

# The Complete Kindora Founding Story

## From Personal Pain to Platform Revolution

### Chapter 1: The Birth of a Need (2024)

The story of Kindora begins not in a Silicon Valley garage or Harvard dorm room, but around a campfire in the California wilderness, where Justin and Sally Steele were discovering that transforming lives through nature came with a brutal price tag.

In 2024, the couple launched Outdoorithm Collective, a nonprofit dedicated to organizing group camping trips for urban families—particularly families of color who had been historically excluded from outdoor spaces. The mission was personal: as a Black father raising four daughters in Oakland, Justin had experienced firsthand the barriers that keep urban families from accessing the healing power of nature.

But mission-driven work, they quickly learned, required mission-level sacrifice.

#### The Financial Reality Check

By early 2025, the financial picture was stark:

- **\$50,000 of personal money invested** in camping equipment, incorporation fees, bookkeeping, food supplies, and group campsite reservations
- **Zero compensation** for either founder after a full year of operation
- **Monthly budget hovering between \$5,000-\$10,000** in their organizational bank account
- **Credit card balances they couldn't always pay off** in full each month

"We had a month where we had to float our credit card balance because we didn't have enough cash flow to pay it off," Justin recalls. "And this is just covering basic operations—no staff compensation, no benefits, nothing."

The irony wasn't lost on them. While their work was creating profound transformation—with 200+ participants experiencing healing through nature—they couldn't sustain it financially. When Justin left his role at Google in November 2024, the financial pressure intensified dramatically.

Yet the impact spoke for itself. When a program officer from Crankstart Foundation joined one of their trips and immediately became an institutional supporter with \$50,000, when Justin's former Google colleagues pooled together \$20,000, when participant families contributed \$5,000—it was clear they had created something powerful. But it wasn't enough to scale.

### Chapter 2: The Search for Solutions (February 2025)

By February 2025, Justin and Sally made a decision that would change everything: it was time to get serious about institutional fundraising.

Like any responsible nonprofit founder, Justin turned to the established platforms designed to help organizations find funders. The two industry leaders—Instrumentl and Candid—came highly recommended by everyone in the sector.

### **The Instrumentl Shock**

Justin carefully created their profile on Instrumentl, meticulously selecting topical categories from hundreds of options, choosing target geographies, and specifying desired funding types. The process felt thorough and professional.

Then came the results: **3,000 funder matches**.

"I literally stared at my screen in disbelief," Justin remembers. "Three thousand? How was I supposed to process that? I'm a startup founder doing every job in the organization. Sorting through 3,000 funder matches would be a full-time position for an entire year."

The financial sting made it worse: the platform required a \$3,600 annual subscription, payable monthly but with a full-year commitment. For founders who weren't even paying themselves, this felt astronomical.

### **The Candid Catastrophe**

Hoping for better results, Justin turned to Candid, the other major player in the space. Their platform proved even more complex—more categories, subcategories, endless checkboxes, keyword searches.

The result? **10,000 matches**.

"Ten thousand! I couldn't even comprehend how to begin with a list that size. It was like asking someone to find a needle in a haystack by giving them ten haystacks."

## **Chapter 3: The Expert Consultation (February 2025)**

Convinced he must be missing something, Justin reached out to the smartest people he knew in philanthropy: Andrew Dunckelman, Deputy Director of Philanthropic Partnerships at the Gates Foundation, and Nick Cain, VP of Strategy & Innovation at The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation.

### **The Gates Foundation Reality Check**

Andrew's response was both validating and deflating:

*"I don't think there's anything that quite fits the bill for what you're describing... Candid is just about to finalize the integration of their two legacy technical stacks (Guidestar + Foundation Center) into one and then they plan to introduce a lot more bells and whistles including AI-powered search. They've been reluctant to roll out new products since the two stacks didn't talk to one another. But it's coming."*

### **The McGovern Foundation Confirmation**

Nick's feedback echoed Andrew's assessment. The tools Justin was looking for simply didn't exist yet. The kind of intelligent matching that leveraged generative AI—which had been publicly available for over two years—somehow hadn't made it into the nonprofit funding discovery space.

