

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

2026 Q2



Making an Impact THE FOUNDATION AWARDS

Full coverage of the 2026 Lawrence Business Magazine
Foundation Awards Celebration



**INTEGRITYMIDWEST
INSURANCE, LLC™**

BIG CITY ABILITY

with hometown values

We work with Regional and National insurance carriers to make sure you get the coverage that is right for you.

- BUSINESS INSURANCE
- PERSONAL INSURANCE
- BONDS
- GROUP HEALTH INSURANCE & BENEFITS
- LIFE INSURANCE

LAWRENCE: 3301 Clinton Parkway Ct • Lawrence KS 66047 | 785.856.5100

EUDORA: 711 Main St • Eudora KS 66025 | 785.542.2000

www.IntegrityMidwestIns.com

Auto-Owners
INSURANCE

LIFE • HOME • CAR • BUSINESS

**Fine Wine • Boutique Spirits
Craft Beer • Knowledgeable Staff**

WINE CLUB MEMBERSHIPS
for you & as gifts



**CITY WINE
MARKET**

PROFESSIONAL WINE INSTRUCTION AVAILABLE - CALL NOW TO BOOK YOUR PRIVATE CLASS

4821 West 6th Street | Suite N | (785) 856-2489

www.CITYWINEMARKET.com

**AWARD-WINNING
HAND CRAFTED ICE CREAM!**



NOW OPEN

4821 WEST 6TH ST., SUITE M
(Next to City Wine Market)

www.bettyraes.com

Bridging the Gap

This local foundation's goal is to empower others through arts programs, mental health and wellness support, and access to a high-quality education all while delivering hope to those who need it.

by Tara Trenary, photos by Carter Gaskins and provided by Rials

The impact of small businesses on a community cannot be overstated. Not only do they contribute to the economy by creating jobs and revenue, they also bring communities together by creating a bond among the businesses and those who may choose to support them by buying local goods.

According to the Business.com article "Why Are Small Businesses So Important? 10 Ways They Empower Communities," by Mark Fairlie, senior analyst, small businesses employ nearly half of the American workforce, representing about 43.5 percent of America's gross domestic product.

"America's 33.2 million small businesses (99.9 percent of all businesses in the U.S.) are frequently referenced as America's 'economic engine,'" says Tom Sullivan, senior vice president of small business policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in the article. "That's because small employers have created more than three in five of all the new jobs since 1995, and they innovate at 12 to 15 times the rate of their larger business competitors."

So how exactly do these small businesses give back locally? Business.com explains that small businesses create jobs and revenue for the community; they spark innovation that can transform communities; they create opportunities for women, minorities and immigrants; they boost the local tourism economy; they give to local charities and initiatives; and they contribute to a community's sustainability goals, among other things.

The Lawrence Business Magazine Foundation Awards was created specifically to celebrate local businesses that do just that—drive the Douglas County economy by spurring job growth, hiring locally and supporting the community. Established in 2012, the Awards honor employers who achieve significant workforce growth. To be considered, businesses must be locally owned, operated or franchised; have an established presence in Douglas County for a minimum of three years; and show employment growth of either 20 percent or at least 20 new hires during the previous calendar year.

In addition, special Impact Awards—the Minority-Owned Business Impact Award, the Woman-Owned Business Impact Award and the Footprint Impact Award—are given to businesses that go above and beyond in contributing to the business community through relationships with other civic entities.

A Cultural Asset

Nicole Rials, founder and executive director of LRM Foundation and K.N. Rials Therapy and Consulting, was awarded the inaugural Minority-Owned Business Foundation Impact Award in 2023, with LRM being a Foundation Award honoree in 2025. She received community impact recognition in 2023 and has continued to be featured as a prominent woman- and minority-owned business leader in the area.

Rials was specifically honored for her local business model and her extensive community outreach. This includes supporting the Lied Center's theater programs and acting as a volunteer chaplain. In addition to her work with LRM, Rials is a member of the Lawrence



*Background: Nicole Rials
Above, top to bottom: LRM productions of Steps of a Good Man,
Riches and Rags, and Panther Burn*

Chamber Board of Directors and has held many volunteer positions throughout Douglas County, collaborating around issues of racial equity as it relates to behavioral/mental health and entrepreneurship.

