

NINA MOINI: A new retail and business incubator space has officially opened in the historic Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul. Rondo exchange on Selby Avenue is now home to four new businesses, spanning photography and visual art businesses, to self-care products and digital illustration. The Rondo Community Land Trust is behind the incubator, which aims to provide retail space and support to creative entrepreneurs.

The land trust's larger mission is to foster community wealth and stability in Rondo, a community that was fractured more than 60 years ago when many long-term residents were displaced from the predominantly Black neighborhood by the construction of I-94. Mikeya Griffin, President and CEO of Rondo Community Land Trust, joins me now to tell me more about Rondo exchange. Thanks so much for being with us, Mikeya.

MIKEYA
GRIFFIN: Thank you so much, Nina. I am so grateful to be here today.

NINA MOINI: So grateful to have you. So I understand your ribbon cutting was over the weekend, I saw some photos online. What was it like to finally launch this space? Had it been a goal and a dream for a while?

MIKEYA
GRIFFIN: It's been great. It's been a really long work here that we've been doing since we moved into supporting not just homeowners here in the Rondo community, but business owners as well. And so for the last four years, we've been working on a few unique spaces here in the Rondo community.

NINA MOINI: Could you tell us a bit more about the four businesses in this space?

MIKEYA
GRIFFIN: I sure can. When I think about Mind the Crown, who is Adrianna Willis, she's really focused on wellness. It's a wellness focused brand offering a firm affirmation cards and journals, apparels, and products, really just helping to support rest and boundary setting and joy for women.

And then we have the lovely production, LeMay photography. So it's a photography and video production business. They're focused on really authentic storytelling of Black life and culture in Minnesota. And then Branoir, it's a creative brand that's using blending visual and art and wellness center products while hosting workshops focused on healing, creativity, and self-expression.

And then KP Inspires as a digital illustration studio, creating vibrant artwork that celebrates Afrocentric beauty, wellness, and self-love through prints, home goods, and licensed art. And then we have Golden Time Cafe. It's our wonderful neighborhood cafe. That's the presence that's actually inside of the Rondo exchange and centering what we really like to say it's a draw for each other. We really hope that as people come into the coffee shop, they'll see places where they can shop for products, sign up for a class, grab a cup of coffee, be with their neighbors, and enjoy the space together.

NINA MOINI: What do you hope or believe that being part of this incubator space offers these entrepreneurs? It's beyond just a brick and mortar.

MIKEYA
GRIFFIN: It is. And some of our artists and business owners, they've not had a brick and mortar presence before. And so this is an opportunity for them to have a brick and mortar space to really have technical assistance, business coaching, marketing support, shared resources, and local folks coming in and supporting their business.

And what I really love about the way that Rondo Community Land Trust and our wonderful economic development manager, Felicia Perry, she has really devised a program and partnerships that are really working alongside the business owner individually, while they collectively cohort together to help solve and identifying maybe issues in wins and things that they would have along the way.

But it's the individualization of the technical assistance as well that is also a part of this. So we're giving them the overarching marketing support, microgrants, business coaching, and all of that. But then there's really individual aspect to the work as well, and supporting the individual owner, not just as a business owner, but also as a person.

NINA MOINI: When you think about the history of Rondo, what do you hope the exchange will mean for the community to have a space like this?

MIKEYA GRIFFIN: Well, as a long time, I'm a daughter of Rondo, so my family's been here for almost 100 years. And so this work is deeply personal, and we hold the history and the legacy of Rondo, but we also look forward to it's really extremely bright future. And so what we really hope that this will do is that this will help folks live, work, and play in their community that they've grown up in. And so that's really at the end of the day, what we really hope happens.

NINA MOINI: I know it was also recently announced that Rondo Community Land Trust has purchased the former Sears property in St. Paul, which, if people are not from the area, it's an old Sears building that has been dormant for some time. There's been some activity, but it has been sitting there. People have been trying to think, what is the best thing to do with this Sears near the State Capitol? What can you share about what you know and what you are thinking for that space so far?

MIKEYA GRIFFIN: Well, this is 17 acres, and this really is about returning land to community-centered stewardship and shaping what the future of the Rondo district can become. We for sure that this is going to be a dynamic, mixed use development, bringing together residential, commercial, and community-centered spaces in a way that reflects both the legacy and future of Rondo, while also creating value for the future of the Capital area, City of St. Paul in the state of Minnesota by returning and growing the tax base there.

NINA MOINI: Wonderful. Mikeya Griffin, thank you so much for joining us. I really appreciate your time.

MIKEYA GRIFFIN: Thank you so much. I appreciate you. Have a great day.

NINA MOINI: You too. That's Mikeya Griffin, President and CEO of the Rondo Community Land Trust.