Both experts confirmed that platforms like Impala were emerging, but they suffered from the same fundamental flaw: an over-reliance on algorithmic matching that generated massive false positive rates.

## Chapter 4: The 11 PM Solution (February 2025)

The moment of creation happened in the most ordinary of circumstances. It was 11 PM in the Steele family's small Oakland craftsman home, and Justin was at their iMac in the corner of the living room—the only dedicated workspace in a house where everything served multiple purposes.

### The Scene of Innovation

With four daughters ages 3, 12, 14, and 16, the evenings after 10 PM were the only time the house was ever quiet. Sally was on the couch nearby, laptop open, organizing their next Outdoorism Collective group trip for President's Day weekend—their first winter camping adventure to Muir Woods.

The financial pressure was immediate and tangible. An invoice for five Portable Propex Suitcase Heater Systems sat on the table: \$9,480. With only \$33,000 in their organizational bank account, the purchase felt massive. But they knew urban families camping in the Redwoods during winter would struggle without proper heating—most had never spent a night outside in temperatures below 45 degrees.

"I can't remember the exact building moment," Justin recalls. "At that point, I had built up some confidence in Cursor. I'd gotten comfortable with taking the leap and just having the audacity to create something for myself."

### The Technical Foundation

Drawing on his engineering background and newly available AI capabilities, Justin opened Cursor and dropped the .txt file containing thousands of funder matches directly into the interface. But this wasn't just coding—it was applying two decades of experience on both sides of philanthropy.

As the former Americas Director for Google.org, Justin had directed \$698 million in strategic investments. He knew exactly what information funders needed to make investment decisions. As a desperate nonprofit founder, he understood what organizations needed to survive and thrive.

### The Perplexity Breakthrough

Justin's first insight was using Perplexity's API to build comprehensive funder profiles from publicly available information. For each of the 3,000 Instrumentl matches, the system would:

- Scrape and analyze foundation websites
- Process annual reports and impact statements
- Extract insights from IRS Form 990 filings
- Analyze news coverage and press releases
- Identify key decision-makers and their backgrounds

### The Program Officer Persona

The breakthrough came when Justin realized he was thinking about the matching problem wrong. His first instinct was to create complex scoring rubrics across multiple categories—the kind of systematic approach that appeals to engineers and data scientists.

But that's not how funding decisions actually get made.

"When a funder receives an outreach email or proposal, they don't pull out a scoring rubric," Justin explains. "A program officer reads about the organization and makes a gut decision about whether to have their team do

more due diligence or pass on the opportunity. It's based on intuition about fit, developed over years of experience."

So Justin programmed the AI reasoning model to adopt the persona of a senior program officer—someone with deep experience in their sector, understanding of their foundation's priorities, and the ability to quickly assess organizational fit.

### **The First Filter: 90% Elimination**

The initial results were rough but promising. The matches appeared in a Supabase table with no frontend interface—when Justin tried to show Sally the results, she couldn't navigate the database effectively. The scripts had incorrectly parsed some files, generating random matches that their Perplexity integration had attempted to match with real funders but weren't even included in the original dataset.

But amidst the noise and errors were clear gems: REI Action Fund, the National Recreation Foundation, Patagonia Corporate Grants Program. These weren't just random matches—they were highly relevant funders that neither Instrumentl nor Candid had surfaced effectively.

"We knew we were onto something," Justin remembers. "We were excited to clean up the list and get moving."

The AI program officer persona, once properly calibrated, determined that 90% of the original 3,000 Instrumentl matches were false positives. The list dropped from 3,000 to 300 potential funders.

Still too many, but finally manageable.

