



entrepreneur center

**PROPELLING IDEAS, EMPOWERING OUR FUTURE**

# **Annual Impact Report**

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**2023**

# Our Mission

The Sky City Entrepreneur Center is dedicated to helping small business owners succeed and new businesses launch in Blount County.

Located in downtown Maryville, Sky City is at the heart of our region's growth. Sky City is more than just affordable modern office space, it is the hub of entrepreneurship in our community.



“ To ensure the long-term sustainability of our community, the biggest asset that we need is diversity in our business environment. We need businesses large and small, from publicly traded to small, focused entrepreneurs. Sky City has been and will be a treasured resource in nurturing and developing our small business infrastructure to ensure our community thrives. ”

**Trevis D. Gardner, Chairman, Blount County Chamber of Commerce**



## What if I told you that you're wrong about entrepreneurship?

If you'd asked me two years ago what kind of person is an entrepreneur, I would have given you a very specific answer. This is a man, most likely in a tech startup, in his mid to late 30s. He has money. He wears carefully stylish yet casual clothes and drives a Tesla. He drinks very dry craft IPAs.

Yes, I'm an imaginative type, but this image isn't far from the general consensus, either.

That consensus couldn't be further from the truth.

I have been leading Sky City Entrepreneur Center since July 2021, and in that time I've seen teens to retirees, moms to grandmoms, foodies, artists, farmers, and yes, even techies, all join us under this big tent called entrepreneurship. And I've seen seasoned entrepreneurs giving of themselves to help these new entrepreneurs along, through mentorship and lessons learned.

The folks we serve here are coming to entrepreneurship for different reasons, and from different walks of life, but all have the same goal: to succeed. Whether success means building big to sell big or just providing for their families, Sky City helps them get there.

As you read through the stories and statistics in this Impact Report, I ask that you think of your favorite local, Blount County business. Think of all the hard work, long nights, worries and joys it took them to get started and keep going. Imagine whether or not they went it alone, and how their story might be different if they'd had a little help along the way.

And I invite you to be part of Sky City's story, to help us help your next favorite neighborhood business, uplifting local people, their families, and the whole community. We'd love to have you along for the ride.

Sincerely

**Shannon Bryant**  
**Executive Director**  
**Sky City Entrepreneur Center**



# Starter Spotlight

## Sarah Miller and Willie Daugherty

### The Neighborhood Chef, & The Untitled Baking Project

In the bustling heart of our community, two innovative CO.STARTERS graduates, Sarah Miller and Willie Daugherty, are cooking up more than just meals—they're stirring a sense of togetherness.

Sarah and Willie connected through Sky City. Willie's meal prep business, The Neighborhood Chef, had just what Sarah needed to grow The Untitled Baking Project: a commercial kitchen available several days a week. Today, that shared space is a testament to the community spirit fostered by Sky City Entrepreneur Center.

Thanks to this partnership, The Untitled Baking Project has grown from a home-based side hustle into a thriving wholesale business, providing quality baked goods to local eateries like Vienna Coffeehouse, Walnut Kitchen and Diamondjack's Wine Bar. She also sells direct-to-consumer baked goods through her email list and local markets, bringing a diversity of flavors to our community.

For Willie, The Neighborhood Chef continues to provide wholesome and diverse meal prep for busy families,

older couples, and everyone in between. His "kitchen time" is on the weekends, culminating in a Monday pick-up. Sarah's business keeps the kitchen active during Willie's weekday downtime.

They both agree that CO.STARTERS is not just a program but a "fraternity" for new business owners, providing a built-in network of support.

While growth is on the menu, Sarah and Willie savor the joys of business ownership, cherishing the autonomy and personal fulfillment it brings. They've found a rhythm working side by side, sharing the kitchen, and exchanging ideas—like built-in consultants who've become as much coworkers as they are co-creators in this culinary niche.

As we look to the future, Sky City Entrepreneur Center is committed to nurturing these connections, supporting the growth of local businesses, and fostering a thriving community for all entrepreneurs.



