



CITY OF FORT LAUDERDALE

EVENT SCHEDULE

8:00 – 9:00 AM

DOORS OPEN, NETWORKING SESSION

Join us early to get settled and connect with fellow attendees over coffee!

9:00 – 9:30 AM

WELCOME REMARKS

Kick-off with a warm welcome from Nikki Austin-Shipp and Merdochey LaFrance, followed by opening remarks from Fort Lauderdale City Manager Rickelle Williams.

9:30 – 11:30 AM

PITCH COMPETITION

Watch innovative entrepreneurs present their ideas to a panel of judges

11:30 – 12:30 PM

LUNCH, NETWORKING, & WINNER ANNOUNCEMENT

A catered lunch will be served. The Pitch Competition winner will be announced at 12:30!

12:30 PM

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Be inspired by thoughtful leadership and forward-thinking perspectives on innovation and community impact from Chris Cooper, Assistant City Manager for the City of Fort Lauderdale.

12:55 PM

CLOSING REMARKS

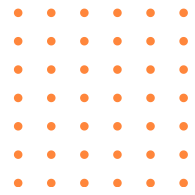
Presented by Daphnee Sainvil, J.D., LL.M Division Manager for Public Affairs, City of Fort Lauderdale

1:00 PM

EVENT CONCLUDES



CITY OF FORT LAUDERDALE



MEET THE JUDGES



ALEXANDER BAILEY

Founder & Financial Planner
Brickstone Advisors



GEORGE GREMSE

Chapter Chairman,
SCORE Broward



ANDRE CROSS

Business Assistance Coordinator,
City of Fort Lauderdale



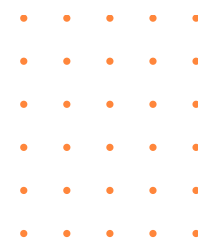
J.R. MCFARLING

Senior Small Business
Development Officer,
Urban League of Broward



ANTHONY SANTANA

CEO & Co-Founder of Hardcore
Advertising and Square One
Startup Solutions





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Building Businesses with Impact: Pitch Competition

Wednesday, May 14, 2025

L.A. Lee YMCA Black Box Theatre, 1409 NW 6th St. Fort Lauderdale, FL. 33311

Opening Remarks



Rickelle Williams

City Manager, City of Fort Lauderdale

Rickelle Williams became City Manager of Fort Lauderdale on April 2, 2025, leading Broward County's largest municipality with a \$1.2 billion budget and more than 3,000 employees. In this role, she oversees all city departments, including Police and Fire, and is recognized for her strategic thinking, strong leadership, and ability to build effective teams. Her background reflects extensive experience in municipal management, economic development, and community engagement.

Before her appointment in Fort Lauderdale, Manager Williams served in multiple executive roles in Miami Beach. As Economic Development Director and later Assistant City Manager, she spearheaded initiatives to strengthen economic growth, including P3 developments, workforce housing, incentive programs, and COVID-19 business recovery grants. In 2024, she was named Interim City Manager, managing a \$952 million budget and 2,300 employees while overseeing key departments and leading significant organizational efforts, such as appointing Miami-Dade County's first woman Fire Chief.

Manager Williams' earlier experience includes leadership roles at the Dania Beach CRA, the Miami-Dade Economic Advocacy Trust, and the City of Miami Gardens. Her work has consistently focused on inclusive economic development, affordable housing, public infrastructure, and capital improvement planning. She holds two master's degrees, is a Certified Economic Developer and LEED AP®, and has been widely recognized for her impact and leadership, including multiple awards honoring her influence and achievements in public service.



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Keynote Speaker



Chris Cooper

Assistant City Manager, City of Fort Lauderdale

Christopher Cooper brings over 20 years of experience in public service, with a strong track record in municipal and county government. Known for his strategic leadership, he has built effective teams, driven solutions to address community needs, and cultivated collaborative relationships across diverse stakeholders. Currently serving as Assistant City Manager for the City of Fort Lauderdale since August 2024, he oversees the Development Services Department, Community Redevelopment Agency, and Neighbor Support Division. In this role, he has led efforts to secure over \$1 million in grants for homelessness services, spearheaded area master plans, and advanced key initiatives in historic preservation, landscaping, and customer service.

