



Serving the Underserved Through Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

JOE KAPP ON HIS EXPERIENCE SUPPORTING RURAL AND LGBTQ COMMUNITIES

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DIVERSITY



EQUITY



INCLUSION

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation asked over a dozen ecosystem builders to watch, recap, and share their thinking on the Firestarter talks from the past three ESHIP Summits. This article is part of a series that supports the Kauffman Foundation's ongoing efforts to grow entrepreneurship and explore new models of economic development by elevating the work of ecosystem builders.

These talks were intended to inspire conversation and drive engagement in key themes in the field of entrepreneurial ecosystem building.

Summary

In this talk, Joe Kapp spoke about overcoming obstacles to create resilient communities. He explained why entrepreneurship and ecosystems are critical to supporting traditionally marginalized communities around the country.

Joe Kapp's entrepreneurship journey has not been about the next great creation or making a million dollars, but focused on social justice and social change. He spent years counseling people on death and dying on an AIDS Hotline in Florida. Through that work, Joe learned the importance of self-advocacy, especially when no one else was advocating for you. He went on to start businesses and services centered on the LGBTQ Community.

“Our fundamental job is to improve access to resources and to create access to opportunities.”



[View the full Firestarter](#)

Unique Solutions

Living in West Virginia and surrounded by naysayers, Joe was inspired by those around him. “As I’ve traveled across Appalachian and to other rural communities around America, I’ve been struck by the sheer poverty and the plight facing many people ... opioid drugs, the lack of clean water, challenges with internet access ... But I’ve been even more struck by the wonderful potential and the resiliency that exists in our rural communities.”

Through these interactions, an unlikely partnership formed after meeting a chicken farmer. Joe, the farmer, and the local community college embarked on a venture involving poultry carbon biochar. This could be an environmentally friendly solution to wastewater remediation, resoiling, and addressing pollutants from waterways.

Entrepreneurship in Rural Communities

In partnership with the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship ([NACCE](#)) and [The Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education](#), Joe sought to change mindsets in young people. He reported, “We threaded together eight community colleges across Appalachia, and we’ve been able to infuse entrepreneurship education into the lives of over 40,000 kids in Appalachia.” As Joe expanded his work in the region, he realized there were no resources for supporting rural communities. But as a result of the 2018 ESHIP Summit, 175 people came together to start [Rural Rise](#), a collective of partnerships working to advance entrepreneurship in rural communities.

**“ There are many days when we will feel lonely,
there are many days when we will question the value of our work,
there are many days we will question the value of our worth ...
please just know what you do matters.”**

**“ Entrepreneurship development will become the next
major social justice issue of our time. Your job as an ecosystem builder
is to create spaces and to create places to make it easier for people
to start new businesses to become self-sufficient.”**

Throughout his career, Joe has sought to live a life of purpose and intention. His work is an homage to those who were lost too soon and those who haven’t historically had a seat at the table. He has tirelessly championed these causes and honored those he serves.

Joe Kapp, like many ecosystem builders, did not set out to empower others and become a servant leader. He saw a need, answered the call, and made a difference. He looked beyond his sightlines and worked toward creating systems that addressed social and environmental needs beyond his local community.



Bio: Cecilia Wessinger is an entrepreneurial ecosystem builder and supports the Kauffman Foundation as an ESHIP Community Activator. She works to unite empowerment and equity with community culture, and as a certified Cultural Competency and Unconscious Bias facilitator, she moves conversations beyond diversity and inclusion to connecting, engaging, and belonging. She previously worked in the travel industry and has lived, worked, and traveled around the world. [Follow her](#) story contributions on Medium.