# CO.STARTERS

## Economic Impact Numbers

### Revenue Growth

Sky City's CO.STARTERS graduates experience an average of \$16,000 of annual revenue growth after completing the course.



**\$16,000**

Annual Revenue Growth

That is an economic impact of \$340,000 added value annually.



**\$340,000**

Annual Economic Impact

### Employee Numbers

Of Sky City CO.STARTERS graduates responding to a survey, 25% added employees after completing the course.



**25%**

Added Employees





# Starter Spotlight

Jonnay Wegener

## Lil Cub Den

Jonnay Wenger, founder of Lil Cub Den, has significantly impacted Blount County by providing a welcoming space for families to connect and celebrate. Her business, born out of the support and knowledge gained from Sky City Entrepreneur Center's CO.STARTERS program, quickly became a community staple. Jonnay opened Lil Cub Den's doors within 45 days of CO.STARTERS program completion, and won the Judges Choice Award at Sky City's pitch competition, The Launchpad.

Lil Cub Den offers solace and celebration, hosting everything from first birthdays to gatherings for foster families and mom groups. Jonnay's commitment to providing a safe and accessible environment ensures that all families have a place to come together.

Through strategic local partnerships and a strong community-oriented vision, Jonnay has fostered a sense of belonging and support in Blount County. Her business not only enhances the lives of individual families, but also strengthens the fabric of our community.

Collaborating with Adventure Playhouse for music classes, hosting yoga sessions, and welcoming food



trucks for special events, amplifies Lil Cub Den's impact, transforming it into a vibrant gathering space that celebrates local talent and entrepreneurship. Jonnay's commitment to fostering these connections not only enriches her business but also fortifies the sense of unity and support for local business.

Lil Cub Den is a shining example of the profound impact that entrepreneurial support can have on an individual and an entire community.

# Starter Spotlight

Maelea Galyon

## Turn It Up Consulting

Maelea Galyon, a dynamic participant in CO.STARTERS at Sky City, has carved a niche for herself in enhancing leadership and communication within the community. Her business, Turn It Up Consulting, focuses on helping leaders work more effectively with their teams and emphasizes the importance of respectful communication and active listening, especially in situations of disagreement. Her goal is to foster an environment where constructive conversations lead to positive outcomes, be it in family settings, community involvement, or the workplace.

Sky City's coworking space has played a crucial role in Maelea's journey. She finds that working away from the distractions of home, like pets and household chores, significantly boosts her productivity. "I will get way more done if I go to SkyCity than if I work at home," Maelea says. The center's facilities, including the versatile conference room and event space, are perfectly suited for her needs, providing ample room and flexibility for various community training programs and meetings.

Maelea's business thrives on partnerships and community connections fostered through Sky City. Sky City Executive Director Shannon Bryant, staff at Blount Partnership, and her fellow CO.STARTERS have helped Maelea grow her professional network.

Her story is a testament to the role Sky City plays in not just supporting businesses but nurturing leaders who, in turn, contribute to the community's well-being. Sky City isn't just a physical space; it's a nurturing ground for skills, relationships, and growth that extend far beyond its walls.



# Co-working Space

10

Dedicated Desks

At 70% capacity

4

Private Offices

Stay full year round

212

Day Passes

Used in 2023

More than 3,000 visits to Sky  
City Event Center in 2023





# Starter Spotlight

Melonie Effler

## In the Kitchen With Momma Mel

Let's raise our spatulas to a social media maestro who turned up the heat in Blount County's online kitchen. Blount County native Melonie Effler founded the "In the Kitchen with Momma Mel" YouTube channel as a side project, and it has now become her full-time job. This content creator has been slicing, dicing, and sautéing her way through the digital world with her zesty quick-fix weeknight meals.

From her first upload, she stirred the pot of local pride, blending the flavors of East Tennessee with her own special sauce. Today, her channel has more than 130,000 subscribers and 12,450,000 views.

