Durham Rising: Supporting Entrepreneurs Initiative

Durham County Grant | May 2024 – May 2026

FINAL PROGRAM REPORT

Two Years of Impact

Period of Performance

May 2024 to May 2026

Lead Organization

AB Community dba Knox St. Studios

Submitted to

Durham County Board of Commissioners

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Executive Summary

Over two years, from May 2024 through May 2026, the Durham Rising initiative set out to put real skills, real capital, and real community within reach of Durham entrepreneurs who have too often been left outside the systems that move a business from an idea to a stable, growing company. Funded by Durham County and led by Knox St. Studios, the initiative delivered programming across five areas, served more than served more than 200+ Durham entrepreneurs, and facilitated close to $300,000 in grants and prizes placed directly in founders' hands.

The work was grounded in a single conviction, which is that coaching disconnected from capital does not get a business very far. A certificate that never connects to funding, or a pitch that never reaches an investor, can leave a founder busier without moving the business forward. For that reason, none of the programs were designed to end at a credential or a single weekend. Each was built to connect skill-building to capital, and to connect founders to a community that would remain after the program itself concluded.

The five programs reached founders at different stages of the journey. Startup Weekends took entrepreneurs from an idea to a tested concept over a single intensive weekend, bookending the grant with events focused first on the green economy and finally on the practical use of AI. The Launch Lab Accelerator served 12 early-stage founders across two cohorts, graduated every one of them, and saw those founders generate more than $207,000 in traceable economic value within months of completing the program. The Support to Scale Incubator served 10 established owners across two tracks, one focused on raising capital, where all 10 founders each received $5,000 grants at a celebration at The Durham Hotel, and one focused on commercial property ownership, which moved five women-owned businesses through a full progression toward acquiring real estate. The Google certification and tech skills work brought practical AI skills directly into Durham businesses and culminated in AI Week, a four-day community convening in May 2026. LevTech paired technology adoption with hands-on coaching across two cohorts, the second of which Knox St. Studios carried through the unexpected closure of a delivery partner by staying directly engaged with its participants.

The investment reached beyond the programs themselves. Founders raised additional capital on their own as their businesses gained traction, built businesses that are generating real economic activity in Durham, and stayed connected to one another and to Knox St. Studios well past the end of any single cohort. Much of what the initiative built, the alumni community, the ongoing training, the relationships with funders and partners, and the ownership pathways opened through the Property Acquisition Lab, remains in place as the grant closes.

Durham Rising is best understood not as a set of programs delivered on a timeline, but as an effort to strengthen the connections that make an entrepreneurial ecosystem work. Two years on, those connections, between founders, between founders and capital, and between Durham's entrepreneurs and the wider networks they had been cut off from, are the initiative's most lasting result.

At a Glance

Durham Rising: Supporting Entrepreneurs Initiative

200+	$87,400	$205K+	$1.18M+
ENTREPRENEURS SERVED	GRANTS TO FOUNDERS	ECONOMIC VALUE CREATED	PROJECTED ECONOMIC VALUE (3 YR)

These figures reflect the completed May 2024–May 2026 performance period. Based on the demonstrated growth of entrepreneurs already served, Knox St. Studios projects their businesses will generate cumulative traceable economic value of roughly $1.18 million within three years — more than 1.5 times the original $750,000 county investment — with no further KSS involvement assumed. Knox St. Studios and its partners also reinvested $302,400, over 40 percent of the total grant, directly into Durham founders and local small business delivery partners. See page 15 for the full trajectory.

METRIC	RESULT
Period of Performance	May 2024 to May 2026
Lead Organization	AB Community dba Knox St. Studios
Funder	Durham County
Geographic Focus	Durham County
Programs Delivered	Startup Weekends, Launch Lab Accelerator, Support to Scale (Venture Capital and Property Acquisition Lab), Google Certifications with AI Integration, LevTech, plus AI Week
Entrepreneurs Served	200+ across all programs
Businesses Launched or Scaled	8 Startup Weekend teams (4 launched, 4 in development); 8 of 12 Launch Lab founders
Program Completion	Launch Lab 100% (12 of 12); Support to Scale Property Acquisition Lab 100% (5 of 5); Support to Scale VC 100% (5 of 5); Google Certifications 100% (25 of 25)
Capital Facilitated to Founders	$87,400 in direct grants across all programs (Launch Lab, Support to Scale, Property Acquisition Lab, Startup Weekend, Google AI Certs)
Local Small Business & Delivery Partner Investment	$215,000 invested in Durham-based small business and local delivery partners
Economic Value Created by Founders	$205,000 in grant and contract revenue, pitch competition wins, and early investment, secured independently by founders across programs
Certifications Delivered (Durham)	25, including 8 dual Google AI credentials
Certifications and Tech Skills (Durham)	25 certifications, including 8 dual Google AI credentials; tech skills workshops across the grant, culminating in AI Week (four days, May 2026)
Funding and Delivery	Durham County, NC IDEA, Wocstar Capital, Forward Cities, Techstars, Partners in Equity, The Consulting Lab, Bull City Ventures, Katalyst HQ, Infinity Bridges, ACCESS Point
Projected Economic Value (3-Year)	$1.18 million+, more than 1.5x the original $750,000 county investment

What Durham Rising Set Out To Do

Durham Rising began with a recognition about the city it serves. Durham is one of the fastest-growing metros in the country, but that growth has not reached everyone evenly. Many of the city's small businesses are sole proprietorships operating without employees, steady revenue, or the runway they would need to scale. The capability of these owners has never been the question. What they have lacked is access to the training, capital, and relationships that growth requires.

