out of Carnegie Mellon’s specific capabilities in computer science, robotics, self-driving, and artificial intelligence.²⁸

An even more relevant example comes from Texas. In the late 1970s, the University of Texas at Austin recruited George Kozmetsky to become dean of its business school. Kozmetsky brought to his new role the economic development wisdom he had gained as a co-founder of Teledyne and, before that, as a professor at Carnegie Mellon. He created the [IC2](#) Institute, the high-tech think tank that played a pivotal role, if not *the* pivotal role, in the development of Austin’s high-tech ecosystem, identifying key strategies and organizing the region’s business, political, and academic leaders around them. As a result, Austin landed such federally funded R&D installations as [Sematech](#) and [MCC](#), recruited established high-tech companies and talent to the region, and developed the region’s startup ecosystem.²⁹

Tulsa can follow this more focused approach to build research strength around its existing industries and budding high-tech capabilities, as it did with its recent Tech Hubs award, NYU-Tulsa, and the emerging partnership between the University of Tulsa and Carnegie Mellon’s Robotics Institute.



Remote work is a key area that the region can capitalize on. With it currently encompassing as much as 20 to 30 percent of all workdays, experts like Stanford University’s Nick Bloom predict it will continue to grow as its flexibility, cost-savings, and productivity benefits become more widely understood and appreciated.³⁰ A great deal of research is needed to develop new and better technologies and management systems to equip people to work productively in hybrid modes spanning home offices, co-working spaces, third places like cafes, restaurants, and libraries, and traditional offices. Tulsa Remote’s success has made the city synonymous with remote work, and its thousands of remote workers provide a natural laboratory in which to develop, test, and improve relevant systems. Should it create a major institute, it could become the global hub for advanced research in this field.

Tulsa would also benefit from greater connectivity. Having welcomed [more than ten million visitors](#) since its opening in 2018, the Gathering Place is an incredible tourist draw. This will be even more the case now that [Zink Lake](#) has opened, a 2.5 mile artificial lake in the middle of the Arkansas River, where people can swim, kayak, and even canoe its white water rapids. But the Gathering Place remains somewhat isolated from the Arts District and Guthrie Green. According to [recent research](#), visitors now account for more than 60 percent of economic activity in America’s downtowns, while workers who commute to them account for just 25 percent or so, and residents for just 10 percent.³¹ Downtown and the city as a whole would benefit from bike trails and linear parks between the Gathering Place and the Arts District.

The Gathering Place sets a high bar for quality in everything from its design to its landscaping and programming. According to its executive director, who came to the park after a decade and a half at Disney Julio Badin, Tulsa’s “whole hospitality and entertainment ecosystem—our hotels and convention spaces, all our amenities—must be at the same level of quality.” Tulsa should work to match or exceed it across its entire hospitality infrastructure, from its airport to its hotels, which are the first things people experience when visiting the city.

But Tulsa’s relatively small size as a city and metropolis imposes limits on its growth. High tech innovation remains incredibly clustered and concentrated on the coasts. The San Francisco Bay Area alone accounts for more than a third of all venture capital investment in high-tech startups and as much as half of all venture investment in new artificial intelligence startups. Just five metropolitan areas—San Francisco, New York, Boston, San Jose, and Los Angeles—account for more than two-thirds of all venture capital investment across the nation.³²

To compete, Tulsa must increase its scale and scope by connecting to other economic regions. A good step in this direction is the formation of an Innovation Corridor linking Tulsa and Northwest Arkansas. Both regions share world-class capabilities in supply chains and logistics (Northwest Arkansas is home to Walmart and the trucking giant J.B. Hunt).³³ There is also an obvious connection to nearby Oklahoma City and the college towns of Norman, where the University of Oklahoma is located, and Stillwater, home to Oklahoma State University.

It makes sense to expand the region’s footprint even farther. Tulsa is less than a four-hour drive from Kansas City and about the same distance from Dallas, which is part of the Texas Triangle mega-region that includes Houston and San Antonio. Taken together, this is an economic aggregate of more than 20 million people that produces more than \$1.5 trillion in economic output, one of the 15 largest economies in the world.³⁴ Though these distances may seem daunting, they are significantly smaller than the area encompassing the long-established Bos-Wash mega-region on the East Coast, which spans Boston, New York, and Washington, DC.



