



Junior  
Achievement™

**NLC**

NATIONAL  
LEADERSHIP  
CONFERENCE

**FOCUSED**

**IMPACT**

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**2025 JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT USA  
NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE**

**IMPACT REPORT**

July 21-24, 2025 - Cleveland, OH

## FOCUSED IMPACT

The 2025 JA National Leadership Conference (NLC) took place from July 21 to July 24 at the Marriott Cleveland Downtown at Key Tower in Cleveland, OH. The conference focused on our strategic themes of Focus & Impact and helping all staff to navigate their respective roles in this evolving JA journey. We firmly believe that Junior Achievement is uniquely positioned to deliver end-to-end solutions that accelerate economic opportunity and mobility by building upon our vast experience in youth development to affect systems change. To help us on this journey, we had a fantastic lineup of speakers, interactive breakout sessions, and networking opportunities throughout the week.

NLC hosted nearly 400 associates from across our network of 99 Junior Achievement Area offices, plus JA Staff Alumni Network members, Achievement Foundation representatives, JA Worldwide staff and regional operating center representatives, and the JA USA Executive and Senior Leadership team.

The week was full of energy and we are thankful for the sponsors who helped make the week a success, especially our presenting sponsors: Drummond, First Western Trust, Microsoft, and Wipfli!

We are incredibly appreciative of the amazing team at the JA of Greater Cleveland office who helped to plan a fun-filled week!



**It is our pleasure to share with you high-level highlights of the week.  
Join us in taking a look at the exciting week spent in Cleveland!**

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 2025 JA USA NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE Opening Reception

The conference kicked off with an opening reception at the Rock n Roll Hall of Fame, symbolizing progress, inclusivity, and empowerment. Attendees had the opportunity to network with their peers from across the JA Area network. This was a night where everyone could become their own rock stars in Cleveland!



## Keynote Speaker: Colette Carlson



At the heart of every sale, every interaction between a leader and a team member, and every conversation with a customer lies a connection—a principle Colette Carlson brought to life during the conference. Carlson’s keynote centered on the transformational power of connected conversations, teaching audiences how genuine connections drive success in organizations and relationships alike. Renowned for her personalized approach, Colette’s presentations are so engaging and tailored, attendees often feel as though she is one of them, seamlessly blending insightful content with laugh-out-loud humor.



Drawing on her Master's Degree in Human Behavior and over 20 years of experience helping individuals create lasting change, Colette illuminated the psychology, mindset, and skills required to build meaningful relationships that catalyze positive shifts. Her outstanding ability to foster authentic communication and her mastery in connecting with diverse groups have earned her the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation—an honor held by fewer than 10% of professional speakers globally—and induction into the CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame®, a lifetime achievement recognizing excellence in platform delivery.



Colette Carlson's session inspired participants to cultivate cultures of trust, embrace change with resilience, and lead with empathy—reinforcing the belief that every impactful moment begins with a genuine connection.

## JA's Strategic Approach: Jack Harris, CEO, JA USA



Jack delivered an update on Junior Achievement's strategic direction, emphasizing long-term goals and leadership unity. He outlined a unified approach that builds on JA's legacy in youth development while evolving toward a systems-focused strategy. This approach seeks to meet students' immediate needs and address larger education and workforce challenges.

JA's ongoing evolution is rooted in preparing youth for the future, now with expanded strategies. Jack also introduced a shift toward Outcomes Based Design, focusing on measurable results: future-ready youth equipped with mindsets, skills, and behaviors for successful, fulfilling lives, and Future Ready Eco-Systems that enable greater access, equity, and opportunity in education.

It is an exciting time for Junior Achievement as these new strategies position JA to drive meaningful change for youth and education systems nationwide.

## More Tuesday Fun!

We heard from a panel of JA Area Presidents sharing how their JA Areas are embracing this new strategic direction and the opportunities and partnerships it's created for their markets. Panels allow the JA network to hear directly from their peers and better understand and visualize what change can look like for JA Areas.