Durham County funded this initiative to address that gap. The work was built to reach entrepreneurs who have been left outside the rooms where businesses get capital, mentorship, and the connections that move a good idea toward becoming a growing company, with a focus on the underserved small business owners who anchor Durham's neighborhoods and local economy.

Knox St. Studios entered this work with a conviction that shaped every program, which is that coaching disconnected from capital does not get a business very far. A certificate that never connects to funding, a pitch that never reaches an investor, or a business plan with no path to a loan can leave a founder busier without moving the business forward. For that reason, the programming was not designed to end at a credential or a single weekend. It was designed to connect skill-building to capital, and to connect each founder to a community that would remain after the program itself concluded.

That conviction took shape through a few commitments that ran across all five program areas.

The first was meeting entrepreneurs where they are. Small business owners carry operations, payroll, customers, and family at the same time, and the programming was built around that reality through flexible formats, asynchronous pathways, and consistent outreach, rather than expecting founders to reorder their lives around a fixed schedule.

The second was practical, applied learning. Whether the subject was AI, capital strategy, or commercial real estate, the measure was whether a participant could use it in their business right away, grounded in real workflows and real problems rather than abstraction.

The third was building something that would outlast the grant. From the start, the initiative was designed for what comes after, including alumni networks, peer collaborations, ongoing training, and ownership pathways meant to keep producing well beyond the funding period.

Taken together, these commitments are why Durham Rising is better understood not as a set of separate programs but as an effort to strengthen the connective tissue of an entire entrepreneurial ecosystem, built toward lasting economic opportunity in Durham.

Programs Delivered

2 Startup Weekends

$2K	60	100%	9
prizes awarded	entrepreneurs engaged	graduation rate	new venture concepts

> Focused on sustainability and AI innovation

Launch Lab Accelerator

12	67%	100%	$85K
founders supported	launched / scaled business	graduation rate	catalytic grants secured

> $207,000 in economic value created

Support to Scale

Venture Capital Track
- 5 founders
- $25K microgrants
- Investor coaching

Property Aquisition Lab
- 5 businesses
- Commerical real-estate readiness
- Ownership pathways

Google Certs & Tech Skills

25	8	6	AI Week
Google certifications	dual AI credentials	Tech skills workshops	capstone week

> Practical AI implementation

LevTech

13	2	Hybrid	Coaching
entrepreneurs	accelerator cohorts	learning model	on technology adoption

> Operational efficiency improvements

TWO YEARS OF IMPACT

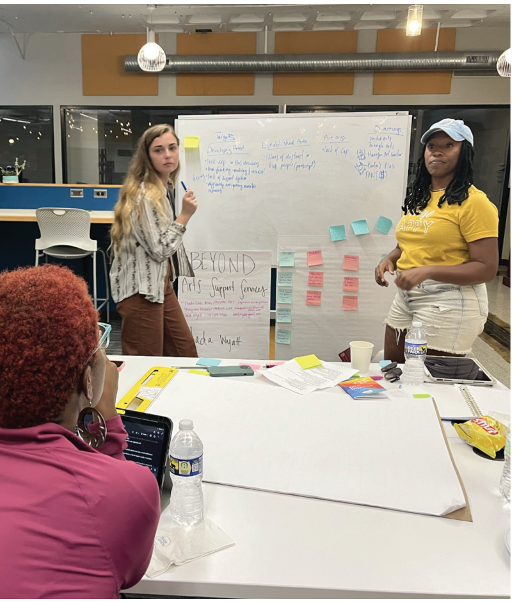
200+	60	13	25	$207K+
Entrepreneurs Served	Startup Weekend Participants	LevTech Participants	Google Certifications	Economic Value Created

Startup Weekends

Startup Weekends are intensive, in-person events that take an entrepreneur from an idea to a tested concept over a single weekend. Participants form teams on a Friday evening, spend Saturday on customer discovery and prototyping, and present to a panel of judges and mentors on Sunday, with winners receiving financial prizes and continued support through Knox St. Studios programming. Under Durham Rising, Knox St. Studios delivered two of these weekends in partnership with Techstars, one near the start of the grant and one as it closed.

