

Celebrating Charlotte's 2025–2026 Knight Emerging City Champions!



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Charles Thomas
Director / Charlotte

Dear Friend,

Today, three of our own **have been named** 2025–2026 Knight Emerging City Champions! Please join me in celebrating Raven Joiner, Lorena James and Marcus Locke—three creative, committed leaders who are already making their mark on Charlotte, and now have the chance to grow their impact even further.

As a reminder, the KECC program, run by **8 80 Cities** with support from Knight Foundation, equips young leaders ages 18–35 with the resources, training and connections they need to implement community projects.

Each selected project reflects the creativity, leadership and care that help Charlotteans thrive:

Raven Joiner will bring *The Braille Trail* to life—the transformation of a park pathway into an inclusive public space through tactile signage, audio stories and art installations designed and co-created by and for people with disabilities.



Lorena James will lead *Eco-Underdogs: Upcycling for Justice*, a series of workshops that turn invasive plants into handmade paper, seed bombs and fiber art—blending ecology, creativity and community healing in public spaces.



Marcus Locke will launch *The Journeyman's Development Guild*, a mobile maker space built from a repurposed shipping container that will offer hands-on workshops in practical trades and creative skills, all rooted in tradition and neighborhood connection.



This August, Raven, Lorena and Marcus will travel to Toronto for a three-day workshop to kick off a year of mentorship, collaboration and community action.

Every year, I'm inspired by the leadership we see in Charlotte, especially in the Historic West End. A heartfelt thank-you to our graduating cohort —[Marlin Wilson](#), [Jordan Braswell](#) and [Cheryse Terry](#)—for your hard work and dedication to strengthening our community over the past year.

Thank you to everyone who applied this year. I'm excited to see where these projects lead, and how they continue to shape our neighborhoods.

Charles Thomas
Charlotte Program Director
Knight Foundation



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