At lunch we celebrated our JA colleagues celebrating their 5, 10, and 15 year milestones with the organization! This is always such a fun way to cheer each other on as they progress through their JA career journey! We also heard from Asheesh Advani and Erin Sawyer from JA Worldwide alongside Simi Nwogugu, President and CEO of JA Africa!



In the afternoon, JA Area attendees participated in functional breakouts taking time to really process and discuss what the new strategic direction means for them; as an individual and as a team member. Field staff shared updates on their journey, asked questions of each other and JA USA staff, and took time to think through next steps for their local operations and local partners.



We also celebrated with Jim Hemak and the participants in the Hemak Leadership Programs. Junior Achievement USA graciously acknowledges the tremendous support that Jim and Pat Hemak provide to JA USA by investing in our training and leadership experiences for staff.

Tuesday night offered a “free” evening for attendees to enjoy the gorgeous Cleveland weather by either dining along the shoreline, visiting the art museum, or dining at the many fine eateries in the city!



## Wednesday: The JA Value Proposition



Wednesday morning featured two dynamic and captivating speakers: Niambi Sampson, Chief Learning Officer of 3DE, led “The JA Value Proposition,” inviting participants to consider how marquee brands distinguish themselves by clearly communicating unique value in a crowded marketplace. Her presentation emphasized the necessity of expressing what sets an organization apart, ensuring its message resonates above the competitive din.

Following this, Ed Grocholski, Chief Marketing Officer of Junior Achievement USA, presented the “JA USA Marketing Update,” unveiling Junior Achievement’s new marketing strategy aligned with the new organization strategy anchored in what is True, Meaningful, and Different about JA, Ed’s session showcased how value-focused brands connect with their audience by authentically delivering on their core strengths, paving the way for heightened impact and recognition in the educational landscape.



## EMPOWERMENT, LEADERSHIP, AND INNOVATION AT JA USA

Highlights from Personal and Professional Development Workshops

### *AI for the Workplace and At Home*

Led by Jim Ballou and Peter Dzubay, experts from Microsoft, this session explored the transformative impact of generative AI on both professional and personal spheres. Attendees learned how AI technologies, when used intentionally, can drive efficiency, reduce burnout, and unlock new opportunities. Through practical demonstrations, participants discovered how AI-powered tools offer real-time feedback to bolster confidence, act as virtual mentors, and assist with task management. A key takeaway was the modern workplace platform’s ability to help users monitor their work habits, identify looming overtime, and regain control of their schedules. Beyond work, AI’s capacity to automate household tasks promises more time for self-care and personal pursuits. Microsoft emphasized that, with mindful adoption, AI could become a trusted ally in balancing the “big rocks” of daily life, making room for growth, renewal, and resilience.

### *Change Leadership*

In a session designed for managers and directors, Greg Cameron from the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) delved into the deeply personal nature of change. Participants were introduced to the Change Style Indicator, a tool for understanding one’s own response to change and enhancing intentionality as a leader. The workshop underscored that successful change leadership begins with self-awareness and empathy, encouraging leaders to recognize individual journeys and tailor their approach. By grounding themselves in the nuances of the change process, attendees left equipped to guide their teams through transitions with greater understanding, flexibility, and purpose.

## *JA Area Presidents Meeting*

Facilitated by Kayla Eitreim, President and CEO of Junior Achievement of South Dakota, and JA USA Senior Leadership, this session gathered Area Presidents for in-depth, strategic discussions. The focus was on sharing insights, best practices, and collaborative solutions to drive impact across JA Areas. The meeting fostered a spirit of partnership and innovation, strengthening leadership alignment in pursuit of the organization's evolving mission.

## *Managing Through Paradox*

Jill Hauwiler of Antheo led this interactive workshop for leaders navigating ambiguity in a rapidly changing world. The session unpacked frameworks and strategies for “sensemaking,” decision-making under uncertainty, and psychological safety. Leaders practiced embracing “both/and” thinking, moving beyond rigid “either/or” choices to foster adaptability and courageous leadership. Through real-world case studies, hands-on exercises, and candid discussions, attendees honed practical approaches to balancing competing priorities, guiding their teams with clarity and resilience even amid complex challenges.

