

**Contacts:**

Valerie Silverman Kerr  
Reciprocal Brand & Strategy  
[valerie@reciprocal.nyc](mailto:valerie@reciprocal.nyc)  
914-806-6647

Rex Unger  
Reciprocal Brand & Strategy  
[rex@reciprocal.nyc](mailto:rex@reciprocal.nyc)  
646-397-7404



## **J.M. Kaplan Fund Selects 2025 Innovation Prize Winners, Marking a Decade of Supporting Bold Ideas**

### Record 3,790 Applications Reflect Growing Demand for Early-Stage Philanthropic Support

*NEW YORK CITY, NOVEMBER 20, 2025* – A decade after launching a philanthropic venture designed to help bold new ideas take root, the **J.M. Kaplan Fund** today announced the ten recipients of its 2025 J.M.K. Innovation Prize. The biennial award provides multi-year, unrestricted support for early-stage projects tackling urgent issues in social justice, the environment, and heritage conservation.

This milestone year drew an unprecedented 3,790 applications, an 18% increase from the previous cycle and more than triple the 1,100 applications received when the Prize launched in 2015. The surge in interest underscores both the urgency of America’s social and environmental challenges and an outpouring of practical creativity and civic spirit across every state and sector.

“At a critical moment in our nation's history, the J.M.K. Innovation Prize reminds us that progress often starts with people who see a problem and decide to do something about it,” said **Julia Bator**, Executive Director of the J.M. Kaplan Fund. “Our 2025 awardees’ determination to confront our toughest challenges with optimism and ingenuity is both inspiring and distinctly American. We are honored to support them as they carry this work forward.”

“The past decade of the Innovation Prize has deepened our conviction that philanthropy’s highest calling is to champion creativity and civic courage,” said **Peter W. Davidson**, Chairman of the J.M. Kaplan Fund Board of Trustees. “This year’s awardees embody that spirit, leading work that strengthens communities, protects our planet, and upholds the ideals that have guided our Fund for four generations.”

The 2025 awardees join a network of 60 Prize recipients since 2015, connecting with peers, mentors, and strategic resources designed to help early-stage organizations navigate critical phases of growth and impact.

71 West 23rd Street, 9th Floor  
New York, NY 10010

212.767.0630

[JMKFUND.ORG](http://JMKFUND.ORG)

The 2025 J.M.K. Innovation Prize awardees are:

- **Better Data Center Project** – Catherine Casomar and Sarah Friedman
- **Center for Land Economics** – Greg Miller
- **Entry Points** – Kyle Daniel-Bey and Jonathan Rajewski
- **Plantaer** – Manuel Benitez Ruiz
- **Redemption Earned** – Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb
- **Rooted Futures Lab** – Sanjana Paul
- **South Dakota Native Tourism Alliance** – Sarah Kills In Water and Rhea Waldman
- **TransYOUning** – Dena Stanley
- **United Stateless** – Karina Ambartsoumian-Clough
- **Unmio** – Jesus Torres

Each organization will receive \$150,000 in unrestricted funding over three years, plus \$25,000 in technical assistance. Beyond financial support, awardees gain access to strategic counsel, peer learning opportunities, and annual convenings with their cohort of fellow innovators.

The J.M. Kaplan Fund created the Innovation Prize in 2015 with a simple goal: to remove barriers that prevent promising-but-unproven ideas from getting off the ground. Traditional philanthropy often prioritizes established organizations and a track record of results, leaving early-stage innovators scrambling to find support during their most vulnerable phase. The Prize takes a different approach, seeking out bold ideas and social entrepreneurs and providing flexible, multi-year funding that allows them to take risks and grow on their own terms.

This year’s selection process exemplified the collaborative spirit that defines the Prize. A group of 568 volunteers—including nonprofit professionals, academics, and wide-ranging “smart generalists”—led the first-round evaluation, ensuring that each application was reviewed at least three times. From there, 263 applicants advanced to a second round, where 33 subject-matter experts conducted in-depth evaluations. Fifteen finalists traveled to New York City in October for interviews before the J.M. Kaplan Fund’s trustees selected the ten awardees.

“This cycle, we’re proud to have engaged our largest group of volunteers yet—and to welcome fellow funders the 1772 Foundation, Burnham Family Foundation, and Trinity Church Wall Street to learn alongside us from the innovators on the front lines of social and environmental change,” said **Justin Goldbach**, Program Director of the J.M.K. Innovation Prize. “The creativity we’re seeing doesn’t come from big institutions alone—it’s emerging in small towns, Tribal communities, and grassroots networks across the country. Together, we’re finding new ways to connect promising applicants with partners who can help them grow.”