A locally grown nonprofit organization, LRM Foundation was founded in 2007 and empowers individuals and communities through innovative programs in performing arts, mental health and wellness, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education, creating a space for learning through cultural and creative expression, Rials explains.

The foundation is a volunteer-led organization financed by grants, sponsors and donations. She says funding limitations and a reduction in direct donor contributions can be a challenge, but as a small, grassroots organization, LRM provides an opportunity for donors to invest in something that is unique and innovative, integrating performing arts, mental health and STEM education programs.

"We strive to instill hope, reconcile broken relationships and restore healthy living by creating bridges to new beginnings and paths to wholeness," Rials says.

The foundation's mission is to foster resilience, nurture creativity and promote holistic well-being, recognizing that healthy relationships are essential to thriving lives, she continues. "Through strategic partnerships, we expand access to resources and develop solutions that transform lives and build stronger communities."

Key programming offered by the foundation includes culturally centered, civic-minded stage plays, documentaries and community events that promote social justice and elevate BIPOC (Black, indigenous and people of color) experiences in the arts; restorative care; culturally competent counseling and workshops addressing grief, trauma and relational health, including specialized BIPOC mental health programming; and integrated arts and humanities into traditional STEM learning to create authentic educational spaces for local youth.

Expanding Creative Diversity

There is an expansive disparity in representation of BIPOC and culturally diverse community members in community theater, which broadens the lack of diversity and inclusion in the arts, Rials explains. "There is a felt and expressed need for diverse participation in theater and for that participation to be culturally relevant with equitable representation, creating an experience through dialogue, various dynamics of expression and artistry."

The foundation's programming centers on education about theater, stage presence and the impact of bringing life issues to the stage, she says. It centers on culturally relevant and social justice-themed events, offering opportunities for a diverse community to collectively engage in theater while promoting empathy and belonging for all persons. "We inspire a call to action to advance equity, fostering discussion about social justice, celebrating diversity and promoting unity," she adds.

Partnering with the Lied Center creates an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of elevating original, culturally rich, civic-minded theatrical artistic creations in Lawrence, featuring local artists, Rials says.

"The Lied Center of Kansas has partnered with LRM Foundation theater since our first partnership production on June 18, 2022, in celebration of Juneteenth," says Derek Kwan, executive director of the Lied Center. "Since then, we have collaborated with Nicole and [the] LRM Foundation theater on eight different stage productions."

He says Rials is a natural mentor and leader, and is impressed with her professional and cordial demeanor, her organizational skills and her passion for helping bring together those in the community. "She takes great care to ensure those around her are included in the process of decision-making. She has a vision for LRM Foundation theater and for her consulting practice to create a better community for all. Folks naturally gravitate to her."

And Rials has taught Kwan how to be a better listener, as well as more empathetic. "The community is so fortunate that Nicole and the entire Rials family have chosen to make Lawrence and Douglas County their home," Kwan adds.

LRM's current production is in celebration of Juneteenth and honoring the cultural resiliency of African and native culture, Rials says. "We are proud to present an original documentary film that highlights local African American and Native American community members, and their arrival to Douglas County, Kansas."

They will also celebrate the culture of dance with live performances by the Esoke West African Dance group, based in Kansas City, and the local Lead Horse powwow dancers.

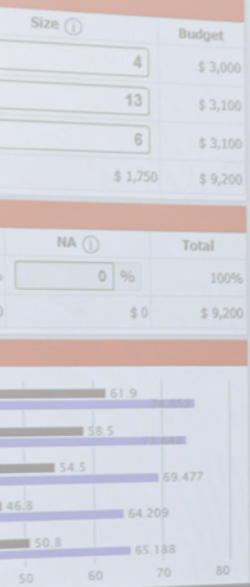
Mental Health Awareness

The LRM Foundation advances mental health and wellness through its BIPOC Soul program. It centers on healing, recovery and restorative wellness, as well as creating solutions, building community and advancing equity.

Heather Hoy, Douglas County Community Foundation director of philanthropy and community relations, says that Rials' focus is on providing a support for the mental, physical and emotional needs of populations that are often stigmatized, ignored or hesitant to engage in mental wellness therapy. "Our community needs this," she says.