## *Thriving Together: Cultivating Well-Being & Belonging in a Changing World*

Ayana Fernandes Pilgrim’s workshop offered a safe, reflective space for JA USA staff to address personal and collective well-being. With a focus on actionable tools, attendees developed their own well-being plans and learned strategies to maintain balance and resilience. The session emphasized connection and belonging, reinforcing community across the JA network. Participants left feeling empowered and equipped to prioritize their health and foster supportive relationships, helping drive the organization’s mission during times of change.

## *Transformative Leadership: Speak Up, Step Forward in JA*

Christie Cawley’s transformative session addressed generational perspectives and organizational challenges, aiming to activate the untapped potential within each team member. Participants explored the unique contributions of different generations to collaborative environments and learned strategies to overcome hesitation and hierarchy. The workshop provided practical guidance for confidently engaging in meetings and projects, demonstrating that leadership is not reserved for those with particular titles or tenures.



## JA Does Baseball!

Wednesday ended with more than 200 NLC attendees seeing the Cleveland Guardians take on the Baltimore Orioles at Progressive Field. Al DiFranco, President of JA of Greater Cleveland threw the first pitch!



## Thursday's Vertical Leap!

Our final morning started with an update from MC Desrosiers, Chief Education and Learning Technologies Officer for JA USA and members of the JA USA Education Team. The session was designed to energize attendees around JA USA's evolving education strategy, emphasizing bold steps forward—"vertical leaps"—in how JA delivers learning experiences and drives impact.

While the general session focused on high-level strategy, the breakout sessions that followed explored:

- Reimagining Future Bound
- Positioning and Scaling Experiential Learning Centers
- Enhancing and Scaling 3DE
- Establishing Workforce Pathways

These themes reflect JA's commitment to expanding access, relevance, and impact across its educational offerings. And, the sessions allowed for JA Area attendees to go deeper into each topic with representatives from the National office as well as hear from their peers who are early adopters in these product segment strategies.

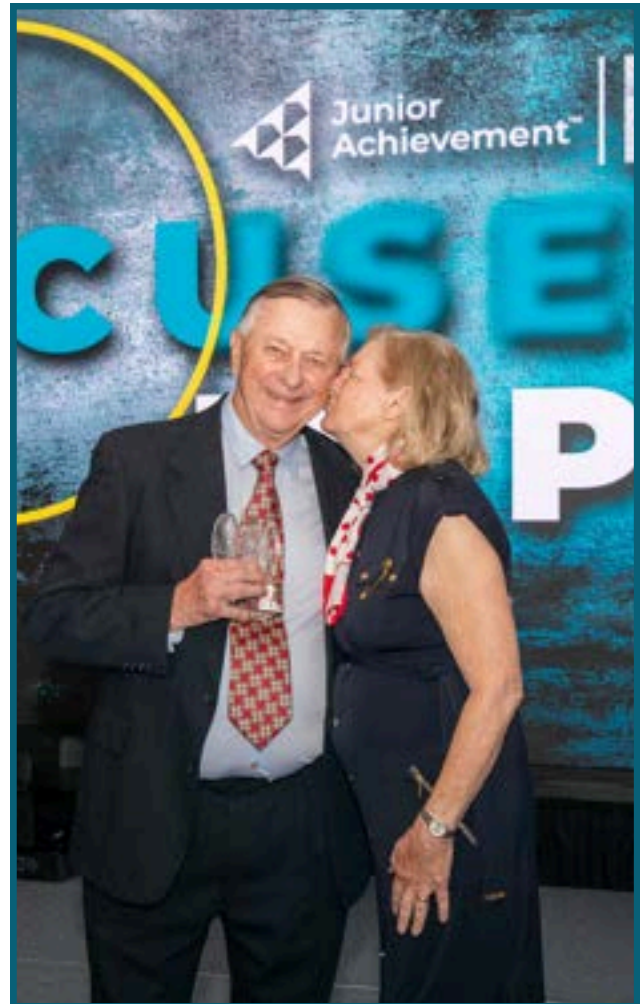


## Celebration Lunch

The Thursday Celebration Luncheon was a vibrant midday event emceed by Wendy Mark and Carlos Laboy from JA of Greater Cleveland. The luncheon blended recognition, updates, and celebration. Attendees were welcomed with a light-hearted tone and enjoyed giveaways provided by our generous sponsors.