### **The Deep Dive: Web Scraping at Scale**

For the remaining 300 funders, Justin deployed Firecrawl to systematically scrape foundation websites, identifying the most relevant pages for matching analysis. The system would:

- Map website architecture and identify key sections
- Extract content from grant databases, impact reports, and strategic plans
- Analyze board composition and staff backgrounds
- Process recent news and press coverage

This enriched data was fed back into the funder profiles, enabling a deeper evaluation of fit with specific scoring (0-100 scale). Drawing the line at 70+ scores, the list narrowed to 150 high-quality, stack-ranked prospects.

## **Chapter 5: The George Family Foundation Validation (February 2025)**

At the top of Justin's stack-ranked list sat an unexpected name: The George Family Foundation.

"I thought, that can't be Bill and Penny George," Justin recalls. "I clicked into the profile the AI had generated, and sure enough, it was!"

This wasn't just any match—Bill George had been Justin's professor at Harvard Business School and the namesake of the George Leadership Fellows program where Justin had participated.

### **The Perfect Outreach**

Using the funder intelligence brief generated by his tool, Justin crafted a targeted email to Bill George:

*"Dear Bill, As a former George Leadership Fellow, I wanted to reach out about an initiative that aligns closely with the George Family Foundation's work in whole-person health and spirituality... Our work—which has already connected 200+ participants to restorative outdoor experiences—sits at the intersection of your foundation's interests in whole-person wellbeing and spiritual renewal through nature."*

### **Immediate Validation**

Within 24 hours, Sean Malone, Executive Director of the George Family Foundation, responded:

*"Hi Justin, Bill shared your email with me; it's always great to hear from a George Fellow! Your website looks great. Congratulations on what you're accomplishing... I'd be happy to jump on a Zoom with you (or you and Sally) to learn more about your endeavor and to be helpful in any way I can."*

A week later, Justin and Sally had an extensive conversation with Sean. Using their tool's intelligence brief to structure their presentation, they knew exactly how to position Outdoorithm Collective within the foundation's funding priorities.

The outcome exceeded their expectations: Sean invited them to submit a formal application once they reached the foundation's minimum budget threshold.

### **The Moment of Realization**

"That's when I knew we were onto something," Justin reflects. "This wasn't just a lucky connection because of my Harvard relationship. Our tool had identified the perfect strategic fit and given us the intelligence we needed to present our organization in the most compelling way possible."

## **Chapter 6: The Validation Cascade (March 2025)**

Armed with confidence from the George Family Foundation response, Justin and Sally began working through their stack-ranked list systematically.

### **The James Irvine Foundation Success**

One of their next targets was the James Irvine Foundation, where Don Howard served as a program officer. Their tool correctly identified that Outdoorithm Collective wasn't a strong fit for Irvine's primary funding priorities around economic opportunity.

But intelligence isn't just about perfect matches—it's about informed relationship building.

Justin sent a thoughtful email to Don acknowledging the strategic misalignment while sharing their compelling work. The response was immediate and generous:

*"I love all that you're doing. In terms of the Outdoorithm Collective, that isn't something that fits with Irvine's focus on empowering low-income workers to get ahead economically. So, Irvine can't be helpful... [But] I can direct a small (\$10k) discretionary grant for CA work your way, if that would be helpful."*

Within days, they had secured their first foundation grant through the platform.

### **The Network Effect Begins**

Word began spreading through Justin and Sally's networks. Friends and colleagues started asking how they could access the tool. These were just scripts running on Justin's personal computer, but the demand was clear.

More importantly, other nonprofit founders were seeing similar results:

- **A \$5,000 family foundation grant** secured by another early user
- **Multiple foundation meetings** scheduled through intelligent outreach
- **Hours saved** on research that would have taken weeks manually

## Chapter 7: The Technical Evolution (March-April 2025)

Recognizing the platform's potential, Justin made a crucial decision: it was time to transform his personal scripts into a production-ready platform that could serve multiple organizations.

### The Full Scale Partnership

Justin partnered with Full Scale, a firm that connects entrepreneurs with talented developers in the Philippines. He was matched with a skilled full-stack developer who brought professional software development practices to the project.

