



Tech, Start-Ups, Ecosystems, and Faith

On Tuesday, January 8th, those at BELIEVES took part in a very engaging and interactive dialogue on “Tech, Start-Ups, Ecosystems, and Faith” with Peyton Day, CEO of ROAM; Jay Bailey, CEO of the Russell Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship; Melonie Tharpe, Director of Programs and Operations at The Guild; and Ryan Wilson, CEO/Founder of The Gathering Spot.



“I am living my best life,” Jay Bailey stated to open the session as he introduced himself. “As a 14-year-old, I used to steal my mom’s car to drive around and look at houses around here in Buckhead because I didn’t believe someone like me could live in places like this.”

Melonie Tharpe followed.

“I tend to be radical,” she said. “I am focused on helping The Guild think through how to be radical in terms of real estate and community building.”

Peyton Day’s story was a bit different.

“I grew up in the hospitality business,” said Day. “I was a franchise partner with Marriott, and now lead ROAM where we not only do things like offer a place to hold meetings, and have a coffee bar, but also partner with those we serve.”

Day shared that ROAM, which has 14 Fortune 500 companies holding meetings at their locations, seeks for those it serves to have fun and memorable work experiences.

“Most people aren’t passionate about what they do. Imagine if that could change? We want to renew and inspire what people do in business.”

Ryan Wilson, who founded and leads The Gathering Spot, then introduced himself.

“I grew up in Marietta, dreamt of being an attorney, and went to Georgetown,” he said. “Then I started to think about the future of community, which led to opening The Gathering Spot. We have members ranging in age from 24 to 86, and are opening in DC and Los Angeles. We’re ‘in the business of community, not space.”

After their initial introductions, the panelists were asked to share about the origins and underlying purpose of the organizations and communities they lead.

“The bulk of Atlanta is liquid asset poor,” Bailey said. “We should be alarmed. The way you close the wealth gap is through economics, commerce, and small businesses. Atlanta has the greatest income inequality in the United States. The undergirding of the Russell Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship is to create the next H.J. Russell.”

Tharpe next spoke about The Guild, stating it started as a place for change-makers, without a focus on real estate at all.

“The economics we see aren’t working. We want something different,” Tharpe said. “This is what we and the people in our community believe. Our people are focused on wanting to live and work in the communities they’re serving.”

With the challenges that start-ups inherently face – including the real estate issue – Tharpe and The Guild team keeps this in mind too for those in The Guild community.

“Start-ups don’t always make money at the beginning, and ‘social start-ups’ even more so,” she added. “And then there’s the real estate issue. What causes this? We wanted to look at that, see what could be different, and serve our community versus investors.”

Day, listening attentively to his peers, spoke next.



“As I hear you all talk, we’re all wrestling with the same thing. We’re sitting at a time that our country’s been as divided as ever. People in this room have to be committed to pulling folks together.”

Day added that when he thinks about the workplace, he believes it’s a natural place for pulling people together because people come with dreams.

“It’s our job to create a culture that supports people,” Day said. “We need to be talking more collectively. What’s happening now is broken. Atlanta has a unique chance to be a change agent for this. You see more people working remotely – not W-2’s but 1099’s – that’s where things are going. People are working as free agents.”

Wilson followed, speaking in agreement with Day.

“Opportunity is a by-product of culture. We’re all talking the same language.”

He then added, “Unique to The Gathering Spot is that we’re seeing people professionally and socially. We see people at 1 PM and 1 AM. I grew up in church. Other than that and university, there’s not many settings where there is a diversity of perspectives that’s easily accessible.”

How has the work and focus of each of the leaders and their organizations impacted the evolution of their own leadership and faith?

“Both my wife and I are in unique spots,” answered Bailey. “My wife is a national NBC reporter in Washington DC at the White House, so you can imagine how much God she needs in today’s world.”

Bailey further added, “For me, when you’re looking at constant poverty, it can squash faith and hope. Hope to spark faith and hope that undergirds belief. The RCIE is meant to be an ‘epicenter of inspiration for aspiration.’ I know I’ll be rooted in faith and prayer because I’m embarking on a journey beyond myself.”

Wilson, speaking next, said that since the middle of 2015, The Gathering Spot has held 4,000 events.

“Wow!” he said. “The challenge I wrestle with is how to use all these opportunities to portray aspects of faith that matter. What’s the point in assembling people if not trying to do good in it?”