The program featured several key moments: service awards honoring 20- and 25-year JA staff members, an update from Gina Blaney on the Achievement Foundation, and a JASAN update from Dennis Gilfoyle. The highlight was the induction of Jim Hemak into the JA Staff Hall of Fame.

The luncheon concluded with a spirited announcement of the 2026 NLC host city—Salt Lake City—led by Jack Harris, Tim Greinert, and JA of Utah President, Christy Tribe, complete with a themed video and Olympic-style handoff.



## JA Stock Market Challenge



This year we hosted our first simulation for staff to see our actual programs in action! Participants took on roles and jobs with the JA Stock Market Challenge. The JA Stock Market Challenge is a dynamic, fast-paced financial literacy experience designed to immerse students—and sometimes adults—in the excitement of stock trading through a simulated marketplace. This provided an opportunity for JA Areas to share their local tips for running the program and simulation while also exciting JA Areas who aren't currently offering this opportunity to consider it for their local market. We loved hearing from a local educator and student who are a part of the experience in Cleveland.

# COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS & LEVEL UP SUPPORT

For participants who did not attend the JA Stock Market Challenge, the final two sessions of this action-packed, high-energy conference were the Creative Solutions Session and the Level Up Support Session.

## Collaborative Solutions

This session was designed as an interactive, peer-to-peer problem-solving experience for attendees. The session aimed to foster collaboration among JA Area staff by providing a platform to:

- Share real-world challenges and brainstorm solutions.
- Exchange insights and best practices.
- Learn from each other's experiences across different functional areas

Attendees rotated through **two 40-minute topic discussions** hosted at designated tables. Each table focused on a specific area of expertise, such as development, finance, marketing, public sector funding, special events, and operations. This was one of our highest-rated sessions!

## Level Up Support

This session served as an informal, interactive Q&A hosted by JA USA's Information Technology team and multiple representatives from the Wipfli team. The session aimed to help JA staff better understand and engage with the **JA Level Up initiative**, which is focused on elevating organizational technology across the network. This includes improvements to:

- CRM systems
- Stakeholder portals
- Marketing automation
- Reporting and analytics

It was structured as a **come-and-go experience**, allowing participants to drop in, ask questions, and explore topics most relevant to their roles. We sincerely appreciate Wipfli's support in our technology transformation...and their support as an NLC Succeed Level Sponsor!



## SPONSORSHIP SUPPORT

JA USA is incredibly grateful for the sponsors who provided support to the 2025 JA National Leadership Conference! In total, we had 15 sponsors, many of whom work closely with JA USA throughout the year. Your support enables JA USA to design and implement a high-energy, informative, and collaborative conference which is instrumental in energizing the JA workforce and setting the tone for the future.

Our attendees love the various “swag” and giveaway items that so many of you provide!

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the JA Staff Alumni Network (JASAN) and the Achievement Foundation for their generous support of the 2025 NLC scholarships. Thanks to your commitment, emerging JA leaders were able to attend the full conference and engage meaningfully with peers and mentors. Your sponsorship not only alleviated financial barriers but also created lasting connections between scholarship recipients and their donors during the JASAN Scholarship Breakfast. This investment in talent development is already inspiring new ideas and deeper engagement across the JA network.

