

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 49

Christina Long

Don and Ebony: [00:00:00] Welcome to another exciting edition of the WCBA powered, of course, by Evergy. First, thank you for listening. Don't forget to like us, love us, share us. We truly appreciate you checking us out today. In the house. We're excited to have the one and only the infamous. The myth, the legend Christina Long. Welcome to the show.

Christina Long: Thank you for having me.

Don and Ebony: Welcome, welcome. You know, it's we have been waiting to get you on this podcast forever. Like

Christina Long: really, really crowded.



Don and Ebony: You've been on every, you've been mentioned on every other wall of fame. Every one has mentioned you. So tell our audience who you are. Christina Long of CML Collective LLC.

well, again, thank you for having me. So I'm a Wichita hometown girl, Who's just trying to work and live in my dreams, working my purpose, really helping to elevate black owned businesses in the city and just doing my part to make Wichita.

Don and Ebony: Doing your part. You are doing the park. You doing it.

Christina Long: Thank you.

Don and Ebony: So what does C M L Collective do?

Christina Long: Yes. So CML Collective is an inclusive communications and graphic design, company. We really work to help bring not only professional quality communications to startups and nonprofits minority led organizations And corporations but we're also wanting to make sure that we do so in a way that demonstrates the business imperative of being inclusive.

Don and Ebony: And how long have you been, an operation?

Christina Long: Yeah. Well, I actually started my business journey officially in 2013 I started with the t-shirt company, but before my second anniversary people will ask you know, you designed this t-shirt can you design this logo, this website, this media campaign? And before my second anniversary, we rebranded became CML collective.

So 2014 CML Collective.

Don and Ebony: 2014. Wow. So you've been in the game for some time?

Christina Long: Been a little while.

Don and Ebony: Yeah. So, but you've always been in comms, like you were a journalist. And so tell us a little bit about that background and how you got to, or why you decided you wanted to start CML

Christina Long: Sure. So yes, I many people do know if you've been around which any length of time, that I used to be the cultural affairs reporter with the Wichita Eagle. And so it was my job there to cover Wichita's ethnic and minority communities. and it was really important to me to do that in a way that wasn't parade coverage, that wasn't, you know, food coverage it's really about covering our communities, as we live work, you know, pray and play. And that was really important to me. I got to cover some really important stories.

And so as I looked at again, just the the journey of my life and what I wanted to continue, the industry change, we had to reinvent ourselves. many of us as journalists. and so I went into education and that was fantastic, but I also continue to hold dear to me that we need a platform. to tell our story. And so the t-shirt company became a platform where I could afford being, you know, early twenties, and young.

and it just it's evolved. It's evolved.

Don and Ebony: That's an amazing story. And so where are you located? How could someone find you.

Christina Long: Yeah. So online of course. The CML collective.com, but I'm also. headquartered, I'm in the same office, that shared space with my nonprofit organization, create campaign. So We're located at founders' Grove 2333 East 21st Street, north corner of 21st and Grove in Wichita, Kansas.

Don and Ebony: So you have a nonprofit as well.

Christina Long: Yes, I do.

Don and Ebony: That is so awesome. What don't you do? Let me, let's just talk about, and so how many employees do you have.

Christina Long: So we are growing, but right now we sell, have one employee with CML collective. We have a network of really dynamic contractors who based on the type of project that we are contracted to do, then we get to pull in the expertise that we have. And it's important to me, not only to activate the network that I have been able to work with, either as a reporter Or during my time building curriculum with the school district, but also to activate startup companies, those companies that are hungry, but they might not be as well known. So as long as they prove excellence with me, they can work with me.

Don and Ebony: If I am, I'm a business [00:05:00] owner, or if I'm someone who wants to get, you know, start a logo or a brand, I would come to you. Is that correct? What else would I come to you for?

Christina Long: Oh, my goodness. Well, you can come to me to have a safe place to be able to discuss, your business goals. it's one thing to want to start a business.

It's another thing to figure out. who you can talk to, to help develop The backing behind your Business, the strategy behind your business, if you're looking for investment dollars again, Wichita is as big or as small as you want to make it. And I've been very blessed to be at the intersection of so many different organizations that my network is very broad.