Startup Weekend: Greenovators (October 4 to 6, 2024)

The first weekend focused on environmental and sustainability ventures. 18 entrepreneurs took part across the three days, supported by 12 mentors and 4 judges drawn from Durham's business and investment community. Participants formed 5 new ventures, including a consumer transparency tool for sustainable shopping, an eco-friendly cleaning service, a workplace sustainability consultancy, and a community-focused fitness concept. Of the participants, **73% were first-time founders and 76% were Durham residents. 94% of attendees reported that the weekend was a valuable learning experience.** Knox St. Studios delivered more than fifty hours of direct entrepreneurial engagement across the event and its preparation, and in the months that followed, 75% of the Greenovators ventures continued active development.



Startup Weekend VII: Age of AI (May 15 to 17, 2026)

The second weekend served as the culminating event of the May programming that also included AI Week, and it centered on the practical application of AI to new businesses. Thirty-one people took part across the weekend, including sixteen participating entrepreneurs alongside 12 mentors and 3 judges. Of the participating founders, 82% were first-time founders, 50% were Durham residents, and 41% were women. Over roughly fifty-four hours, participants formed 5 teams, developed venture concepts, and presented to a panel on Sunday.

The winning team, Booming Millennials built an application for the sandwich generation, adults who are simultaneously caring for aging parents and raising their own children, a group that manages significant logistical, financial, and emotional demands with few coordinated resources available to them. The team was selected on the strength of its problem validation, market viability, and the solution presented at the final pitch. Across the weekend, 92% of participants indicated they intended to keep developing the ideas they built. Five prototypes or working concepts were produced over the three days.

Across both weekends
The two events bookended the grant, opening with a focus on the green economy and closing on the practical application of AI. Together they engaged 60 entrepreneurs, produced 9 new venture concepts, and awarded $2,000 in cash and in-kind prizes to winning and runner-up teams.13 Startup Weekend participants went on to join other Knox St programs. Namely, the Launch Lab Accelerator and Google Certifications programs. The subjects of the two weekends tracked the opportunities most relevant to Durham entrepreneurs over the two years of the initiative.

Launch Lab Accelerator

The Launch Lab Accelerator is a hands-on program for early-stage founders, run over roughly thirteen weeks in a hybrid format. Participants work through the core building blocks of a young business, including customer discovery, lean canvas development, prototype and MVP building, marketing and growth strategy, and the use of AI for growth, supported by expert-led sessions and ongoing coaching.

Across the grant, Knox St. Studios ran two Launch Lab cohorts in 2025 and served 12 early-stage founders. Every one of them graduated, a 100 percent completion rate, which is uncommon for accelerator programming and reflects the high-touch coaching model the program is built on. Each founder also earned an Intermediate Icehouse Mindset certification, for 12 certifications in total.

The outcomes extended well past graduation. Of the 12 founders, 8 launched or scaled a business during or shortly after the program, a rate of 67 percent. The founders also created 3 part-time jobs as their businesses grew, and secured partnerships with Durham Public Schools and the YMCA of the Triangle. Consolidated figures on grant funding and economic value generated by founders across all Durham Rising programs, including Launch Lab, are detailed in The Investment At Work on page 15.

What distinguished the cohorts was how much they built together rather than only in parallel. Five cross-founder collaborations formed organically across the program, ranging from joint workshops to shared beta testing, and several founders set ambitious targets for the year ahead, including revenue goals, platform growth, and first full-time hires. The coaching relationships did not end at graduation, and many founders stayed connected to the program and to one another well after their cohort concluded.

67%
of founders, launched or scaled a business during or shortly after the program

100%
Launch Lab completion rate (12 of 12 participants)

Support to Scale

The Support to Scale Incubator served a more established stage of founder than the early-stage programs: business owners, generally four to eight years into operating, who were ready to grow. The program ran through two tracks built around the two paths these owners most often pursue, raising capital to scale and acquiring commercial property to own. Across both tracks, Support to Scale served 10 Durham business owners, 5 in the Venture Capital track and 5 in the Property Acquisition Lab.

Venture Capital Track

The Venture Capital track focused on the challenges established owners named most often, which were raising capital, building visibility, and gaining access to investor networks. It was delivered as an eight-week cohort from August through December 2025, in partnership with Wocstar Capital and Forward Cities. The cohort served 5 Durham-based entrepreneurs, all of whom completed the program. Knox St. Studios and its partners delivered 110 program hours, more than 22 hours per participant, across group sessions, office hours, a spotlight series, and in-person activations. The curriculum paired training in capital raising, marketing, and storytelling with tailored coaching and direct connections to potential funders, including sessions led by outside investors and CDFI leaders on navigating venture capital, accessing CDFI funding, and applying AI in a small business.

The track culminated in the Durham Rising celebration at The Durham Hotel on September 8, 2025, where five founders **each received a $5,000 grant, for $25,000 in total**, support from NC IDEA. The event included a fireside chat with Dr. Shani Daily of Duke University and Gina Loften, a Fortune 100 board director, alongside live music and an art showcase.