**With immense gratitude, we thank you for your partnership and support and hope to see you back next year.**



## AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

Each year, one of the major highlights of the National Leadership Conference is taking the opportunity to recognize outstanding performance and community outreach of our JA Associates. This year, JA awarded the Charles R. Hook Award, Flemke Achievement Award, JA MVP Awards, and Rising Star Awards. In addition, JA recognized service awards for individuals who have worked with JA for 30 and 35 years!



### CHARLES R. HOOK AWARD

The Charles R. Hook Award is bestowed annually and recognizes the Junior Achievement USA President whose professionalism and performance best represents the core values and ideals of Junior Achievement.

The 2025 Charles R. Hook Award recipient is Larry Washington, President & CEO of JA of Greater New Orleans.

### KARL FLEMKE PIONEER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

This award is named in honor of Karl Flemke, who served as the national President and CEO of JA from 1982 until his death in 1994. This award recognizes significant achievements and contributions of first time JA Area Presidents with not less than two and not more than five years of service in their current position. This award is sponsored by the JA Staff Alumni Network (JASAN).

The 2025 Karl Flemke Pioneer Achievement Award recipient is Jennifer Helgeson, President of JA of Kentuckiana (Louisville).





At Junior Achievement, the way business is conducted is just as important as achieving operational goals. The JA MVP – Model of Values Professional Award was established to reinforce the importance of living of JA values. JA associates must exemplify values and behaviors that provide the model for the students served and assure JA is a place as a business to be respected in every community where JA has a presence.

The recipients of the 2025 JA MVP award are: Kayla Eitreim, President & CEO, JA of South Dakota and Christina Kuenstler, Operations Coordinator, JA of Wisconsin- Northcentral Region.



The Rising Star award was created in 2004 to recognize JA staff professionals who have excelled in their role and are considered “Rising Stars” of the organization. These individuals demonstrate a commitment to the success of JA and accept increasingly important leadership roles within the JA organization. The 2025 Rising Star Award Recipients are:

- Dr. Nate Klein, Vice President-Education, JA of Eastern Iowa
- Annie Blankemeyer, Senior Program Manager, JA of Southeastern Pennsylvania
- Laura Lutterbeck, Sr. Vice President & Chief Operating Officer, JA of Michigan Great Lakes
- Bette Bronson, Vice President of Education, JA of Greater South Carolina
- Eddie Mehta, Development Director, JA of Arizona
- Timberly Taylor, Director of Site Based Learning, JA of Memphis and the Mid-South



## IMPACT ON STAKEHOLDERS

The conference provided a platform for attendees to network, share ideas, and gain valuable insights into the latest trends and strategies in the field. It also served as a valuable opportunity for sponsors to engage with the JA community and understand the impact of their contributions. We hope you enjoy a few of the attendee testimonials:

“

*Cleveland was a wonderful location. The local staff did an amazing job hosting us and we couldn't have asked for a better experience. Thanks for giving us time to team build and explore on Wednesday.*

”

“

*Both Niambi and Ed did a fantastic job with their presentations. Afterwards, I felt a better understanding of the 3DE and the marketing approach for JA moving forward.*

”

“

*Hearing from leadership about the future direction of JA USA and our keynote speaker was amazing!*

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“

*I really enjoyed the Stock Market Challenge. As an office that does not currently offer this program, participating in the activity firsthand gave me a much clearer understanding of how it works and the value it brings to students. It was both engaging and informative.*

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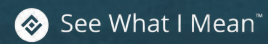
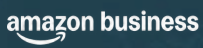
*Great first day. Our team went to dinner that evening - and the flow of the first day enabled us to have thoughtful conversations and discuss the high-level topics and ideas that were presented. I thought Colette's presentation was excellent, as well. Informative, thought provoking, engaging, and funny.*

”

# THANK YOU!



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In closing, JA USA would like to extend another Thank You to the generous supporters who sponsored the 2025 JA National Leadership Conference. NLC is a special time of year for our organization to reflect, celebrate and look forward and your support ensures we can provide the right environment, content, entertainment, and support to do just that. We appreciate your generosity this year and look forward to working together for the 2026 JA National Leadership Conference in Salt Lake City, UT!

## Laura Goodman

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