And so when we're looking at activating capital on behalf of these businesses, sometimes it just takes an email introduction, sometimes the phone call, and I'm able to do that in many cases, for folks we've been able to do that successfully many times over, if you're looking at how to grow your professional. brand. So my one of my mentors, Curtis Quintin, he always says, this quote, it's not what you know, who you know, which everyone knows that quote, but it's really about who knows you.

And so who knows you well enough to open up a door of opportunity to open up access to their network, to be able to help you on your path to professional or personal goals. and so being able to activate my network on behalf of others, and then also introduce my network to others' networks, so that we can build even more dynamic networks of change influence, power, things of that nature. That's some of what I do.

Don and Ebony: I am just so happy that you're here. Of course I'm smiling and full disclosure, Christina and I, we go to Saint Mark or went to St. Mark and, Christina used to, run into halls up the church had to tell her to slow it down and all that. But, I know her parents and, you know, and like my mom would say her parents are good people, you know? And, so it's a beautiful thing just to sit here and watch her just thrive and be in this show every every week.

And somebody mentioned Christina Long. That's just a beautiful thing. So I'm so glad you're here. And, a couple of things I want to hit. What made you. The side, this is what you want to do. I know the Eagle is doing its thing or whatever, but what made you decide I'm going to hang up my own shingle and make this pop?

you know, there's something about being a creator and not just being, a consumer. And when I look at some of the most important stories that I've been able to cover or tell during my time at the Eagle, it really was about a group of minority contractors. who could not get work in Wichita. They were getting work outside. of here and building fantastic successful companies outside of here, but they did not have that experience in Wichita.

Christina Long: And they had approached the city city, of Wichita government. And looked at how can we build more equitable and inclusive contracting practices. These were men who I went to church with. These were men who were pillars of the community, but could not find work here. And that stuck with me. So as I look at again, the, the journey of my life, I don't mean. new year's resolutions. I make birthday resolutions. And when I was 29, I looked ahead to the year of 40. And if I was doing every single thing that I was doing at that time, would I have the life that I wanted to live at 40? And the answer was no. there was some things that I wanted to accomplish for me. And part of that was again, having that platform for communication.

So bringing it full circle to be able to launch my business, To be able to launch the nonprofit and to work towards again, those same goals that those gentlemen have. decades ago when I was reporting, it has been humbling because now we're making progress to the point that they're getting contracts now. And what I'm calling a time of homecoming. I mean, some stores you can't write better than this. And so I know it has been an opportunity for me to be able to just be obedient to I'm a believer. So be obedient to God's. will and where he has placed me And to do the best that I can recognizing I am not an economist Ebony, I do not have your title, and not have your name. but I am a connector I am a writer. I know how to bring people and resources together.

So I was told, do that, and do that well, and do your best at it. And that's what I've been able to do. And that's been the foundation from which I have built this. front.

Don and Ebony: And you mentioned about helping business owners get contracts. But let's unpack the part where you're starting to help them get capital. And I shared this with Donna Wright. A few weeks ago, we were talking about, it was always hard to get capital for minority women owned businesses back then and still is, but you're doing your part, share how you're doing your part.

Christina Long: Thank you. Through the nonprofit, I've been able to establish a great relationship with Aaron Bastian, the President of Fidelity Bank and we spent almost a year looking at how can we put more financing in the hands of a deserving minority entrepreneurs who might not fit the traditional profile. So we were able to create the create capital fund, which dropped the credit criteria, 100 points from litter, traditional lending ask what looked like [00:10:00] it waived the collateral requirements. it also created a system where we're approved for funding through this create capital fund, you would be paired with business development support.