As the J.M. Kaplan Fund celebrates both its 80th anniversary and a decade of the Innovation Prize, this year’s awards reaffirm a long-standing belief that modest investments in bold ideas can yield transformative results. From the creation of New York’s park conservancies to spurring today’s next-generation innovators, the Fund continues a legacy of catalytic giving that began with founder Jacob Merrill Kaplan in 1945.

For more information and full profiles of the 2025 awardees, visit [JMKFund.org](https://JMKFund.org). Those interested in learning more about other applicants from the 3,790-applicant pool are invited to contact the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

## Meet the 2025 J.M.K. Innovation Prize Awardees

### **Better Data Center Project**

Catherine Casomar and Sarah Friedman

*Washington, D.C., Operating Nationally*

[betterdatacenterproject.com](https://betterdatacenterproject.com)

The Better Data Center Project works in solidarity with communities on the front lines of data center development to realize fair and just distribution of economic, social, and environmental costs and benefits.

### **Center for Land Economics**

Greg Miller

*Washington, D.C., Operating Nationally*

[landeconomics.org](https://landeconomics.org)

The Center for Land Economics is a national coordinating body for land value tax reform, combining technical assistance to local governments, open-source research and software, and a national action network to unlock affordable housing, reduce inequality, and promote sustainable development.

### **Entry Points**

Kyle Daniel-Bey and Jonathan Rajewski

*Detroit, Michigan*

[entrypoints.org](https://entrypoints.org)

Entry Points is a re-entry artist residency that offers housing, studio space, and additional support to returning citizens who were unconstitutionally sentenced to mandatory life without parole as juveniles in Michigan, allowing participants to not only transition to life outside, but also maintain their developed identity as artists.

### **Plantaer**

Manuel Benitez Ruiz

*New York, Operating Nationally*

[plantaer.com](https://plantaer.com)

Plantaer creates biocompatible, cement-free materials that integrate plant life into urban infrastructure to cool buildings, purify air, capture carbon, and deliver exceptional durability.

### **Redemption Earned**

Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb

*Alabama*

[redemptionearned.org](https://redemptionearned.org)

Redemption Earned is a nonprofit law firm that provides free legal and reentry services to elderly, critically ill, and infirm people in Alabama's prisons, prioritizing public safety while addressing fundamental deficiencies in the state's parole process.

### **Rooted Futures Lab**

Sanjana Paul

*Massachusetts, Operating Globally*

[rootedfutureslab.io](https://rootedfutureslab.io)

Rooted Futures Lab transforms the teaching, design, and deployment of science and technology by embedding environmental justice at their core to confront systemic social and ecological harm.

### **South Dakota Native Tourism Alliance**

Sarah Kills In Water and Rhea Waldman

*South Dakota*

[sdnativetourismalliance.org](http://sdnativetourismalliance.org)

The South Dakota Native Tourism Alliance is reclaiming tourism as an engine of Indigenous economic power and cultural resurgence—empowering Native youth to lead, innovate, and thrive in a future where their communities own both their stories and their success.

### **TransYOUning: QMNTY Continuum**

Dena Stanley

*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

[www.transyouningpgh.org](http://www.transyouningpgh.org)

The QMNTY Continuum is a grassroots, community-led model created by TransYOUning and Proud Haven that delivers wraparound care for Black trans and TLGBQIA+ people through affirming shelter, essential services, civic engagement, and cultural connection in Pittsburgh’s inner city.

### **United Stateless**

Karina Ambartsoumian-Clough

*New Jersey, Operating Nationally*

[unitedstateless.org](http://unitedstateless.org)

United Stateless redefines social justice by centering the leadership of stateless people themselves, creating a groundbreaking model of self-advocacy and systemic change for a population long excluded from legal recognition and public discourse.

### **Unmio**

Jesus Torres

*California, Operating Nationally*

[unmio.com](http://unmio.com)

Unmio is a privacy-first digital platform for vulnerable communities and the organizations that serve them to safely communicate, coordinate services, and exchange sensitive information, without fear of surveillance or exploitation.

### **About the J.M. Kaplan Fund**

Established in 1945 by philanthropist and businessman Jacob Merrill Kaplan, the Fund has championed visionary innovation for 80 years. Across four generations of family engagement, the Fund has invested more than \$300 million in efforts focused on human rights, civil liberties, equality and justice, the arts and literacy, and the conservation and enhancement of the built and natural worlds. The J.M.K. Innovation Prize continues this legacy, providing early-stage support for entrepreneurs developing 21st-century solutions to urgent social and environmental challenges. Learn more at [JMKFund.org](http://JMKFund.org).

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