When Wilson was growing up, he shared his dad ran and owned a call center business.

“He would have a day care center, employee emergency fund, and other things of that sort for the employees – so way beyond just a business,” said Wilson. “These are things we should be doing anyway.”

Day’s reflections followed Wilson’s – remaining very personal.

“My mom has been very ill and in the hospital the last 45 days. My dad died when I was 17. This has been a reminder there are people out there who care for my mom like I do. It’s been renewing.”

Day next spoke a bit further about his dad, one of his two great mentors, and Truett Cathy, his other great mentor.

“Truett lived his faith and let people find out,” Day recalled. “My father also lived his faith out in a way I could see and appreciate. My goal and aim is to everyday integrate faith to serve other people. We try to hire people who live this.”

Tharpe followed Day, returning back to an earlier thread in her remarks.

“As I mentioned, I’m radical in my thinking,” she said. “The realm of people who are activists are also driven by faith.”

What does faith really mean?

“We’re looking for people who come together to move through this world – perhaps from different traditions – in a way they live and act with aiding society,” said Tharpe. “It’s part of our culture to think through how to work through all this. The reason many want to solve a problem is because they faced it.”

Listening to the remarks, Jeff Woodward, CTK parishioner and partner at Taylor English Duma LLP, then shared reflection and posed a question to all the panelists.

“You all are combining community engagement and work. What’s so important with religious tradition is not what you do on the weekend, but during the week. It’s focusing on the 8 hours each day where the biggest impact can be felt. How do you see this process of engagement changing the way people view work?”



Bailey chose to respond first, stating he thinks people very rarely feel seen.

“This notion of seeing the whole person is different,” Bailey stated. “We want to create community model that focuses on the whole person. ‘I am the #6 or #7 person at the company.’ That’s how we talk about ourselves. If we don’t get to what’s going on for people spiritually, emotionally, physically ... people have to matter again.”

Continuing the focus on people, Tharpe told everyone that one of the biggest things they think about at The Guild is “who and where are we getting money from.”

“There’s a lot around direct investment now,” commented Tharpe. “Investment used to be seen as something that was inaccessible with a divide. How do we alert people to this so it’s ‘How do I align with my values?’ versus ‘How do I spend my money to make more money?’”

Day reflected on Woodward’s question and spoke of three things – purpose, passion, and talent.

“At this intersection is where things happen,” he remarked. “I didn’t learn this until my 40s. If I had learned this in my 20s, my life would be different. We want our people to know guests personally and make an emotional connection. Who connected better than Christ? Everyone who walks in our door has hope, but they have challenges. A lot of people want to ‘get rich’ but not ‘be rich in good deeds.’”

Wilson’s response to Woodward’s question was on something different.

“First, it’s about shifting the conversation,” he said. “When we interview people to be members at The Gathering Spot we ask ‘What animates you outside of the office?’ What people don’t know is the answer to that question is the most important. A lot of times, we try to see how long conversation goes without talking about work to gauge the work environment at a leader’s organization or company.”

The dialogue had been so engaging in the session that by the time it was necessary to begin wrapping up, Andrew Schoppe, BELIEVES leader and facilitator of the discussion, noted two things.

“I just wanted to point out that there has only been one question needed to spark the entire session worth of dialogue, and though part of the session’s focus was on ‘Tech’ and how it’s used, we haven’t talked at all yet about ‘Tech.’ I think that’s telling and speaks to the authenticity of y’all’s shared focus on people, culture, faith, and ecosystems.”

Upon hearing this, Wilson commented in agreement, “We’re a tech-enabled company. You have to come in and engage and show up. I’ve filmed almost all our events, but I don’t post the videos or show them. You have to show up.”

Before closing, there was time for one more question, which CTK Parishioner Elaine Szeto asked.

“How do you drive change as an employee, versus from the top?”

“The intrapreneurship term was coined a few years back,” Tharpe responded. “People are starting to look at how the world’s changing. How do you see that and distill it to the values being lived? Companies are seeing this more and trying to figure out how to get a leg up on it, see how their companies can be set up for this, and hear more of what employees have to say.”

Bailey then commented to close out the session, “There’s an amount of courage involved because doctrine says that’s inefficient and takes too much time. The ‘probably’ keeps us in the status quo, and then we assume so much. We have to be willing to do something different and deal with the consequences.”

He then added, “Courage is discouraged so often. Anything of significance in history comes from something or someone doing something with courage.”