The outcomes for these founders continued past the cohort. Most Incredible Studio launched the first-ever Jimi Hendrix collectible set in partnership with the Museum of Pop Culture and the Hendrix estate. Burdock Naturals was featured alongside fellow Durham Rising founders on CBS 17 News as a recipient of a **$5,000 microgrant**, and produced its first marketing campaign through the program's story-telling fellowship. Looks AI was featured in Business Fashion Live and on the Innovate ON Purpose podcast for her work on AI in retail and fashion. Several founders also advanced conversations with CDFIs and other funders to pursue non-dilutive capital.

Property Acquisition Lab Track

The Property Acquisition Lab, facilitated by ACCESS POINT, addressed a different path to growth: ownership of commercial real estate. Designed for business owners ready to move from leasing to owning, the track combined a structured curriculum with individualized coaching to help participants build the knowledge and readiness to pursue commercial property. It was also built as a pilot intended for replication, with its process and lessons documented into a practical model that other municipalities could use.

The track served 5 Durham business owners, all of them women-owned businesses, across 4 industries, including event spaces, retail and events, retail and manufacturing, and professional services. The participating businesses averaged more than 7 years in operation, reflecting the established-owner stage the program was designed for. The cohort ran as a 10-session program from December 2025 through February 2026, held on Monday evenings, with a mix of in-person and virtual sessions supported by weekly office hours.

The curriculum moved participants through a full progression toward ownership readiness: real estate readiness, acquisition strategy, financing preparation, lender readiness, and asset management. By the program's close, participants had reviewed their financial positions against lender expectations, worked through deal structures and financing strategy, prepared borrower documentation, and presented individual capstone plans for long-term asset growth. **All 5 business owners maintained full attendance across the program**, and several made especially heavy use of the weekly office hours for one-on-one strategy work, financial document review, and deal vetting.

Because the program concluded in February 2026, the most significant outcomes, actual property acquisitions, are still ahead of the participants. The track was designed to produce ownership readiness first, with acquisition outcomes following as participants move forward. Each of the 5 participants received $6,000 to help offset the costs of property acquisition.

Google Certifications and Tech Skills

The certification and tech skills work ran the full length of the grant and evolved as it went. It began with Google Career Certificates in digital marketing and cybersecurity, moved into Google AI credentials as the technology shifted, and was paired throughout with a series of hands-on Tech Skills Workshops that culminated in AI Week in May 2026.

The Google certification program is delivered in a cohort format, combining group sessions, one-on-one check-ins, and post-program support, and it pairs the certificate coursework with practical AI integration so that participants can apply what they learn directly in their businesses. The focus is on using AI for everyday business work, including content development, research and analysis, routine task automation, and prompt engineering, alongside the in-demand digital skills the Google credentials carry.

In Durham, the program delivered **25 certifications** across its cohorts, including 8 participants who earned both Google AI credentials, AI Essentials and Prompt Engineering. Beyond the certificates themselves, participants put the skills to work right away.

The Tech Skills Workshops gave entrepreneurs short, intensive, hands-on sessions throughout the grant. The series began with a workshop on the green economy and continued with a **Prototyping with AI session that drew 124 Durham participants**, teaching owners to build working prototypes using AI tools in a single sitting. Over the course of the grant, the program delivered 6 Tech Skills Workshops in total, the last 4 of which were the sessions that made up AI Week.

AI Week, held May 4 through 7, 2026, was the capstone of this work. Over four days, Knox St. Studios convened Durham small business owners, entrepreneurs, and community guests across a deliberate progression: the role of AI in public service, storytelling for founders, a critical-literacy session on what AI can and cannot do, and a closing showcase in which Knox St. alumni presented how they are applying AI in their businesses today, paired with a hands-on session for founders ready to turn a side business into their main work. **The four public sessions drew registrations of 26, 46, 26, and 29 across the week.** AI Week showed the program's throughline in one place, with alumni from earlier cohorts visibly building businesses using the tools the program had taught them.

The clearest shift across the two years was in how we treated our certificates. Early on, completion was the finish line. By the end of the grant, we had built an ongoing engagement layer around the credential, including a weekly alumni email sharing new tools and developments, and a monthly training session, recognizing that for a small business owner, earning a certificate is the start of putting AI to work rather than the end.

LevTech

LevTech was a technology-focused accelerator delivered in partnership with Forward Cities and NC IDEA, built to give Durham entrepreneurs hands-on support in adopting technology and transforming how they run their businesses. It ran across two cohorts during the grant.

