



LAUNCH & LEARN

*An unlikely pair have helped get hundreds of businesses off the ground.
Now they have their sights set on tackling America's racial divide*

DYNAMIC DUO

Katie Gailles and Matthew Kane (below and on previous pages) started LaunchRaleigh in 2017 to help local entrepreneurs.

t all started when Matthew Kane was struck by lightning while canoeing in Guatemala.

OK, so it wasn't literal lightning, but as he floated down the Chixoy River in 1994, about as far off the grid as one can get, Kane felt a mental jolt of electricity, that rare *aha!* moment that comes when you suddenly see the world in a new light — and you know that life will never be the same.

As one of nine children in a Catholic family from Bethesda, Maryland, Kane, then 34, had spent years searching for his place in the world — the elusive cosmic purpose he calls “what is mine to do.” He sold printing equipment in Houston, then worked for a utility company. He and his wife, Sonia, moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, where he started an engraving business out of their home, despite having never engraved anything in his life. And he kept searching — often through his church, St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh — hoping that God would put him where he needed to be.

Now, his path had led him to the middle of nowhere. He had flown into Guatemala City with other members of his church to build a relationship with a small Mayan community there. After hopping

an old puddle-jumper to a rural military airport and then piling into the back of a pickup truck, Kane's group found themselves slicing through the Chixoy River in canoes. After about an hour, they paddled past a small village where families stood on the bank, waving.

“Here I was, a sheltered guy from an all-white church,” says Kane, now 61. “And these people had nothing. It's one thing to see those images of the kid with the bowl of rice. You know, ‘You can feed this kid for a dollar a week.’ But here were the kids. It was the first time I recognized the need of folks — and my own privilege. It opened my eyes.”

When Kane returned to Raleigh, everything felt different. Being a husband, a father, an engraver — it was no longer enough. He went back to his business, but the idea kept nagging at him: He was not doing all that he could.

In 1996, in hopes of doing more to help others — and of making connections in the community — Kane joined the Rotary Club of North Raleigh. By 2016, he had forged a long and distinguished career in Rotary, including working on a successful literacy program in Guatemala and serving as governor of District 7710, when he began looking for a way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Rotary Club of North Raleigh in 2017. He encouraged club members to think about something big. Something important.





MALIKIA ROBERTSON

Malikia Robertson runs Yoga 4 Us, whose primary mission is to bring African American women and their families into the practice of yoga. LaunchRaleigh helped her define her business strategy and expand operations with Zoom parties and date night sessions. She now serves as a LaunchRaleigh mentor.

Over the years, Kane and his fellow club members had noticed that when good things happened in their city, a neighborhood called Southeast Raleigh always seemed to miss out. In that primarily African American neighborhood, the per capita income in recent years has been at least 30 percent lower than the national average, and the unemployment rate more than twice as high.

As Kane was researching potential projects, he came across a story from the September 2014 issue of this magazine about a program called LaunchDetroit, which was helping budding entrepreneurs by focusing on education, mentorship, small loans, and networking. He wondered if he could replicate the program in Southeast Raleigh. “Knowing that it had been done successfully before was very encouraging,” he says. “And knowing it was done by Rotarians gave me added confidence that a similar model in Raleigh might work.”

He got in touch with Larry Wright and Marilyn Fitzgerald, the Rotarians who had started LaunchDetroit, to learn more. As they talked about what had worked and what hadn’t in Detroit, he realized that his club in Raleigh didn’t have the resources to run such a program on its own. “The only way to make it work was to go to the community,” Kane says. “If I could find out who was already focusing on entrepreneurship and invite them to be part of our Launch [program], then Rotary could be the connector.”

Through a friend, he heard about Katie Gailles, the director of Wake Technical Community College’s

entrepreneurship initiatives. She seemed like the perfect person to help him get a local version of LaunchDetroit off the ground. Now if he could just get her to return his phone calls.

A quick side note about Matthew Kane: A cynic might look at him and make assumptions. He’s a smiling, middle-aged white guy with a sun-drenched twang and a pressed button-down shirt who says he just wants to help people, peppering conversations with bromides — albeit sincere ones — such as, “I’m here to help build the kingdom of God here on earth.” A cynic might roll their eyes. Call him Pollyannaish. Naïve, even. But Kane isn’t deterred by cynics. First he charms them with his folksy manner. Then he wins them over through sheer positivity.

The Rotary Action Group for Community Economic Development is creating opportunity by investing in communities. Learn more, and read about some LaunchDetroit success stories, at ragged.com.

**“OUT OF ALL THE THINGS THAT
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RENEE WILSON

The owner of It Sparkles, It Shines, It's Clean! a residential and commercial cleaning service, Renee Wilson had run her business for 14 years but felt she was coasting. "LaunchRaleigh came into my life when I needed to be rebuilt," says Wilson, who put together a business plan for the first time through the program. "I needed a new mindset on how to do business." She stays involved in the program by speaking to prospective applicants.



