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2021 J.M.K. Innovation Prizes Awarded to 10 Initiatives With Standout Potential, Shared Community Focus

Record Number of Submissions Demonstrates Surge in Social-Impact Projects and Innovation Through Collective Empowerment

New York City – November 16, 2021 – The J.M. Kaplan Fund today announced the results of its nationwide search to identify and elevate transformative, early-stage projects in the fields of social justice, the environment, and heritage conservation. After a collaborative review of 2,826 applications—more than double the total submissions from the 2019 cycle—the Fund awarded its biennial J.M.K. Innovation Prize to ten exceptionally promising, visionary organizations with the potential to make a significant, lasting impact on America’s most pressing challenges. The 2021 awardees reflect particular attention to healing trauma, protecting our planet, and racial justice.

The 2021 Prize awardees are:

- **Black Women Build – Baltimore**, Shelley Halstead
- **Cambium Carbon**, Ben Christensen and Marisa Repka
- **Co-op Dayton**, Lela Klein and amaha sellassie
- **Every Campus A Refuge**, Diya Abdo
- **Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program**, Sara Sindija and Brandon Smith
- **Freedom Community Center**, Mike Milton
- **HEARD**, Esperanza Dillard and Talila "TL" Lewis
- **Nuns & Nones**, Brittany Koteles
- **Respond Crisis Translation**, Ariel Koren and Fernanda de Oliveira Silva
- **Wikitongues**, Daniel Bögre Udell and Kristen Tcherneshoff

Each awardee will receive a cash award of \$150,000 over three years, plus \$25,000 in technical assistance funds, for a total award of \$175,000. Awardees also join a resource network designed to support them through the challenges of a startup organization, participating in twice-yearly convenings and benefitting from peer learning, mentoring, and strategic counsel throughout their Prize term and beyond.

“This year saw far and away the most applications and volunteer participation in the Prize to date, and the submissions we received were more integrated and layered across our three program areas than ever before,” notes **Peter W. Davidson**, Chairman of The J.M. Kaplan Fund Board of Trustees. “These ten J.M.K. Innovation Prize awardees are incredible standouts, and they are just a fraction of the inspiring ideas shared by leaders of trailblazing nonprofit and mission-driven for-profit organizations in all fifty states.”

Now in its fourth cycle, The J.M.K. Innovation Prize is awarded biennially to ten innovators with potentially game-changing ideas to address pressing needs within the Fund’s program areas, whether supporting vulnerable communities, slowing climate change, or preserving the places communities care about most. The Prize’s unrestricted funding is designed specifically to support untested pilot projects or nascent efforts, which involve a certain amount of measured risk but may ultimately lead to large-scale, transformative results.

The 2021 award recipients were selected through an extensive evaluation process that included 497 first-round reviewers—committed volunteers who carefully assessed each and every application—followed by a second-round review by thirty subject matter experts.

“Our open application process, which relies on guidance from volunteers across diverse disciplines and communities, consistently elevates issues and approaches that traditional funding streams have not yet reached. This year’s innovators are taking on structural inequities and cycles of harm with creativity and determination, and we can’t wait to see how their pathbreaking ideas develop,” says **Amy L. Freitag**, Executive Director of The J.M. Kaplan Fund.

Since its launch in 2015, The J.M.K. Innovation Prize has provided forty social and environmental change initiatives with valuable tools, training, and capacity-building resources, in addition to crucial funding. From this early-stage support, past awardees have grown their ideas into category-leading, multi-million-dollar organizations and garnered accolades most recently including a 2021 White House Fellowship (Victoria Herrmann, 2017) and Prince William’s Earthshot Prize (Coral Vita, 2017).

Innovation Trends in the Fund’s 2021 Report

The J.M. Kaplan Fund put out the call for applications for the Prize in January 2021—as the country was reeling from a pandemic and grappling with racial and political tensions—and by April received a record 2,826 applications from all fifty states, as well as numerous territories and tribal nations. With so many deserving innovators working in the midst of turmoil, the Fund analyzed those proposals with a critical eye on the forces driving creativity for key takeaways.

The report on this year’s Prize, [*Building Pathways to Collective Power*](#), sheds further light on these findings and related social trends, highlighting a shift toward more layered projects connecting social justice to the environment, cultural heritage, and community-building. An eye-opening 31% of 2021 applications crossed multiple focus areas, up from 15% in 2019. Following a year marked by long-overdue conversations about race-based harm and activism for racial justice, 39% of submitted projects cited serving communities of color, while 18% specifically referenced Black Lives Matter. The report also spotlights an influx of projects in language justice, applicants building

on schools as community infrastructure, and emerging new modes of organizing and labor empowerment.

Beyond celebrating the ten awardees, the biennial Prize offers an opportunity to shine a spotlight on the entire pool of 2,826 innovators who may have huge potential to do a world of good. The J.M. Kaplan Fund also invites philanthropic leaders from across the country and beyond into its trove of proposals, allowing other funders to discover innovators who may be working on ideas of particular relevance to their communities or issue areas—and helping to kickstart even more change-making impacts.