So We're not just giving you funding, but we're also making sure that that funding comes accompanied with skills and resources and information for how you can navigate your business better. That led to me, I'm also working to eventually, write the City of Wichita's Propel Fund, and that's a loan fund that a vice mayor, Brandon Johnson was able to champion for District One entrepreneurs. Come to find out, depending on when this airs, this is going to go citywide. And so my company was tasked with writing the program designed for this loan fund. We were able to successfully, loan one in the initial and the initial release and rollout of propel from there, I work with a statewide nonprofit, and they saw what can happen when you do not. have the traditional lands for financing. And so they looked at their programs and recognize. one of their programs that I to also set over required matching But if you cannot qualify for the traditional match, then you couldn't have access to their funds. So they have created the empower loan fund it's network. Kansas, and that is Now a no match fund.

That's being piloted in Wichita and three other cities with the whole goal of being rolled out to other urban and inclusive communities. All of this to say between another fund, restart Kansas, create capital propel. All of these resources now are looking at broadening the credit flow. And what is happening is that businesses that were not traditionally get finance are getting financed in ways to support their business development and growth. We are seeing launches, We're seeing acquisitions, we're seeing people being hired.

We're seeing businesses staying in business and becoming bankable traditionally. That is the work.

Don and Ebony: Excellent. And just one more quick question on the, when you're. Providing all this funding, are you making it mandatory that they get this? I think you called it business development service support is mandatory.

You're not going to get the money and run, I guess, is what I'm trying. I'm trying to get at. I mean, if you're making this possible, it's a mandatory support that you provide,

Christina Long: Yes, it is a support and I will say this when we're able to do business and have a relationship with those who we are doing business with, Then the obligation to repay does not look like a traditional. They see the business funding that has been provided to them as a tool. And we make sure in the underwriting process that we are not approving loan funds for businesses that have not demonstrated the ability to repay. We do not want to place a burden on people's households.

So as a result, our loan funds are doing tremendously well, in repayment and those business skills and knowledge that comes along with successfully managing those funds. It's evident. in playing out.

Don and Ebony: Excellent. Hey, no, I mean, I, all of this is exciting, you know, I was a banker in a former life, for a number of years and to see, see how, you know, the credit flow has opened up is amazing because you, and it's about relationship, right? You say that we are relationship bankers and you sit down with a business owner and you try to explain the process. But, the traditional methods were not available. We could not help. And it was very deflating for the business owner, but also for the banker.

so to see that you have opened up these opportunities and worked with so many different organizations to make this, pathway available is really, really an amazing thing. I mean, it, it, you know, Don even talked about back in the day, you know, we've been talking about, capital access from. For decades, decades.

Don and Ebony: And.

Christina Long: It's happening. and, you know, there are some institutions that feel like, well, what can truly 10,000 dollars do for a business. Well, if you haven't had access and if you're used to building so lean 10,000 might as well be 50,000 because you know how to navigate and deploy it responsibly in ways that extend it. I remember one week I was looking at the different loan funds and how they were performing in just in a week and a half, I had done 76,000 in approvals. I mean,

Don and Ebony: Whoa, that's good. But the flip side of that is if they think what can really, what can \$10,000 do then? Why aren't you providing that 10,000?

Christina Long: Well,

Don and Ebony: I, you know, but it's, it's, it's those things. so in your work, you get to work with all these amazing people who, you know, may not even thought that it was possible.

So you get to instill hope right along with that. What scares you in this journey?

Christina Long: Ooh, what scares me? So I've been in the work since 2015. what scares me is that we're going to miss opportunities because the moment. Right now, out of the racial, and social justice movement says that supporting black [00:15:00] black owned businesses is the thing to do. It's always been the thing to do. A rising tide lifts all boats and when we look at who is most disproportionate and their experience in business, African-American owned businesses make up that category. Unfortunately. so what I fear is that people will misrepresent what this led. the. Thoughts, the conversations are out of the social justice movement. And just look at this as a point in time, when really we need to look at solutions that are sustainable beyond this point in time. I also, you know, being on this side of it, I worked so hard. I used to work 16 to 18 hour days. A 24 hour shift was nothing to me. I would do that, like that, to get everything done and done as well as I could. But in doing so I. run my. I am in a health battle right now, and the entrepreneurship, culture will tell you grind and you can, you can sleep when you're dead and all these things.