Still, Gailes would not be won over easily. A self-described "rough and gruff" Winston-Salem native, Gailes runs her own consulting firm that helps entrepreneurs "find their swagger." She spent 27 years working for IBM in sales, marketing, and public relations, and her LinkedIn page describes her as an "Entrepreneurial Mindset Trainer and Coach/CommunityBuilder/Speaker/Writer/Innovative Problem Solver," which is another way of saying she is relentlessly busy. But this Matthew Kane guy wouldn't stop calling. "He kept hounding me until I called him back," she says.

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When Gailes finally agreed to a meeting, she was impressed by Kane's enthusiasm — and by his plan to focus on an underserved community. "He laid out this thing he wanted to do," says Gailes, who has been doing community service since she was a teenager. "And it was right in line with my mission at the community college, which is to identify holes in the entrepreneurial fabric in our county and find a way to mend them. I was excited to do it in a community that had been left behind." Yes, it sounded like a lot of work. But she would make the time. This was important.

The pairing turned out to be inspired. Their personalities dovetailed beautifully: Gailes' hard-charging managerial strengths, Kane's unstoppable positivity. Gailes' to-do lists and documentation, Kane's emotional approach. She assigned endless action items. He made sure all the papers were stapled and organized. And while both turned to their extensive networks of personal connections in search of partners in finance, education, and public relations, Gailes marveled at Kane's ability to get people on board. "He appealed to their sense of goodness," she says. "He made them feel like, 'This is just the right thing to do. Look how many lives we can change.'"

The partners they landed for the LaunchRaleigh entrepreneurship program included other Rotary clubs, local universities and nonprofits, and the city of Raleigh. With about \$60,000 in seed money, they were ready to get started.

n December 2016, Gales and Kane interviewed 44 people

from Southeast Raleigh, each of whom was hoping to start or expand their “main street business” — a salon, a photographer, a home maintenance service. Twenty-two made the cut for the first LaunchRaleigh cohort, which would meet every Tuesday in a classroom provided by Shaw University, a historically Black college in downtown Raleigh. Each student outlined their idea — some were more developed than others — and a facilitator taught them the nuts and bolts of building a business.

At the first LaunchRaleigh graduation ceremony in March 2017, Kane and Gales watched proudly as 20 students presented five-minute “infomercials” on their businesses. “The class helps entrepreneurs gel as friends and acts almost like a board of directors,” says Kane. “We’re giving them intangibles — and one of those is a community of believers.” The graduates are also paired with mentors, many of them Rotary members, whom they work with for an additional six months as they implement their business plan. If they need funding, a LaunchRaleigh liaison helps them apply for an interest-free loan.

It was at that first graduation ceremony that Gales and Kane knew that they had something special — something that could be replicated in other cities, just as he had modeled LaunchRaleigh after Launch-Detroit. Kane’s son Ryan — at the time a member

of the Rotary Club of Raleigh Midtown — designed LaunchMyCity, a website that outlines everything a club needs to carry out the program. “We wanted people to see it and say, ‘If they can do it in North Carolina, we can do it in Nebraska,’ or Maine, or Arizona,” says Kane. “We have a model that is proven, and I think it can be reproduced in any city in America.”

LaunchMyCity has since expanded the program to 16 communities across North Carolina, Colorado, and Michigan; seven more are interested. “Role models like Matt [Kane] and LaunchDetroit pointed the way. Having a template was a tremendous asset,” says Mark Murray, a member of the Rotary Club of Adrian, Michigan, who is on the leadership team for the local LaunchLenawee.

Seven programs in North Carolina’s Wake County alone boast 390 graduates, many of whom have come back to help the next group of students.

On a Tuesday night in November, 20 entrepreneurs are on a Zoom call; COVID-19 has forced Launch-Raleigh classes online for the time being. Most of the participants look exhausted. Many have come straight from work, and now they’re sunk into couches or sitting at a kitchen table for three hours. But they’ve been meeting for nine weeks now, and they have become one another’s friends, confidants, and cheerleaders.

Tonight, they’re listening to Michael Loftin, the energetic founder and CEO of a digital marketing and IT solutions firm called BoxTech LLC, as he gives a rousing presentation, equal parts pep talk and marketing lesson. More than one student entrepreneur

The Launch program, created in Detroit and Raleigh to boost struggling entrepreneurs, can be adapted for any community and any budget. Visit launchmycity.org to learn how to start a program in your area.



SAM TATE

Sam Tate co-founded Tango Legal, a web platform that connects attorneys via smart devices with clients seeking their services. “To be an entrepreneur, you have to have a certain skill set, and I realized quickly that I didn’t have that yet,” Tate says. “LaunchRaleigh gives you the information and the knowledge to be a successful entrepreneur.”

takes notes. Others pepper Loftin with questions: How much do graphic designers charge to build a website? How much should they budget to market their business? Does he pay his employees weekly or monthly?