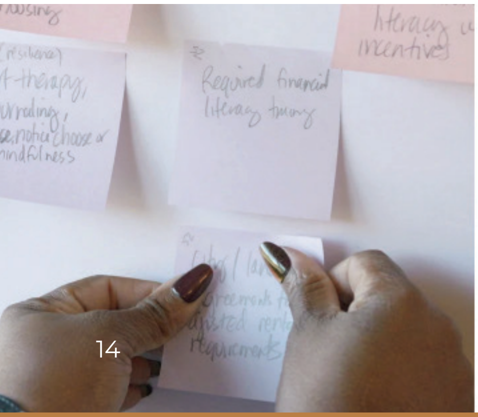
The first cohort, in spring and summer 2025, supported 7 entrepreneurs through a technology-enabled business transformation program and reached a 100 percent completion rate. The cohort concluded with final presentations on August 19, 2025, at Mutual Tower, where participants demonstrated progress in business model development, operational efficiency, customer engagement, and technology adoption.

All 7 participants adopted or implemented at least one new technology platform or system, meeting the program's technology integration goal, and several showed meaningful movement toward scalability and revenue growth.

The second cohort launched in October 2025 through the same Forward Cities and NC IDEA partnership. It was structured as a 16-week, technology-focused accelerator on an 80 percent online and 20 percent in-person hybrid model, with weekly 90-minute sessions, bi-weekly one-on-one coaching, and peer mentoring. 6 entrepreneurs enrolled after a competitive application process and were organized into technology-need clusters to support peer learning. The cohort navigated weather disruptions during the term, converting sessions to virtual formats when winter storms made travel unsafe.

Final showcase presentations for the second cohort were scheduled for February 2026. Due to the unexpected closing of Forward Cities, the program's delivery partner, no final graduation event was held and complete end-of-program data was not available. Knox St. Studios remained committed to the participants through that transition, continuing to engage and support them by inviting them to all Knox St. Studios events and offering individual coaching as the cohort wound down.

Across both cohorts, **LevTech served 13 entrepreneurs** and delivered hours of direct programming, demonstrating the value of pairing technology adoption with hands-on coaching even as the partnership landscape shifted during the grant.



The Investment At Work

Durham County's investment in Durham Rising reached well beyond the programs it funded. It moved into grants placed directly in founders' hands, into capital founders went on to secure independently, into contracts that supported Durham-based small business and local delivery partners, and into businesses now generating measurable economic activity in Durham — activity that is projected to compound well past the original investment over the next three years

Capital facilitated to founders

Across the grant, Knox St. Studios provided $87,400 in direct grant funding to entrepreneurs across all programs, including Launch Lab, Support to Scale, the Property Acquisition Lab, and Startup Weekend. This included $50,000 in microgrants awarded through the Support to Scale Venture Capital track and Property Acquisition Lab, where ten Durham founders each received $5,000 at the Durham Rising celebration at The Durham Hotel in September 2025 and April 2026, funded by NC IDEA. It also included nearly $35,000 in microgrants to Google Certificate holders and Accelerator and Incubator cohort members, plus $2,000 in cash and in-kind prizes awarded to Startup Weekend winners and runners-up.