Meet the 2021 J.M.K. Innovation Prize Awardees

Black Women Build – Baltimore

Shelley Halstead

Maryland

blackwomenbuild.org

Black Women Build – Baltimore is a homeownership and wealth-building initiative that trains Black women in carpentry, electrical, and plumbing trades by restoring vacant and deteriorated houses in West Baltimore. Once the building project is completed, the women have the opportunity to buy the home on which they worked.

Cambium Carbon

Ben Christensen, Marisa Repka

District of Columbia (*Operating nationwide*)

cambiumcarbon.com

More trees fall in our cities than in our national forests, and most are wasted. Cambium Carbon turns fallen urban trees into valuable wood products, creating waste-to-value revenues to restore much-needed tree canopy in under-resourced areas. Carbon Smart Wood™ is locally salvaged, locally milled, and reinvests in community tree planting.

Co-op Dayton

Lela Klein, amaha sellassie

Ohio

coopdayton.org

Co-op Dayton is a nonprofit organization founded in 2016 to meet community needs, whether that's access to fresh groceries or to quality job opportunities. Co-op Dayton organizes community- and worker-owned cooperatives that center Black workers, expand democratic participation, and rebuild neighborhoods in a deeply divested Rust Belt city.

Every Campus A Refuge

Diya Abdo

North Carolina (*Operating nationwide*)

everycampusarefuge.net

Every Campus A Refuge revolutionizes refugee resettlement by partnering colleges and universities with local resettlement agencies to host and support newly arrived refugees on campus at no cost, providing a softer landing and a stronger, dignified beginning in the United States.

Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program

Sara Sindija, Brandon Smith

California

forestryfirerp.org

The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP) is a nonprofit organization that provides skill-building and work-readiness training, resources, and support to formerly incarcerated firefighters, as well as those currently incarcerated in California's Conservation Camps, who are interested in careers in the Wildland and Forestry sector. FFRP's mission is to increase wildfire personnel from nontraditional and underrepresented communities.

Freedom Community Center

Mike Milton

Missouri

freedomstl.org

The Freedom Community Center (FCC) is a Black-led organization in St. Louis, Missouri, that was founded to dismantle systems of oppression, particularly the police and criminal punishment system, that inflict trauma on Black communities. Creating a movement of survivors using three overlapping strategies—community-building, transformative justice, and organizing for change—FCC is working toward a future of compassion and investment for Black citizens, centered on collective power, communal healing, true accountability, embracing repair, and nonviolence.

HEARD

Esperanza Dillard, Talila "TL" Lewis

Nationwide

behearddc.org

HEARD is a cross-disability abolitionist organization that aims to unite people across identities and communities to end ableism, racism, and other forms of oppression and violence. With the first reentry program of its kind in the US, HEARD supports incarcerated and formerly incarcerated deaf/disabled people, who have experienced language/communication deprivation and harm from the medical-carceral industrial complex. Through grassroots advocacy, community organizing, education, and peer support, HEARD is working to increase our collective capacity to identify and challenge oppression.

Nuns & Nones

Brittany Koteles

Wisconsin (*Operating nationwide*)

nunsandnones.org

Nuns & Nones supports an unlikely alliance across communities of spirit. This not-for-profit organization guides Catholic sisters to invest their land in regenerative stewardship practices, reparations with Black and Indigenous people, and common ownership structures, while equipping them to lead the way for religious groups at large to invest their land in a just transition.

Respond Crisis Translation

Ariel Koren, Fernanda de Oliveira Silva

California (*Operating globally*)

respondcrisistranslation.org

Respond Crisis Translation is a collective of language activists mobilizing around the clock to provide trauma-informed, life-critical translation and interpretation services to asylum seekers, the organizations supporting them, and to all people who require language support in contexts of crisis.

Wikitongues

Daniel Bögre Udell, Kristen Tcherneshoff

New York (*Operating globally*)

wikitongues.org

Wikitongues strengthens cultural sovereignty, ancestral knowledge, and cross-cultural dialogue by safeguarding endangered languages, increasing global access to critical linguistic resources, and directly supporting language revitalization movements in the United States and beyond.

About The J.M. Kaplan Fund

Established in 1945 by philanthropist and businessman Jacob Merrill Kaplan, the Fund has since its inception been committed to visionary innovation. Over more than three generations of family stewardship, the Fund has devoted \$280 million to propel fledgling efforts concerning civil liberties, human rights, the arts, and the conservation and enhancement of the built and natural worlds. The J.M.K. Innovation Prize continues the Fund's legacy of catalytic giving, reaching across America to provide early-stage support for entrepreneurs with twenty-first-century solutions to urgent social and environmental challenges. Learn more at JMKFund.org.

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