A few months earlier, Loftin had been right where these students are. A graduate of LaunchWakeForest just down the road, Loftin spent two months learning from mentors, bonding with others in the community, and building his business. Looking at him now, confident and fluent in business-speak, all 20 students believe it can be done. And that's the whole idea. "You have a problem with your phone, you call Apple," says Loftin, 41. "If you have a problem with your business, who do you call?" Entrepreneur Dante Evans says, "Out of all the things that went wrong in 2020, LaunchRaleigh was one of the things that went right."

K

ane sold Cutting Edge Engraving in 2017 and is now

retired. Though he spends much of his time on LaunchRaleigh, he is always looking for new opportunities to do good. In April 2020, when the full extent of the COVID-19 crisis was beginning to sink in and local food pantries were running out of food, Kane received a misdirected email from the governor of his district. It said that Rise Against Hunger, an international hunger relief non-

profit, was sitting on enormous supplies of rice in a warehouse roughly 90 miles away. Kane quickly contacted a few agencies and learned that people had been asking for rice at a Raleigh food pantry.

So Kane persuaded his Rotary club to buy thousands of pounds of rice, much of which ended up in a fellow club member's garage. Then he enlisted members of his church, Rotarians, and neighbors to scoop the rice into five-pound bags. In the end, they prepared 84,000 servings of rice (at 10 servings per pound) for families who needed it — all because of an accidental email. "It made a tangible difference — not just to the families who received the rice, but to the people who bagged the rice," Kane says.

A month later, Kane saw people throwing bricks through windows in downtown Raleigh during protests against police brutality following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. "People were feeling hopeless and angry about racism," he says. "White people don't understand Black people, and Black people don't understand white people." Where many people might respond, "Well, yeah. And your point is?" Kane's first thought was: "Maybe my indifference is contributing to the problem." His next thought: "What is mine to do?"

Back in 2005, he had taken part in a "racial study circle" in which members of his predominantly white church joined with members of a Black church to talk about issues of race in a safe space. What he learned had stuck with him. One man told a story about how he had to put on nice slacks and shoes to buy something from the hardware store; otherwise employees would think he was stealing. "I couldn't believe it," says Kane. "That told me a tiny little bit about what it's like to be a Black person in America."

Remembering that experience, he thought, if only there were some way to replicate that type of structured conversation during the COVID-19 era. He envisioned Zoom calls between people of different races and backgrounds, each telling their stories and listening, with facilitators guiding the dialogue. He felt certain his Rotary club would fund such a program, but how could he pull it off?

Once again, he called Katie Gables. Now a Rotarian herself, in Holly Springs, North Carolina, she loved the brilliant simplicity of the idea — and had plenty of her own ideas. Guidelines were set; a website was built. An expert in racial equity was brought on to train facilitators in the sensitive nature of racial discussions. Eighteen participants volunteered to have the conversations. And by early July, pilot sessions had been rolled out for Our Stories: Brave Conversations on Race.

Then, for five consecutive weeks, four groups of 10 people — five of them white, five people of color — Zoomed together for 90 minutes a week, answering questions like: "What did you learn about race from your parents?" And they listened, with no shaming, no blaming. In the controlled, confidential environment, the same people who are tired of explaining what it's like to be Black finally felt heard. And the same ones who might have said, "It's not my fault! I wasn't a slave owner," realized that they had been contributing to institutionalized racism in unconscious ways. "White progressives benefit from these programs," says Kane. "They walk in and say, 'This is for other people.' Then they participate and say, 'I guess this is for me.'"

Like any new program, this one has its growing pains, with slight attrition rates and some difficulty getting people to sign up for what amount to tough conversations with complete strangers. "These are acts of justice, and that demands more of you," Kane says. "It's way easier to scoop rice."

But Kane believes it's the kind of initiative that Rotary values. He hopes that clubs everywhere will see something they like in the idea and say, "Hey, my community needs that."

In other words, he hopes fellow Rotary members will ask themselves: What's mine to do? ■

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JENNIFER MURPHY

As a small-business owner running a wedding planning service, Weddings Made to Order, Jennifer Murphy felt isolated. “People who work 9-to-5 jobs typically do not understand what comes with being an entrepreneur,” she says. “LaunchRaleigh gave all of us the connection with people who get it — especially during COVID-19, when no one is networking.”

Interested in bringing Our Stories: Brave Conversations on Race to your community? Kane and Gailles have put together a model with a set of standard practices for anyone who wants to replicate the program. Find out more at ourstoriesonrace.org. And learn how Rotary is making diversity, equity, and inclusion a priority at rotary.org/dei.

Frequent contributor Jeff Ruby wrote about Deepa Willingham and her school for girls in India for our October issue.