And what I fear is that people will take the negative side of the entrepreneurship culture and apply that to themselves and experience, definitely debilitating health challenges. And we, as a people, African-Americans, our health outcomes are again disparate as well. We have to take care of ourselves.

so with that being said, I almost lost and doing this work and that scares me because that is never the outcome that you want to have. So I want to take a moment to tell everyone self care is not a luxury. It's a necessity. And even in entrepreneurship, you can be so purpose-driven, but you have to be aligned in what is well, for you. so don't miss that. either.

Don and Ebony: Yeah.

Thank you for sharing that, you know, that's not the first time we've heard that and it's significant. So I appreciate you, being vulnerable and sharing that with us and given those. Those nuggets of wisdom. Well, friends, it's time to hear for our sponsors. So we're going to take a break and hear from them.

And we'll be back to hear a little bit more from Christina Long of the CML Collective.

Welcome back friends right here with Christina Long. And we're hearing about her story. We're having a lovely conversation and we just finished talking about some of the things that, She's scared of, but now we want to talk about some of the things she's excited for in the future. So talk to us a little bit about that.

Christina Long: Oh, my goodness. The excitement comes in so many ways. It comes from looking and seeing the progress that we're making with the loan funds and what they're doing inside of the businesses. Like I've mentioned before it comes and seeing the entrepreneurs who we're working with who are actually growing their business, So seeing Wichita Cheesecake company now. and their expansion. Seeing what's happening over at Jenny Dawn Cellars. is just as exciting as seeing what happened with Weekend, as well. as seeing what happened in October, with Jeri Greer, who launched Community Blessed a wonderful organization, that's going to put the emphasis on supporting wellness and wholeness and women. It's just as exciting as sitting across the desk from an entrepreneur who is sharing with me again, I don't know what I'm doing, but I know that. I want to do this. What do I do? All of these things are just as important to me because again, I walked the journey and many of their instances, and to be able to see something that you've dreamed about that you have prayed about manifest into

something that you drive past or something that you provide to another, in the form of a service. it is a privilege and it comes in. many shapes. So I'm really excited about where the trajectory of the work is going. I'm excited that I am still here and I am better to be able to do the work and navigate it and to bring others along to develop them because now it's team time, if something were to happen to me, the work must live once I want to equip people with this, with the skills and the knowledge to be able to take the Baton and pass it forward and move it forward so that the work is sustainable and that it lives beyond me.

Don and Ebony: I tell you what if, if the people are listening to this, don't get excited about all the stories that you're telling. I don't know what is more exciting. I mean, all the [00:20:00] names you just listened to that you just listed. Excuse me, I'm so super proud of Jeri and, and her journey. It's been amazing. so, and it's about someone having, you know, who believes in you, and you.

I believe in people and you try to help them, you know, see their, their dreams come to reality. So that's awesome.

Christina Long: Thank you.

Don and Ebony: Another question for you, you know, you born and raised in Wichita, Wichita gal. What makes Wichita unique? Why did you decide to stay at Wichita?

Christina Long: Ooh. Why did I decide to stay in Wichita?

It is because it is home. My family is here. I laugh because many people know my husband took a job at the Tulsa chamber. And so he's in Tulsa. So we are splitting time between two cities. But when I think about Wichita, again, this is a backbone, for who I am. my grandparents were Strong members of Calvary Baptist Church, longtime employees with the us post office. And they really instilled in us a love of community and a need to. serve community. it goes back to that African proverb. I am because we are. And so looking at again, building upon that platform. So what my parents instilled in My sisters and I. you don't just walk away from that for easier cities or easier time. Some people.

I watched actually, when there was a exodus of my peers going to Atlanta and then to Dallas, and I watch and see all of that talent that has left Wichita or these areas. And while I celebrate their journeys, I am left sometimes, like, what would Wichita look like if more of them had stayed? Sometimes you feel like you're part of a, you know, a lonely crew. It's lonely, work. Sometimes it's isolating work. We're fortunate to be able to travel and see other areas to escape, but when you're here, sometimes there's a sacrifice of service that is, placed upon you. and that's real.

