First 60 Days: Where Momentum is Building

A reflection from Dr. Kristen Wagner, Executive Director of Upward Momentum

As I reflect on my first 60 days as Executive Director of Upward Momentum, I find myself feeling both grateful for, and inspired by, the people and communities I've had the opportunity to connect with.

This has led me to also reflect significantly on our name: *What creates momentum? Where is it already being built? And what does upward momentum ultimately look like for Missouri families and communities?*

These questions have followed me through conversations with grantees, community leaders, funders and partners, as well as gatherings of people working to strengthen communities across Missouri and the Heartland. Sixty days is far too soon to have all the answers, but it has been enough time to begin seeing a pattern.

For me, it starts with **connection**.

Across Missouri, there is no shortage of good ideas or committed leaders. Community-based organizations across the state are addressing challenges ranging from workforce development and childcare to housing, food security, and family stability. What stands out is that these organizations are deeply rooted in their communities and invested in meaningful change.

The opportunity, then, is not always to create something new. Sometimes, it is better to connect what is already there.

At our September Bridging Divides grantee convening in Columbia, Missouri, organizations working across different geographies and issues shared their work, experiences, and explored opportunities to collaborate. At CORI's Rural Innovators Collab – Heartland, held in Emporia, Kansas, leaders from rural communities came together to share promising strategies around entrepreneurship, workforce development, technology and economic growth.

What stayed with me from these conversations was the genuine commitment people have to their communities, their awareness of their strengths, and the willingness to learn from one another. It was a meaningful reminder of how much possibility already exists across our region and what more might be possible through greater regional connection.

That idea resonates deeply with me when I think of the role of Upward Momentum in the Missouri ecosystem.

Bridging divides should not mean asking rural and urban Missouri to become alike. It should mean connecting their distinct strengths so that geography becomes an asset rather than a limitation.

Connection takes more than bringing people into a room. It requires connective infrastructure: relationships, trust, coordination, shared learning and the capacity to work across organizational and geographic boundaries.

Those things are sometimes treated as secondary to the “real work.” Yet, I am increasingly reminded and convinced that they ***are*** the work.

Because when the connection becomes strong enough, it creates momentum.

Momentum is movement: when planning becomes action, one investment attracts another, or organizations discover they can create stronger pathways by working together.

At Upward Momentum, I want us to ask not simply, *“What did we fund?”* but *“What became possible because we invested?*”

Did our support strengthen local leadership, unlock resources, build lasting capacity or help a community turn an idea into action? These questions are shaping how I think about our role.

As Upward Momentum begins a new chapter as an independent organization, we have an opportunity to be intentional not only about where we invest, but how we show up across Missouri — as a convener, connector, learning partner and catalyst for lasting change.

But connection and momentum are not the end goal.

The goal is **mobility**.

For Missouri families and communities, that means greater economic security, opportunity, wealth, and choice. A parent can access childcare that makes work possible. A worker can gain skills for a better job. A family can build assets rather than simply making ends meet. And communities can build the capacity to pursue the next opportunity.

Connection brings people and resources together. Momentum turns those connections into action and progress. Mobility is what progress should make possible in people’s lives.

Sixty days in, I have much more to learn, and I'm grateful to the many people who have shared their time, experiences, and perspectives with me. Those conversations have left me encouraged by the leadership and possibility I see across Missouri, and increasingly clear about the opportunity before us: to strengthen connections, invest where momentum can grow and keep our focus on meaningful, lasting opportunities for families and communities.

Because ultimately, momentum matters most when it leads to mobility.

That is the work I am excited to continue.

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Upward Momentum