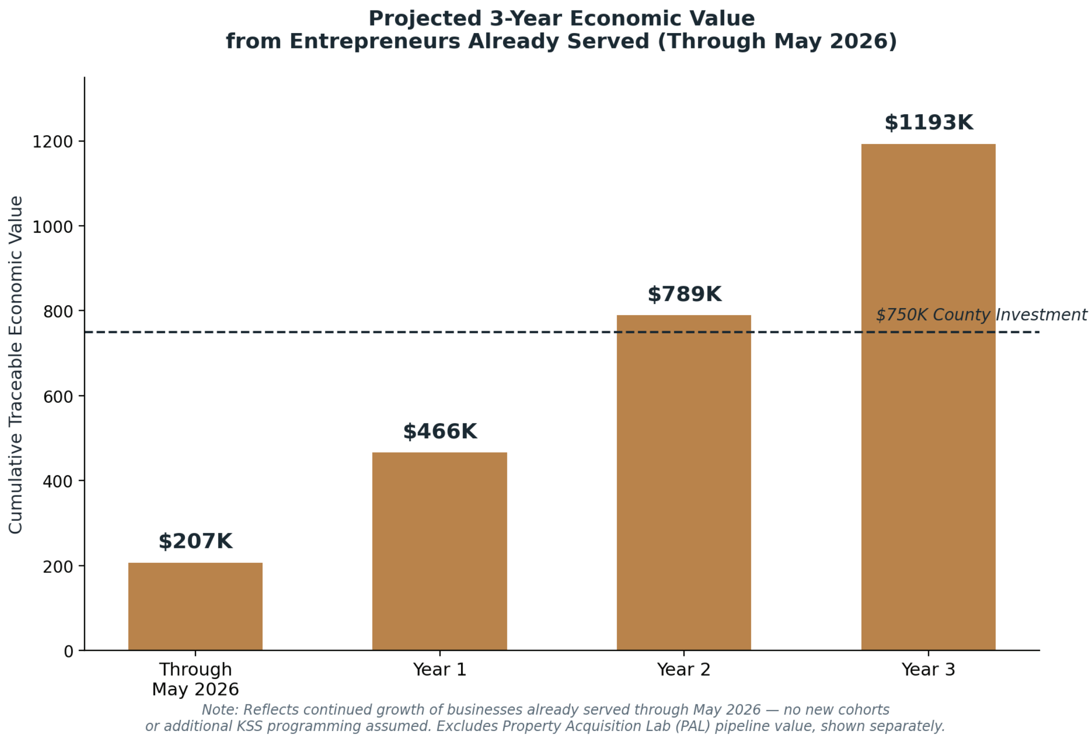
Capital founders secured independently

Beyond the dollars granted to them directly, three Durham Rising founders across programs went on to secure a combined $205,000 in grant and contract revenue, pitch competition wins, and early investment. This figure carries particular weight because it reflects businesses that reached a point where outside funders were willing to invest in them — one of the clearest signs that the training was translating into traction.

Investing in Durham's small business ecosystem

Knox St. Studios also invested $215,000 of the grant directly in Durham-based small business and local delivery partners who helped design and deliver Durham Rising programming — reinforcing that the initiative's impact extended beyond founders served, into the local economy that supported the work.

Combined, $302,400 — over 40 percent of the total county investment — was reinvested directly into Durham founders and the local small business ecosystem.



Economic value created — and where it's headed

Durham Rising founders generated more than $205,000 in traceable economic value through May 2026, including grant and contract revenue, pitch competition wins, and early investment.

Modeling the continued growth of these same entrepreneurs, with no assumption of further KSS programming or investment, cumulative traceable economic value is projected to reach $461,250 by Year 1, $781,563 by Year 2, and roughly $1.18 million by Year 3 — more than 1.5 times the original $750,000 county investment, generated entirely by the entrepreneurs KSS set on their journey.

A note on the Property Acquisition Lab pipeline

This projection does not include the Property Acquisition Lab. PAL's first cohort graduated in February 2026 with 100% completion (5 of 5), and graduates are now in active transaction execution with support from ACCESS POINT Investment Services. If current deals close as anticipated, KSS projects up to $1,300,000 in property value transacted by PAL graduates. This figure reflects anticipated, not yet realized, transactions, and depends on financing timelines and deal terms outside KSS's direct control — it is shown here as a pipeline indicator, separate from the traceable economic value figures above.

These outcomes were made possible by a network of funding and delivery partners, described in full later in this report.

Participant Outcomes

The clearest measure of what Durham Rising produced is what happened to the people who came through it. The founders below reflect the range of the work, from first-time founders launching a product to experienced operators sharpening a business they had been building for years.

Rich Gilliam, STEM PLUG

Rich Gilliam was selected as one of the businesses to develop during a Durham Rising Startup Weekend. He carried the momentum forward, conducting more than 30 teacher interviews after the event and launching his HydraBot robotic arm, a product built for STEM education. He secured partnerships with the YMCA and 4H and raised more than $100,000 through grants, pitch competitions, and crowdfunding. He pointed to the customer discovery work as the turning point:

"Thanks to this deep dive into real user needs, I was able to launch my HydraBot robot arm, a product that might never have materialized without that empowering experience."

Nadiah Porter, ClubClean

Nadiah Porter won her Startup Weekend pitch competition with a bathroom sanitation business, then converted the win into paying clients, including an event judge, a local brewery, a non-profit, and a community organization. She described the experience as both a business catalyst and a source of lasting relationships:

"Knox St. Studios Startup Weekend was the most beneficial opportunity I could have experienced as a new business owner, providing funding and connections I needed to scale."

Charryse Fredrick, NIA Educational Services

Charryse Fredrick brought 25 years of experience transforming classrooms in Durham Public Schools into her business, which delivers after-school enrichment, STEAM activities, tutoring, and parent advocacy training. Through the Launch Lab Accelerator, she moved from an early-stage vision to a clear understanding of her customers and her company's value, and introduced enrichment programs in 5 Durham schools. In her words: *"In under 90 days in the Launch Lab Accelerator, I went from a fledgling entrepreneur with a big vision to someone with a clear understanding of my customers and my company's value proposition."*

John Deberry, Burdock Naturals

John Deberry founded Burdock Naturals to bring holistic health and organic skincare to his community. Through the Support to Scale Venture Capital track, he received a $5,000 microgrant and was featured alongside fellow Durham Rising founders on CBS 17 News, a segment that highlighted the collaboration among Knox St. Studios, Durham County, NC IDEA, and Wocstar Capital. He also produced his first marketing campaign through the program's storytelling fellowship.