And I think Wichita needs to be real about that. What this young professionals, and particularly it's young professionals, of color. This is not always easy, but at the same time, if you choose to be here. Look at the positives, understand the negatives, work towards a better. And again, bring others along.

Don and Ebony: I would consider you a, an SME on Wichita's business ecosystem. What do we need to do to make it better?

Christina Long: Wow. we need to truly look at the assets that we do have every organization can not do everything well. So be honest about where you serve and where you serve best and where you don't then be willing to refer. we have had a challenge of just getting an asset map together. This has been a challenge since 2015, because again, everybody says that they can do everything and that is not the truth.

additionally really looking at broadening, who is considered an entrepreneur when I sat down at the Kansas small business development. center, I did not fit the profile again. I'm a journalist trying to do a t-shirt company through them. They helped me to discover ways to be strategic about my growth. but I didn't fit the profile.

Christina Long: And we have a problem in this city, and the entrepreneurship ecosystem as a whole, and looking at pre-qualifying who gets to be an entrepreneur. The walk is the stories are different honor and respect the stories, but then help those who are willing to help themselves to move. forward. Because you know, on paper, I wasn't anybody's entrepreneur, And now I'm being invited to talk about entrepreneurship. So let's not miss that and other people. And then lastly, I think that we need to be bold and courageous. We need to open up rooms of opportunity. And for those of us who are adopting. Then we need to be willing to walk through those rooms, find our place and be there instead of shying away from that for areas where we are comfortable.

Again, there's that quote, the comfort zone is a beautiful place, but nothing ever grows there. We all need to grow we all need to grow. Ooh, what's next for me? Expansion of the nonprofit. We are going through an expansion. I will be celebrating my birthday tomorrow.

December babies. So, yes, again, just reflecting as again, not new year's celebrations or resolutions, but birthday resolution.

So I've got a whole nother set of resolutions for myself for this next year, but expansion and development of others and taking care of me.

Don and Ebony: What, business or local or national business you want to partner with.

Christina Long: Say more about that

Don and Ebony: Is there a, a business that you want to partner with either locally or nationally or a person you want to partner

I asked you to say more about that because I've been very fortunate to have So many great partners right now. I think that our expansion that we're currently experiencing with the nonprofit represents a, an incredible The partnership opportunity. And that's what stand together. They're a foundation associated with Koch industries and the partnership that we are currently experiencing with rising tide capital rising tide capital is going to be [00:25:00] working with create campaign to present a series of 12 week business academies. And then we get to get connected and plugged into their national network of entrepreneurship mentor. So I'm really excited about that partnership that's happening?

Don and Ebony: That's dope. Yeah. That is it really, truly is. Congratulations that, you know, it, they don't accept anyone. so to be accepted and be able to be a part of that, it says a lot.

Yeah. Well, since I'm talking, I guess I'll keep on asking you a question.

Well, as we begin to wrap up, I'm curious to know, I, I know that you are a very, well-read person, so, who are some of the thought leaders that you admire? Who's been inspiration to you?

Christina Long: Ooh. So you made an assumption about me. I look, I love reading, but I have my favorites and one of my favorites is, a book. Oh, I don't have the author's name right now, But it's a book called Rules of the Red Rubber Ball. It's a short illustrated, book that really looks at what happens when you look at building a life that supports your red rubber ball. and the author goes on to say, your red, rubber ball. It's that thing that encourages you. It's that thing that you go to sleep and wake up about. It's gripping you It's calling you to move beyond your current experiences, to put something out into the atmosphere, and into the world that represents your passion. So, what is it? Red rubber ball. he talks about there's 86,400 seconds in a day. That's 86,400 opportunities to chase kick catch go after your red rubber ball. That is, I continue to come back to that work It's grounding. what is our red rubber ball that moves and motivates us the anchor says again, with that quiet lonely work, and also when the spotlight is on, you have to be very, very careful to carry your red, rubber ball with honor, with humility Because somebody could come along and swipe it away. or you could be the person that bobbles your red, rubber ball. And there's so many consequences because so many people are, they're really relying on you to carry it and carry it well.