The two groups work together through grant programs, nonprofit organization training opportunities and general support for ideas about fundraising and donor connections. "Nicole has a calming, quiet and extremely compassionate demeanor in her professional life," Hoy says. "She really cares about people. She is so happy and positive. She is always seeking opportunities to bring multicultural learning, understanding, mental wellness support and opportunities for joy to our community."

Recently, the City of Lawrence had a traumatic event happen at City Hall. Hoy says Rials provided support, compassion, advice and professionalism to the city staff that was crucial for navigating the trauma so many staff members experienced and will continue to work through. "I felt so proud to know her when I was told this story. She is a leader, a mentor and a saving grace for people she connects with in our community."



ADVANCE YOUR CAREER AND EARNING POTENTIAL.

Earn your MBA from Washburn University School of Business in as little as 12 months or choose your own pace.

FLEXIBLE

Our flexible hybrid graduate program caters to working professionals and adult learners from any academic background.

- o Traditional In-Person Program
- o 100-Percent Virtual Program
- o Blended Hybrid Program

SCHEDULING OPTIONS

Part-time and evening options are available. Choose a pathway that works for you.

SKIP ENTRANCE EXAM

Skip the GMAT or GRE graduate program entrance exam.

EARN FROM ANYWHERE

Earn your Washburn MBA from any distance. Apply now: washburn.edu/mba

Three convenient start dates:

Fall, Spring, or Summer

More info at

mba@washburn.edu
785.670.1308



Master of Business Administration



This year, Rials says the Foundation will offer its Fourth Annual BIPOC Soul wellness event. Previous events have centered around issues of stress, anxiety, depression, suicide, grief, relational health, restorative care and navigating health-care systems.

Expanding Education

LRM works with educators and organizations across the nation to ensure children in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade—especially those underrepresented in STEM—have meaningful access to high-quality STEAM (a more holistic, design-driven approach to innovation) learning.

"That means engaging families in community and classroom settings," Rials explains. "We design identity-affirming environments where children envision themselves in science, technology, engineering, math, medicine and performing arts. Every program, every space we create asks: 'Does this child feel like they belong here?'"

She says LRM intentionally uplifts and spotlights professionals from historically excluded and marginalized communities to redefine who the world sees as a scientist, an engineer, a mathematician. "When a young person sees someone who looks like them and shares their story, possibility becomes reality."

LRM partners with educators, community organizations and local businesses to break down systemic barriers and build those pathways together. "We forge culturally relevant connections between local communities and STEAM professions so students see pathways that feel real and attainable," Rials says.

She explains that this work belongs to every educator who refuses to cap a child's potential, every business leader who opens a door to a young person, every caregiver pushing forward against headwinds. "We invite the community—businesses, organizations, families—to engage with us, because the next generation of innovators needs all of us."



Nicole Rials and Derek Kwan

A Bright Future

Rials' collaborators believe she is a light in the Lawrence community who is eager to give back to people in all walks of life. She teaches others to be more thoughtful and compassionate, and to listen more than talk. "She is always willing to listen, learn and ask good questions. I need more that in my life," Hoy says.

Kwan agrees. "Nicole is a wonderful consensus builder. She has the unique gift of ensuring all involved are heard and seen. I have always been impressed with Nicole's determination, pleasant demeanor and drive to create a welcoming and warm community for all."

In May 2023, LRM's board of directors voted to expand its name to "LRM Foundation," which encompasses a continued growth and expansion to create solutions and increase access to resources in the areas of theater/arts, STEM education, mental health and wellness. "We will continue to build community by discovering new business collaborations and partnerships, rising together with shared vision and optimizing outcomes for people who need services," Rials says. "We aspire to grow in partnership opportunities, capital, programming and overall infrastructure." ▲



Director, writer and producer Rita Rials

150 YEARS

One customer at a time.

For a century and a half, we've grown with you, our small business customers, the economic heart of our communities. We're only here to celebrate thanks to you, and by daily refreshing our tradition of service.

So, how can we help you *today*?

150
YEARS of Tradition for Today

 **INTRUST**
Bank®

Member FDIC | © 2026 INTRUST Bank