Mr. Cooper joined the City of Fort Lauderdale in 2018 as deputy director of Development Services and was promoted to director in 2022, managing urban planning, zoning, housing, and public art initiatives. Prior to that, he held leadership roles in Gainesville, Florida, including intergovernmental affairs coordinator and code enforcement manager, where he led advocacy, grant programs, and technology upgrades. He began his career as a planner in Marion County. Mr. Cooper holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Florida and a bachelor's from Florida State University. He is an AICP-certified planner and a certified code enforcement professional, active in professional associations including FCCMA and ICMA.



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Master of Ceremonies



Merdochey LaFrance

Managing Principal, iTaylor Strategies

Merdochey LaFrance is a powerhouse strategist, connector, and public affairs executive with over two decades of cross-sector experience at the intersection of innovation, community, and impact. As the Managing Principal of iTaylor Strategies, a national consultancy, she leads initiatives that shape policy, elevate community voice, and advance equitable outcomes across government, corporate, and nonprofit sectors.

A respected voice in public policy and civic engagement, Merdochey has built a career on the belief that transformation happens when leadership is intentional, partnerships are authentic, and solutions are people-centered. Her portfolio includes designing stakeholder engagement campaigns, leading public-private partnerships, and producing high-impact convenings that drive results. From her tenure at Verizon, Brightline Trains, and The Florida Senate to her advisory roles with Smart City Expo USA and Popstock.io, she brings a 360-degree understanding of how innovation and leadership fuel progress.

A native Miamian of Haitian descent, Merdochey holds graduate degrees in Public Administration and Urban & Regional Planning, and executive education from Harvard Business School. She's a proud member of Leadership Florida, The Links, Incorporated, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and Women in Government Relations, among others. She is also deeply passionate about cultivating emerging leaders, championing inclusive economic growth, and curating moments that move people from inspiration to action.



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Judge #1



George Gremse

Chairman of SCORE Broward

Mr. Gremse is the Chapter Chairman at SCORE Broward. He has held senior management positions in both Fortune 500 companies like Hertz Rent a Car, Citibank, and Adecco Staffing as well as start-ups. He is President of Jolizmo Consulting and Investments, Inc. He was Interim CEO and a member of the Board of Directors at Liberty Health Sciences. He served on the Board of Directors of Metro Broward Economic Development Corporation.

Mr. Gremse was a Peace Corps Volunteer in South America. He holds a B.S. from Cornell University and an MBA from Baruch College of the City University of New York



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Judge #2



Anthony Santana

CEO & Co-Founder of Square One Startup Solutions

Anthony Santana is the Co-Founder of Hardcore Advertising, a boutique advertising agency and Square One Startup Solutions, a small business service and consulting firm. He has over 20 years of experience in business strategy, media and marketing. His journey began at Televisa, the largest creator of Latino content in the world. It was there that he discovered his passion and long-term goal of being in advertising and marketing. He also spent time at Tribune Publishing, owners of the Sun Sentinel, Chicago Tribune, and LA Times. There, he successfully guided a wide array of clients across many marketing verticals to positive outcomes by quickly understanding their goals and implementing strategies that generated results. His main role was to start and develop Tribune Publishing's digital marketing initiatives through their internal content agency.

Anthony is a South Florida native with a firm belief that the key to success in business is to be a part of the community. He currently serves on the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee for the FTL Chamber of Commerce and sits on the Board of Directors for Hispanic Unity. Anthony is also an Adjunct Professor at the University of Miami, where he teaches Managing Media Brands, a graduate-level course.

Anthony and his business partner, Corey Levin, have grown Hardcore Advertising from just a dream to a marketing machine. Hardcore Advertising manages the media and marketing efforts for an extremely diverse group of clients, including medical devices, law firms, universities, real estate, and much more. Hardcore campaigns are known for amazing design work and lead generation tactics that are second to none. Hardcore Advertising brings the power of first-class experience, ideas, and creativity to help clients achieve their business objectives.



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Judge #3



J.R. McFarling

Senior Small Business Development Officer, Urban League of Broward County Entrepreneurship Center

J.R. McFarling is a recognized leader in small business development and inclusive economic growth, currently serving as the Senior Small Business Development Officer at the Central County CDC—a proud subsidiary of the Urban League of Broward County. With over 15 years of experience in business development, strategic programming, and community engagement, J.R. plays a pivotal role in advancing economic mobility for underserved entrepreneurs across South Florida.

At the helm of the Entrepreneurship Center, J.R. has spearheaded the design and expansion of innovative cohort-based trainings, high-impact technical assistance, and access-to-capital initiatives. His leadership has resulted in measurable outcomes including revenue growth, job creation, and improved financial readiness among hundreds of small businesses. By leveraging strategic partnerships and data-driven solutions, J.R. ensures that each initiative is responsive to the real-world needs of the community.

