

The Gathering: A Unique Twist on First Friday Networking

By Bonita Gooch
The Community Voice

Wichita businesses do a "fair" job of recruiting Black professionals, but before you know it the majority of them are gone. That gives rise to the question, why do some people move to Wichita and fall in love with it and others can't wait to move away?

The 10 founding members of the Gathering agreed, individuals who fall in love with Wichita have built ties to the community.

Helping to build the kind of connections that help retain Black professionals in Wichita is one goal of The Gathering, a First Friday event with a purpose.

The idea for The Gathering started with three Black professionals who met to catch up over breakfast. What they caught was the vision of creating a "welcoming mat" or "landing space" for Black talent living in and/or moving to Wichita.

The original group of three grew to 10 and together they developed the vision and the concept for The Gathering, an invitational "First Friday" networking concept where diverse businesses and community professionals come together with "intentionality."

The concept of intentionality makes it clear, this is more than just a social event. These events are about accomplishing something.

For each of these strategically planned gatherings there are four goals:

1. Serving as a welcome mat for Black professionals,
2. Intentionally connecting people to get to know one another,
3. Sharing Wichita happenings,
4. Determining how members in attendance can best benefit/support each other.

This is also more than a program for new or nearly new people to Wichita. It's also for people who've been in Wichita for a while, who can benefit from making connections with other Black businesses and professionals.

"Ultimately a long-term goal would

be to serve as a vital community resource that helps develop and retain Black talent in Wichita by cultivating opportunities, helping businesses to engage African American new hires, creating pipelines through mentorships, diversifying boards and engaging the community through relationship building, said John Rolfe, one of The Gathering founders."

HOW CAN YOU PARTICIPATE?

Each of The Gatherings, are specially cultivated invite-only events. The 10 founding members identify people who have not previously attended The Gathering and pull together a diverse invite list of between 30 to 40 participants for each gathering.

"We don't want any more than that," said Junetta Everett, another founder. "We want to give it plenty of room and space for people to connect with each other."

At each Gathering, people stand up and introduce themselves. That way, everyone gets to know everyone in the room. Light snacks and drinks are served and during the networking segment, the goal is for everyone in the room to build a connection with a person that will extend beyond this one event.

The founders work to pull together another totally unique – non-repeat -- and diverse group of guests for each of The Gatherings. So far they've held four with a little over 100 people attending. The plan is to hold a Gathering every other month.

Earlier this month, a Grand Gathering was held. This is an event where all of the guests from the previous Gatherings were invited.

MAJOR COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP

So far, all of the Gatherings have been sponsored by a Wichita business or non-profit. The sponsoring organization is given an opportunity to promote their organization, but they also get a chance to meet and connect with some of the City's leading Black professionals.

For many of the sponsors, this cultural connection is something

totally new.

This spring, Jeff Fluhr, President and CEO of the Greater Wichita Partnership sponsored a Gathering at his office in downtown Wichita. "It was an evening that provided a very welcoming atmosphere to meet remarkable Black talent who call our great city home. Even after the meeting was over, the conversations continued. I left energized about living in Wichita!"

In addition, the food and beverages for each of the events are catered by a Black business.

We are proud to have been able to use Black businesses to

cater our events which helps to showcase their businesses" says Darryl Kelly, Gathering's Founding member. ●●



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PHOTOS: From the Grand Gathering held June 9 at the Emprise Bank Building, downtown Wichita. 1. Dr. Harrison Black, pediatric Dentist 1. Poetess Mese and Krystal Jordan 3. John Rolfe, President of the Wichita Chamber; Matt Michaelis, President Emprise Bank; Jeff Fluhr, President and CEO Greater Wichita Partnership, Jeff Weiford, Executive Vice President GLMV Architecture. All of their organizations have hosted a Gathering. 4. John Ford and Renaire Palmer and 5. T.J. Everett, entrepreneur, Scalp Resoration for Male Pattern Baldness.

Photos by Sonya Norris

The Gathering

PURPOSE STATEMENT: Amplifying Connections and Cultivating other Opportunities

Learn more about The Gathering by contacting any of the people below.

FOUNDING MEMBERS: Junetta Everett, Darryl Kelly, John Rolfe, Dr. Kaye Monk-Morgan, Carla Eckels, Corinthian Kelly, Jaci Kelly, Derek Morgan, (Previous: Terrell Benton, Christina Long, Jonathan Long) Taishma Council (joined)



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