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Rotary Action Group for
Community Economic Development

LaunchDETROIT Marks 12 Years Helping Detroit Area Entrepreneurs

If you drive down Woodward Avenue from the riverfront through midtown Detroit today and recall what it looked like 12 years ago, the changes are visible and noteworthy.

While not as observable, LaunchDETROIT, the Rotary-powered program established 12 years ago to help entrepreneurs in under-resourced areas of Detroit, also made significant strides. LaunchDETROIT has provided business education, mentoring and networking opportunities to 100 entrepreneurs as well as micro-loans of up to \$2,500 each to 42 qualifying participants. Visit: www.launchdetroit.org

The inspiration for LaunchDETROIT began in 2012 with a presentation by Rotarian Marilyn Fitzgerald, author of "If I Had A Water Buffalo," to a Rotary District 6400 Assembly. Fitzgerald detailed her travels to countries around the globe and the benefits of micro-financing sustainable futures for impoverished people. District Governor Mary Kehoe and Assistant Governor Donna Schmidt organized a committee to explore establishing a microfinance project that birthed LaunchDETROIT. Taking on leadership roles were Rotarians – Chair Larry Wright, Vice Chair Margaret Williamson and Treasurer Liz Smith.

"From the very beginning, we quickly realized that business education was key to the success of our entrepreneurs," said Margaret Williamson, current LaunchDETROIT chair, who credited Rotarian Aaron Maike, then president of Baker College of Allen Park, in helping with the design of the program's first business classes.

As word about LaunchDETROIT spread through local news outlets and The Rotarian International Magazine, similar models emerged including LaunchMyCity (<https://launchmycity.org>) in Raleigh, North Carolina. In 2018, the program's efforts paid off with receipt of a two-year global grant from The Rotary Foundation with Detroit Rotary as the host club in partnership with Taylor and Trenton Rotary Clubs, and international partner -- the Toronto Sunrise Club of District 7070.

Margaret Williamson notes the award was significant because it was one of the first Rotary Foundation Global Grants for microfinance in the United States. Level One Bank stepped up as a community banking partner while Wayne State University's Mike Ilitch School of Business and International Strategic Management (ISM) partnered to provide additional business education resources customized to better serve participating entrepreneur's business needs. With the global grant, entrepreneurs were divided into small groups of five to seven people. Each group was assigned a mentor to advise them.

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As the pandemic caused many small businesses to close or pivot, LaunchDETROIT continued to accept entrepreneur applications and interviewed individuals virtually to join the program.

"We connected with graduates of our program as well through group Zoom meetings to find out how entrepreneurs and their businesses were doing," added Williamson. "To our delight, we listened as they gave each other tips and helpful referrals to generate more business."

Partnerships have extended across state lines as well. More than five years ago, the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University (IU) contacted LaunchDETROIT, offering to send students to help the program's entrepreneurs with marketing and finance needs as part of the school's alternative break program. In the spring of 2022, IU students and advisors arrived for a week-long visit with five businesses established by LaunchDETROIT entrepreneurs, who welcomed the students' insights and recommendations.

Currently, a new group of entrepreneurs is attending individualized education sessions with ISM and will soon meet together on a regular basis with Rotary volunteer mentors. "We continue to accept online applications and will plan to conduct the next round of interviews in late summer," said Williamson. "Our experience shows that the energy and passion each person brings to this program helps set them up to be successful in their business."



Margaret Williamson, Chair of LaunchDETROIT talks with entrepreneur Dazmonique Carr, founder of Deeply Rooted Produce.



Khella Young, and her mother Karen Young share plans for their business, BeeBuzzed, with LaunchDETROIT mentor Bernadette Durkin.

For Williamson and her committee, the program is paying off in other ways. She said, "Our entrepreneurs have learned that Rotary's motto 'Service Above Self' is not an empty commitment, and they want to be part of giving back to the community by becoming Rotarians themselves."

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