Dr. Jameya Jones, Gradual Concepts

Dr. Jameya Jones entered the Launch Lab Accelerator as a first-generation entrepreneur with eleven years of workforce development experience and a new doctorate, building a business that designs career pathways connecting young people to economic opportunity. During the program, she secured her first client and launched her initial offering. She credited the program with both the practical tools and the confidence to move forward: *"Launch Lab was instrumental in helping me sharpen my vision and validate ideas in a real-world context. I walked away with practical tools, a network I still lean on, and reassurance I can truly do this."*

Founders Putting AI to Work

Founders who came through the Google AI certification program are applying what they learned across their daily operations. Dr. Susan Lovelle uses AI to compress research and presentation development from days into hours, and has since been asked to help design and test AI tools in her field, work she says she would not have been comfortable taking on without the training. Diesha Banner uses AI as a strategic thought partner across her brand and an emerging glassware line, refining brand messaging, strengthening investor and grant pitches, and organizing research on manufacturing and supply chain. Victoria Beamer has been integrating AI directly into her daily operations since completing the course. As Banner put it, the tools do not replace her creativity or lived experience, they help her "articulate my ideas more clearly, move with intention, and execute at a higher level."

Additional founders

Beyond those profiled here, the programs produced a wider set of outcomes worth naming. Bobby Duke validated the business model for his youth education platform and secured his first major client through Launch Lab. Dr. Glenda Clare developed a workplace wellness toolkit and established partnerships with SHRM and coworking spaces. Homayoon Ershadi's Jabin Beverage Co. expanded into retail across North Carolina and received a **$5,000 stipend through the Venture Capital track**.

Partnerships

Durham Rising worked because Knox St. Studios did not try to do it alone. Over two years, the initiative drew together funders, delivery partners, investors, academic institutions, and community organizations, each bringing something Knox St. Studios could not have assembled on its own. The result was less a set of vendor relationships than a working ecosystem, one that connected Durham entrepreneurs to capital, expertise, and opportunity across sectors that too often operate in isolation from one another.

Funding and capital partners

Durham County was the foundation of this work, funding the initiative and anchoring its accountability throughout the two years. NC IDEA brought seed-stage capital and grant pathways, supporting both the capital-readiness goals of the grant and direct funding opportunities for participating founders.

Program delivery partners

Techstars powered the Startup Weekend model, lending the structure and credibility of a nationally recognized program to Durham's founders. Forward Cities partnered on the LevTech accelerator and the Support to Scale Venture Capital track, contributing to program delivery during the grant period before the organization closed in early 2026.

Capital and ownership pathways

ACCESS POINT served as a resource for founders interested in commercial real estate acquisition and ownership, the natural next step for participants moving from leasing to owning. This relationship reflected one of the initiative's core aims, connecting business owners not only to operating skills but to the pathways that build long-term assets and wealth.

Investor and expert network

Beyond the formal partners, Durham Rising connected founders to a roster of investors and subject-matter experts who led sessions and mentored participants, particularly through the Venture Capital track. These included leaders from Aspira Capital and Zeal Capital, CDFI experts, and founders and operators who shared practical guidance on raising capital, navigating venture funding, and applying AI in a small business. The Durham Rising celebration at The Durham Hotel featured a fireside chat with Dr. Shani Daily of Duke University and Gina Loften, a Fortune 100 board director.

Academic and ecosystem partners

Knox St. Studios maintained relationships with Duke University and UNC Chapel Hill that enriched program content and connected founders to academic expertise. Corporate and ecosystem partners, including Google through its certification pathways and American Underground as a host and convening space, extended the program's reach and signaled to founders that Durham's entrepreneurial ecosystem has access to national networks and resources.

Reaching Underserved Communities

Durham Rising was built to reach entrepreneurs who have historically been left outside the systems that move a business from an idea to a stable, growing company. Across the two years, the programs consistently served first-time founders, women-owned businesses, and small and micro-businesses rooted in Durham, the owners who anchor the city's neighborhoods but who most often lack access to capital, mentorship, and the networks that growth requires.

Women-owned businesses were a defining presence throughout the initiative. **Roughly 70 percent of Startup Weekend participants were women founders, and about 60 percent of the Google certification participants were women**. The Property Acquisition Lab, which prepared established owners to pursue commercial property, was made up entirely of women-owned businesses, a meaningful fact given how underrepresented women remain among commercial property owners.

The programs also reached founders at the earliest and most fragile stage of business ownership. **More than 80 percent of Startup Weekend participants were first-time founders.** Reaching people at that first step, before they have established revenue, staff, or access to traditional financing, is where support changes the trajectory of a business most, and it is where Durham Rising concentrated much of its early-stage work through Startup Weekends and the Launch Lab Accelerator.

The initiative kept its focus on Durham throughout. Programming was designed for and delivered to Durham residents and Durham-based businesses, and the Support to Scale Venture Capital cohort, for example, was composed entirely of Durham-based entrepreneurs. The businesses served were overwhelmingly small and micro-businesses, many of them sole proprietorships or owner-operated companies working with limited budgets and staff, which is precisely the segment of Durham's economy that has the most room to grow and the least access to the resources that make growth possible.

Taken together, this profile reflects the equity intent at the heart of the Durham Rising initiative: to direct real skills, real capital, and real community toward the entrepreneurs and communities that the broader economy has too often passed over, and to do so in a way that builds lasting opportunity in Durham.

