

Why Nashville's Entrepreneurs Are Shaping the City's Next Chapter

By Bill McCleskey

When people ask me what Nashville is known for, I've heard the same two answers my entire life. Music and healthcare. And those are worthy answers. This city has earned both. But I've spent the last several years watching something else take shape here — something that doesn't yet have its name on the marquee but absolutely deserves one.

Nashville is becoming one of the best cities in America to be an entrepreneur. And the founders, builders, and CEOs who call this place home are quietly shaping what this city's next chapter looks like.

As the Board President of EO Nashville, a responsibility I don't take lightly, it has me thinking hard about what this moment means for our city and for the entrepreneurial community at the center of it. Nashville is at an inflection point. The question isn't whether entrepreneurship will define this city's future. It already is. The question is whether we're going to be intentional about it.

Entrepreneurship is Nashville's Third Pillar

Think about what it took to put Nashville on the healthcare map. It wasn't a policy or a PR campaign. It was HCA, a company that started here, scaled here, and created a gravitational pull that drew an entire industry. That's what entrepreneurship does. It doesn't compete with music or healthcare; it's the engine underneath all of it.

And the momentum is real. Nashville's entrepreneurial energy has grown exponentially over the past five years. Oracle, Amazon, and Starbucks aren't relocating their operations here because of the skyline. They came because Nashville has something rare in American cities: a collaborative culture. A place where newcomers are welcomed into the ecosystem quickly, where relationships are accessible, and where the spirit of "let's figure this out together" is genuine rather than performative.

The numbers behind Nashville's entrepreneurial community tell a story most people haven't heard yet. EO Nashville alone, a community of 350 entrepreneurs, collectively employs more than 15,500 people and generates over \$4.4 billion in annual revenue. That makes EO's membership one of the largest employer groups in Middle Tennessee. Not a corporation. A community of people who started with an idea and built something real.

When entrepreneurs succeed at that scale, the ripple effects can potentially touch everything: job creation, affordable housing, education, civic leadership, political influence. These aren't just business owners. They're the people imagining and executing Nashville's future.

The Ceiling Doesn't Have to Exist

I hear a version of the same worry from entrepreneurs across Nashville: the city is growing so fast, the market must be getting saturated. I understand where that fear comes from. But I think it's the wrong frame entirely.

Nashville is still primarily seen, from the outside and sometimes from within, as a city for healthcare, music, and tech. That preconceived notion is a ceiling that doesn't need to exist. Entrepreneurship is about finding your lane, establishing your unique value, and then removing the lid on what you believe is possible. The city's growth isn't a reason to hesitate. It's an invitation.

What "Together We Grow" Actually Looks Like

The strategic vision driving EO Nashville right now is built around a simple idea: intentional collaboration. Not networking, which is transactional. Intentional collaboration means building structured, meaningful relationships with organizations across Nashville's ecosystem that, when connected, multiply everyone's impact.

That means deeper university partnerships where experienced entrepreneurs become mentors, adjunct professors, and internship connectors for the next generation of founders. It means a more structured presence with the Entrepreneur Center, the front door of entrepreneurship in Nashville, so that EO is woven into a founder's journey from the earliest stages. And it means beginning to explore what a true entrepreneurial coalition in Nashville could look like: a unified voice for founders across industries, backgrounds, and business stages.

Nashville has all the ingredients. The talent is here. The capital is growing. The culture is right. What's been missing is a more connected, more visible, more coordinated entrepreneurial community that tells its own story.

The Human Side of Building Something

There's a dimension of entrepreneurship that rarely makes it into the economic development conversation, and I think it's one of the most important things Nashville's ecosystem needs to get right.

The personal cost of building a business is real. Entrepreneurs carry things they can't fully share with their employees, and that even the most loving family members can't always follow them into. The emotional weight of payroll, of a key hire that didn't work out, of a slow quarter when the stakes feel existential — it doesn't just disappear because you close your laptop. I've lost people in my life to that weight. Peers who carried the entrepreneurial burden alone for too long. That's not something I talk about lightly, but I think about it often, and I believe an entrepreneurial ecosystem that doesn't address mental health and human resilience is leaving its most important asset unprotected.

The strongest entrepreneurial communities in the world aren't just deal networks. They're places where founders can let their guard down, be honest about what's hard, and receive the kind of

support that helps them show up better in their businesses, their families, and their city. That's the standard Nashville should be building toward.

Nashville's Next Chapter is Being Written Now

When I joined EO Nashville in 2019, I came in through EO's Catalyst Program. I started my business, honestly, because I wanted to make more money than I was making at Comcast. That was the goal. But what I found through EO, through the relationships, the forums, the process of growing alongside other founders, was something I didn't expect. I discovered that my real gift isn't running a business. It's inspiring people to live on purpose. That clarity never would have come in a corporate environment. It came through this community.

I've come to believe that entrepreneurship is fundamentally a journey of self-awareness and self-improvement with a compensation plan attached to it. The business is the vehicle. The destination is growth, as leaders, as community members, as people.

Five years from now, I want to live in a city where everyone knows what entrepreneurship means to Nashville. Not just the business community. Everyone. Right now, I still walk into rooms where people who should know about EO look at me and ask, "What's EO?" That's the gap we're closing. Where founders at every stage have access to community, capital, and collaboration. Where the story of this city includes, without question, the thousands of people who built something from nothing and changed the economic and cultural fabric of Middle Tennessee in the process.

When that growth happens at scale, across hundreds of founders across Nashville, it becomes something bigger than any one company or any one leader.

It becomes a city's identity.

Nashville is ready for that. The entrepreneurs here are ready. And if you're building something in this city, or thinking about it, I hope you'll find your way into this community. Because this next chapter is going to be something worth being part of.

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Bill McCleskey is the 2026-2027 Board President of [EO Nashville](#), the largest chapter of the Entrepreneurs' Organization in the United States and the third largest globally. Bill is the founder of [Mitech Partners](#) and an advocate for building a stronger, more connected entrepreneurial ecosystem across Middle Tennessee.