A passionate advocate for equity and sustainability, J.R. is deeply committed to building resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems. His mission is to equip business owners with the tools, knowledge, and relationships they need to thrive—ultimately fostering long-term wealth creation and reshaping the economic landscape for generations to come.



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Judge #4



Andre Cross

Business Assistance Coordinator, City of Fort Lauderdale

Andre Cross has dedicated over 28 years to the City of Fort Lauderdale, beginning in Public Works in March 1997. His progressive career includes roles in the Meter Shop and as a Code Enforcement Officer for 13 years. Since 2016, Andre has served as a Business Assistance Coordinator for the Building Department, where he leverages his extensive experience to guide the public and welcome new businesses to the city. Beyond his professional life, Andre is a proud husband and father of three, with a love for music, exploring new places through travel, and his church community. He truly values his work and the opportunity to serve the City of Fort Lauderdale.



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Judge #5



Alexander Bailey

Founder & Financial Planner, Brickstone Advisors

Alexander Bailey is the Founder of Brickstone Advisors, a Fort Lauderdale-based financial advisory practice specializing in wealth management, retirement planning, and commercial lending solutions. With nearly a decade of experience in the financial services industry, Alexander has devoted his career to helping individuals, families, and business owners achieve their financial goals.

His areas of expertise include financial planning, investment advisory, retirement planning, accounting, and Small Business Administration (SBA) lending, providing tailored guidance to entrepreneurs and families seeking to build and secure their financial futures.

An alumnus of Florida International University, Alexander was actively involved in campus leadership, serving as Treasurer for both Phi Delta Theta and Alpha Kappa Psi. His dedication to community engagement continues through his role as Co-Chair of the Develop Committee at Emerge Broward, where he works alongside fellow young professionals to promote positive impact and growth across South Florida.



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Participant #1



Adaeze Ajoku

Founder, Ada Data

Industry: Technology

Adaeze Ajoku, CEO & Founder: Adaeze is a former STEM educator turned data professional with 7+ years of experience in data analytics and engineering across Fortune 500 companies and startups. Currently serving as a Senior Product Manager for a Data Lake product in the insurance tech space, she brings deep domain expertise and a passion for data accessibility, GCP technologies, and innovation. She holds a Master's degree in Information Science from the University of Michigan. Adaeze founded Ada Data to enable decision makers to access raw demographic data, without any of the narrative.



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Participant #2



Brianna Reeves

Founder, Poppy Lane Florals

Industry: Retail; Floral

Brianna Reeves – Building a Blooming Business—And a More Beautiful Fort Lauderdale 🌸

Brianna Reeves isn't just building a flower business—she's reimagining how people experience flowers. As the founder of *Poppy Lane*, she's bringing blooms to the people—curated, intentional, and always with a story. As an ambassador for *That Flower Feeling*, Brianna is part of a national mission to get more Americans enjoying more flowers more often. For her, acquiring a flower truck reflects the belief that florals don't belong in a box—or on a calendar. Flowers should be a lifestyle.

By offering mobile bouquet bars, floral workshops, and custom designs, Brianna is helping people see flowers not as a luxury, but as something alive—woven into the rhythm of daily life. Drawing on her experience in investor relations—where she crafts stories, builds relationships, and drives growth—Brianna brings that same strategic mindset and emotional lens to her floral work.

A proud NSU alum, Brianna pairs creativity with community leadership. She serves on the board of the historic *Stranahan House*, supports the arts through *Las Olas Capital Arts*, and leads as President of the *Broward Young Republicans*, where she's grown one of Florida's fastest-rising chapters. She's passionate about partnering with fellow small businesses to bring more beauty, creativity, and connection to every corner of the city.

She's reimagining flowers not as a finishing touch—but as the starting point for how we feel, connect, and live.



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Participant #3



Charnelle Charlestin

CEO, Charlestin Consulting Firm

Industry: Management Consulting

Charnelle Charlestin is the visionary Founder and CEO of Charlestin Consulting Firm, a strategic agency committed to unlocking economic mobility for marginalized women through customized consulting in faith and family centered mentorship, financial wellness, mental health, career and leadership development. With a deep understanding of generational disadvantage and a proven ability to convert vision into results, Charnelle is reshaping what success looks like for underrepresented communities-one scalable solution at a time.