Our digital chef found the ingredients for success at Sky City Entrepreneur Center in the CO.STARTERS program. The guidance she received was just what she needed to season her growing venture – taking it from a simmer to a rolling boil as she stepped up to be the sole provider for her family.

While flying solo in the kitchen, she's whipping up delicious partnerships with fellow CO.STARTERS, like Jammin Jams, by folding their fruity goodness into her videos.

Our culinary creator's story is a testament to what Sky City can nurture – a community of entrepreneurs who aren't afraid to mix it up and bring their dreams to the boil. Your support can help keep the entrepreneurial "kitchen" alive, celebrating our local people, our culture, and our community.





# Sky City Board of Directors



**Jeremy LaDuke**

Interim President



**Tammi Ford**

Secretary



**Leigh Cowden**

Treasurer



**Lane Shuler**



**Abhijit "AV" Verekar**



**Anna Graham**



# Community Partners



**EPIC NINE**  
MARKETING OUTFITTERS

Heather L Martin CPA PLLC



Blount  
Partnership

# Sky City Events

Launchpad, Lunch & Learns, Ignition,  
and Women in Entrepreneurship

## Launchpad

The Launchpad is a high-energy, fun pitch contest. With local celebrity judges, Blount County business startups take the stage to vie for cash prizes, both Judges Choice and Audience Choice.

## Lunch & Learns

Sky City's Lunch & Learn Series brings entrepreneurs together for an hour-long presentation on a different topic each month, helping them expand their skillsets and make lasting connections.

## Women in Entrepreneurship

Women in Entrepreneurship - Blount County is a supportive meeting of women business owners in our community. They enjoy an informative presentation each month, along with a growing network of like-minded women.

## Ignition



Ignition is a chain-reaction podcast, featuring conversations between Sky City's entrepreneurs, showcasing the real lives of business owners and offering inspiration and lessons learned to listeners.





# Thank You

To our CO.STARTERS speakers

At Sky City, we believe in connecting new business owners with existing business owners, to create an ecosystem of support and shared experiences. Our CO.STARTERS benefit from a new guest speaker each session, and we thank them for their time. These include:

**Jonnay Wenger, Lil Cub Den**

**Laurie Meier, Neighborly Books**

**Stefan Wilson, Allevia Technology**

**Lane Shuler, INK Spoken Word**

**Tina Rhea, REO Cheesewagon**

**Leigh Cowden, Vermillion Law**

**Marcus Blair, Omega Digital Solutions**

**Zack Webb, Guyot Holdings**

**Gregg Bostick, TSBDC**

**Melonie Effler, In the Kitchen with Momma Mel**

**Steve Burnett, DYB Solutions**

**Daniel Ritchey, TN Exterior Cleaning**

**Brexton Bennett, Ecosummit**

**Heather Martin and Amy Sanders, Heather Martin, CPA**

We also thank our CO.STARTERS facilitators and mentors for giving of their time, including:

**Clifton Caudill, Greg Rowe, Jeremy LaDuke, Marcus Blair, and Kyle Perkins**





When we first started plotting ideas for helping stimulate entrepreneurship in Blount County in 2017, we couldn't envision the emergence of Sky City as it exists today. This center's profound community impact stems from years of dedication by volunteers, our entrepreneurial network, and our executive director.

I often say that Sky City is doing "upstream work" - we are helping solve problems before they are problems. The main problem we are preventing is a future where Blount County doesn't have a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem. We are fighting against that, because that's a Blount County where good ideas and brilliant people have left, local business startups have failed, and the human capital that is invested into them is wasted.

In the last 2 years, Sky City has graduated over 50 starters from our CO.STARTERS programs and that tells me we are creating a future where good ideas flourish, local

Sky City wouldn't be where it is today without the generous support of our community. Please join us in shaping a future that Blount County be the best it can be.

**Jeremy LaDuke**

**Interim President**

**Epic Nine Marketing Outfitters**