Don and Ebony: Again, as we are, truly, wrapping up. Now, I would like to know before we leave, what can we as a community do to help you in your business? What do you need from the Wichita community?

Christina Long: Well, you know, my ask is all about other people's, opportunities. And so we have an opportunity through supplier diversity right now, the city of Wichita is going through a major expansion of capital projects. Some represent the most expensive and involve capital projects such as our water treatment facility. and what's going on with the redevelopment of that.

We must, if we are truly about creating opportunity and being a regional driver. for prosperity, then we need to look at how we can activate more inclusion in our contracting practice. There is no reason, and this type of technologically sound society that our vendor and database software should not be able to appropriately track and manage and desegregate who we are spending our dollars with. If you have decision-making opportunities and authority within your departments, that don't require contracting opportunities to go through an RFP in RFQ and RFI, Then look at your network of who you are always saying yes to, for business opportunities. The same folks, or are you doing your due diligence to make sure that there is inclusion and your practices and policies. If you do have a seat at the table and writing RFPs, RFQ is RFS. Are you looking at it through a culturally proficient lens? Are you challenging? What is there or are you leaning back and saying, well, it's that way because it's always been that way. We will never get to the next level, always doing things the way that they've been done in an areas where we have an opportunity, not to even challenge by threats, there's no need to threaten There's an opportunity to ask to make change through more savvy, intentional question asking We have an opportunity to then create the behaviors and the environment that will make a change for the economic output and opportunity for all in business. It's time.

Don and Ebony: It's time.

How's your folks.

Christina Long: Folks are great. My father was able to retire from the post office after 38 years and four months. So he retired in October. And part of what has allowed him to retire is my company. So my daddy gets to come work with me and I've been able to actually say that I have helped to continue to help him, to retire my dad. When we talk about generational legacy that entrepreneurship can change and impact, the fact that, again, a 40 something year old has the opportunity to retire her daddy. That's powerful.

Don and Ebony: That's a

Christina Long: My family is doing well,

Don and Ebony: Excellent. My late mom, she loved her some Reverend Dr. Michael Wood.[00:30:00]

Christina Long: And he loved her as well.

Don and Ebony: Excellent. Well, we appreciate you being on the show today. Going to have a little word association.

Christina Long: Okay,

Don and Ebony: I give you one word. You give me one word back. It's not wrong because it's your word.

Christina Long: all are not the Terrell Show. I'm not singing anything.

Don and Ebony: Excellent, leader. I'm sorry. Excellent. One word you're excellent leader is the word,

Christina Long: Leader. word association, KLC leadership is an activity, not a position.

Don and Ebony: Okay. Nice college.

Christina Long: Ooh, college. K U

Don and Ebony: Boom.

Christina Long: The land of the shockers. I started my college career at KU

Don and Ebony: And Ebony then left the room,

Entrepreneur

Christina Long: Problem-solver

Don and Ebony: Wichita

Christina Long: Home.

Don and Ebony: Hero

Christina Long: Ooh, my dad

Don and Ebony: Chamber

Christina Long: Hmm, good partner.

Don and Ebony: Family.

Christina Long: Everything

Don and Ebony: Fun

Christina Long: Traveling.

Don and Ebony: Failure

Christina Long: Oh, tears.

Don and Ebony: And last but not least beverage

Christina Long: Ooh, water. Y'all are not getting me.

Don and Ebony: Wow.

Christina Long: No, let's do it. Jenny Dawn. I'm going to do several words. Jenny Dawn, Greatness Vodka, Simply Sangria, African-American owned.

Don and Ebony: She just got real on your There you go. Cool, Christina, we appreciate you being here and thank you for sharing your story with us.

Christina Long: Thank you for having me and thank you for taking care of my story.

Don and Ebony: Well friends, we have come to that time where we are at the end of the road. You want to sing that for us? Okay. Well, she will not.

Christina Long: No.

Don and Ebony: All right. right.

Well, on that note, thank you for being here. Make certain that you like us share with your circle of influence and make certain that you leave a message or notes, letting us know who you want to hear from. Until next time. Peace.