A second-generation college graduate and former educational leader, Charnelle's roots are grounded in legacy and forward-thinking. Watching her mother navigate systemic barriers taught her that vision is survival. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29: 18 KJV)-a verse that became her blueprint. She earned degrees in education from Temple University and Bucks County Community College, but her true education came through experience-balancing motherhood, community leadership, and faith-driven service. Her pivot into nonprofit and ministry work in 2016 sharpened her mission: to transform lives and close generational gaps. Today, Charlestin Consulting doesn't just advise-it builds platforms for growth, financial resilience, and generational transformation.

Charnelle's firm addresses a market often ignored: first- and second-generation women who are the economic anchors of their families, yet face limited access to traditional wealth-building tools. Her inclusive model offers both strategic planning and real-world support-making it not just ethical, but investable. Guided by Luke 12:48: "To whom much is given, much is required," Charnelle combines vision, values, and viability in everything she builds. As a mother of three and a mission-driven leader, she's not just changing narratives-she's opening doors for a new generation of empowered women.



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Participant #4



Claudia Rodrigues

Co-Owner, The Great Buffalo Furniture+

Industry: Retail; International Trade

Hello, everyone! Good morning, my name is Claudia Rodrigues, co-owner of The Great Buffalo Furniture.

Established in Fort Lauderdale, in 2025 The Great Buffalo Furniture is a commercial furniture business dedicated to providing commercial spaces with the highest quality, durable, and stylish furniture solutions. The Great Buffalo Furniture is more than just a commercial furniture business; it's a place where your vision comes to life. Our team specialize in creating custom furniture that reflects your personal style and functional needs from unique designs to timeless classics, we offer a wide range of options, all crafted with meticulous attention to detail. We believe in using only the finest materials and employing time-honored techniques to create furniture that is not only beautiful but built to last.



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Participant #5



Colby Williams

Co-Founder, Ready for the World LLC

Industry: Health Care; Social Assistance

Brenda and Colby Williams, the co-founders of Ready for the World, LLC, bring over 45 years of combined experience in caregiving, education, and advocacy for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Their passion for supporting this community led them to create a business that focuses on not only providing care but also empowering individuals to achieve personal milestones.

Brenda Williams has dedicated her career to working with individuals with special needs. She has extensive experience as the Director of a daycare center, Owner of a family home care center, Lead Adult Day Instructor, and Assisted Living Residential Manager. Brenda's leadership and hands-on approach have been instrumental in creating nurturing, inclusive environments for people with disabilities.

Colby Williams is an advocate for children and adults with disabilities. With a background in early childhood education and a National CDA certification, Colby has worked as a Residential Assistant Manager at the Jewish Association for Residential Care, a Behavioral Tech, and with both Broward County Schools and the YMCA. His work as a Program Assistant Director at the City of Fort Lauderdale and his volunteer efforts with the City of Fort Lauderdale Homeless Committee and HIV Planning Council reflect his dedication to community service.

Together, Brenda and Colby founded Ready for the World, LLC, an APD Medicaid Waiver provider that offers personalized services, including respite care, personal care assistance, STEAM-based enrichment camps, and companion services. Their mission is to create a world where individuals with IDD can live independently, confidently, and with dignity.



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Participant #6



Devin Taylor

Founder, Aero-Mar Executive Short-Term Rentals

Industry: Lodging; Accommodation

Devin Taylor is the founder of Aero-Mar, a premium short-term rental company designed for professionals in the airline and maritime industries. With over 20 years of experience in the moving and logistics industry—including 10 years as the owner of his own moving company—Devin has developed a deep expertise in customer service, operational efficiency, and managing the needs of clients with dynamic, on-the-go lifestyles.

In addition to his logistics background, Devin brings over five years of hands-on experience in yacht provisioning, where he gained a deep understanding of luxury service, attention to detail, and the unique demands of maritime professionals. These combined experiences shaped the foundation for Aero-Mar: a company that delivers safe, high-quality, and fully furnished executive rentals tailored specifically for airline crew members, yacht staff, and other transient professionals.

With a focus on comfort, consistency, and convenience, Aero-Mar properties are strategically located near major airports and ports and designed to meet the rigorous schedules of mobile professionals. Under Devin's leadership, Aero-Mar is setting a new standard in crew housing by blending high-touch service with functional, well-appointed living spaces.

Currently expanding across key transportation hubs—starting in South Florida—Devin remains committed to elevating the experience of short-term housing for those who work hard and travel often.