Lessons Learned

Two years of programming produced lessons that shaped the work as it went and that Knox St. Studios carries into what comes next. Some confirmed what the team believed at the outset. Others required real adjustments in the middle of delivery.

1

Small business owners need programming built around their lives.

The clearest and most consistent lesson across the grant was that the entrepreneurs Durham Rising served are stretched thin, balancing operations, payroll, customers, and family while trying to build something new. Early programming assumed a steadier availability than many owners actually had, which showed up in completion rates that fell short of what the team wanted. In response, the programs moved toward flexible formats, asynchronous pathways, and consistent outreach, meeting founders on their own timelines rather than expecting them to reorder their lives around a fixed schedule. That shift is one of the main reasons later programming saw stronger engagement and completion.

2

A certificate is a starting point, not a finish line.

The team learned that earning a credential is the beginning of a longer process of putting new skills to work, especially with AI tools that take time to integrate into a real business. Participants frequently asked for more support after completing a program, not less. This reshaped how Knox St. Studios thought about engagement, leading to the weekly alumni communications and the monthly training cadence that now extend support well past the formal end of a cohort.

3

Capital and coaching have to move together.

The initiative was built on the conviction that skill-building disconnected from capital does not get a business very far, and the two years bore that out. The founders who saw the most movement were not only the ones who finished a program, but the ones who also connected to grants, investors, and a peer community that kept them building afterward. The microgrants awarded through Support to Scale, the capital founders raised on their own, and the relationships formed with funders like NC IDEA and Wocstar Capital were not separate from the training. They were what gave the training somewhere to go.

4

The peer community is as valuable as the curriculum.

Across programs, some of the most durable outcomes came not from instruction but from the relationships founders built with one another. The Launch Lab cohorts produced cross-founder collaborations that formed on their own, from joint workshops to shared testing. The Support to Scale cohort created a high-trust space where founders learned candidly from each other. These connections kept founders engaged after their programs ended and turned a series of cohorts into something closer to a standing community.

5

Strong partnerships carry real risk, and lead-grantee accountability matters.

Delivering through partners extended what Durham Rising could do, but it also meant the initiative was exposed when a partner could not continue. The closure of Forward Cities during the grant left the second LevTech cohort without a final graduation event or complete end-of-program data. Knox St. Studios responded by staying directly engaged with those participants, continuing to invite them to events and offering individual coaching as the cohort wound down. The lesson the team took forward is that the lead organization remains responsible for participant outcomes regardless of what happens to a partner, and that future partnerships should be structured with that accountability clear from the start.

The Work Continues

The close of this grant is not the end of the work it supported. Much of what Durham Rising built is still operating, and the founders it served are still growing their businesses.

The alumni community remains active. Founders who came through the programs stayed connected to one another and to Knox St. Studios, through the cross-founder collaborations that formed in the Launch Lab cohorts, the peer relationships built in Support to Scale, and the ongoing communications that keep the network engaged. What began as a series of separate cohorts has become something closer to a standing community of Durham entrepreneurs who continue to learn from and support one another.

The certification and tech skills work continues through a weekly alumni email and a monthly training session, which together keep participants connected to new tools and developments well beyond the end of any single program. This ongoing engagement reflects what the team learned about how small business owners actually integrate new skills, that the support has to continue past the credential for the learning to take hold.

The ownership pathways opened through the Property Acquisition Lab are still unfolding. Because that program concluded only at the start of 2026, the most significant outcomes, founders actually acquiring commercial property, are still ahead. The readiness the program built, and the relationships with resources like Partners in Equity, position those founders to keep moving toward ownership in the months and years after the grant closes.

The relationships that powered the work also endure. The connections built with NC IDEA, ACCESS POINT, Wocstar Capital, and the broader network of investors and community partners did not end with the grant, and they continue to create opportunities for Durham founders to access capital and expertise.

Durham Rising was never only a set of programs delivered on a timeline. It was an effort to strengthen the connections that make an entrepreneurial ecosystem work, and those connections, between founders, between founders and capital, and between Durham's entrepreneurs and the wider networks they had been cut off from, remain in place as the grant closes.

Closing

Knox St. Studios is grateful to Durham County for making the Durham Rising initiative possible. The County's investment, and its belief that supporting small business owners is a meaningful way to strengthen the broader community, gave Knox St. Studios the opportunity to design and deliver programming that met the real needs of the entrepreneurs in front of us.

We are grateful as well to the partners who made this work possible, including including NC IDEA, Wocstar Capital, Access Point, American Underground, Duke University, City of Durham and the many investors, mentors, and community organizations who lent their time and expertise to Durham's founders over these two years.

Most of all, we are grateful to the entrepreneurs themselves, the founders and small business owners across Durham who showed up, did the work, and trusted us to be part of their journey. Their effort and their ambition are the heart of everything described in this report.

Special shout out to our team for putting in the work (Lee Gray, Richard Brown, Talib Graves-Manns)!

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