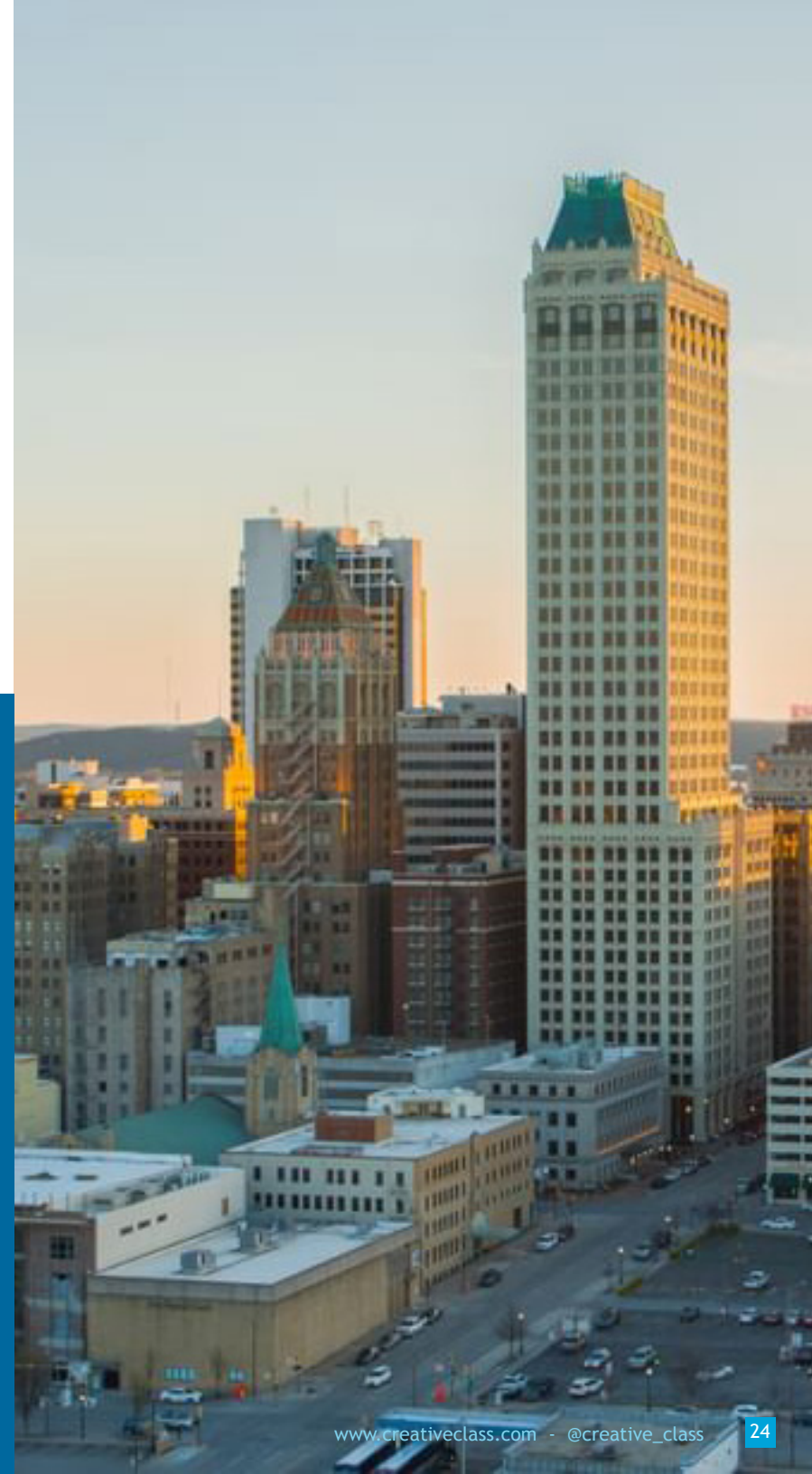
Back in the 1990s, when I was a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, I got to know Tim McNulty. The head of the [Council of Great Lakes Governors](#) at the time, he catalyzed initiatives to clean up the Great Lakes and modernize the region's older manufacturing industries. Later, he went on to help develop and steward Pennsylvania's economic development efforts under two of its governors. In his current role at Carnegie Mellon, McNulty spearheads initiatives to apply cutting-edge technologies to revitalize industries and communities. There is little in the world of local economic development that he hasn't seen or done.

But when he joined me on a recent trip to Tulsa, he was as wide-eyed as I've ever seen him. "What they have done is amazing," he said. "A step beyond what we were able to do in Pittsburgh. They are reinventing economic development, marrying innovation and talent to more inclusive place-based development."

Indeed, Tulsa's model of community-enhancing development is one that cities across the United States and the world have much to learn from.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The internationally bestselling author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, *Who's Your City?* and *The New Urban Crisis*, Richard Florida is one of the world's leading urbanists. He is currently Visiting Distinguished Professor at [Vanderbilt University](#) and University Professor at the [University of Toronto](#). He also serves as Visiting Senior Fellow at the [Kresge Foundation](#) and Senior Fellow with [Heartland Forward](#). He was previously a faculty member at [Carnegie Mellon University](#), [George Mason University](#), [Ohio State University](#), and NYU, and has been a visiting professor at Harvard and MIT. A co-founder of CityLab, the leading publication devoted to cities and urbanism, he provides strategic advice to companies, foundations, and governments worldwide, and serves on the boards of several real estate development firms, venture capital firms, and investment funds. For the past five years, Florida has served as an advisor to Tulsa's [George Kaiser Family Foundation](#).



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TEAM BACKGROUND AND BIOS



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Arthur Goldwag participated in the interviews and served as editor for this project. Senior Writer and Editor for the Creative Class Group, he held positions at Random House, *The New York Review of Books*, and the *Book-of-the-Month Club* and is the author of several books, including *The New Hate* and *The Politics of Fear*.



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Mark Block serves as director of events and logistics for the Creative Class Group. Block began his career in the U.S. Senate in 1990, working in every major position in the Senators' Capitol Hill Office, culminating in his role as Deputy Chief of Staff for four years. After receiving his MBA from Johns Hopkins University, Block joined *Newsweek* as Director of External Relations in 2003, where he created the Newsweek Executive Forum, which became the magazine's standard Q&A event series.

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