Together, they:

- **Refactored the entire codebase** for multi-client support
- **Implemented robust security and privacy protections** essential for handling nonprofit data
- **Deployed the system to Azure cloud infrastructure** for scalability and reliability
- **Created user authentication and organization management** systems
- **Built comprehensive logging and analytics** to track system performance

### The Stealth Mode Launch

By April 2025, Justin began quietly onboarding selected nonprofit leaders into the platform. The results were consistently impressive:

- Organizations were finding high-quality funder matches in hours instead of weeks
- The AI-generated intelligence briefs were providing strategic insights that typically required expensive consultants
- Users were successfully securing meetings and grants using the platform's guidance

But Justin increasingly felt the weight of building alone.

## Chapter 8: The Co-Founder Discovery (April 2025)

Building a startup is fundamentally lonely work, especially when you're coding until late at night while managing a household with four daughters. Justin knew he needed a partner—someone who shared his vision and brought complementary skills.

### The Kitchen Island Call

The answer came through an unexpected video call that interrupted a coding session. It was around 8 PM, the house was still buzzing with kid energy, and Justin was at the desk in the living room trying to block it out and

focus on his code. Sally was on a business trip, leaving him solo parenting while trying to hold everything together.

Their mutual friend Chris was calling from Karibu Nyaggah's kitchen island in Half Moon Bay. What started as a friendly hello turned into a three-hour conversation that changed everything.

Justin was in the middle of watching his code generate increasingly better matches and intelligence briefs. He couldn't contain his excitement about what he was building, and they started nerding out together about the technical possibilities and how they might work on it together.

## **The Harvard Connection**

Justin and Karibu's relationship stretched back over two decades to their first meeting at Harvard Business School's Summer Ventures in Management Program (SVMP) in the summer of 2003. Both were rising seniors taking time off from their summer internships with big companies to spend a week at Harvard exploring careers in business. They had bonded over shared values about business as a force for good, with Karibu sharing Ed Silvoso's "Anointed for Business" and sparking conversations about finding higher purpose in professional success.

## **Complementary Expertise**

Their professional journeys had taken them on parallel paths in social impact:

### **Karibu's Background:**

- **Co-founded Sinapis**, scaling entrepreneurship programs across six countries in Africa and Latin America
- **Trained 7,000+ entrepreneurs** and supported the creation of 130,000+ jobs
- **Facilitated \$200M+ in revenue growth** for small and medium enterprises
- **World Bank consultant** on investment policy and strategic planning
- **Chief of Staff at Alphabet's Loon project** (global internet connectivity initiative)
- **Currently Director at Meta** leading AI efficiency initiatives in Product Data Operations

### **Justin's Background:**

- **Led Google.org's Americas philanthropy**, directing \$698 million in strategic investments
- **Deputy Director at Year Up**, a top workforce development nonprofit
- **Consultant at Bain & Company and The Bridgespan Group**
- **Built the entire Kindora platform prototype** using engineering background and AI capabilities

## **The Vision Alignment**

What made their partnership powerful wasn't just complementary skills—it was shared values developed over twenty years of friendship. Both had worked on opposite sides of the philanthropy ecosystem and witnessed the same frustrations:

- Worthy organizations struggling to find aligned funders
- Founders spending more time on fundraising bureaucracy than mission work
- Systemic barriers that favored well-connected organizations over community-rooted impact

## **The Partnership Decision**

"I told Karibu on the spot that we should create something together," Justin recalls. "We talked about the vision for where we could take Kindora, and I really didn't want to do it alone. Karibu got excited immediately."

Their agreement was straightforward:

- **50/50 equity split** reflecting equal partnership
- **Bootstrap as long as possible** to maintain control and mission alignment
- **Focus on underserved customers** that existing platforms ignored
- **Build for accessibility** with affordable pricing and flexible terms
- **Public Benefit Corporation structure** from day one—there was never a moment of doubt about this commitment

The decision to structure as a Public Benefit Corporation wasn't an afterthought or marketing strategy. Both founders had spent their careers witnessing families like the Millers—participants in Outdoorism Collective whose stories of transformation through access to nature exemplified exactly why this work mattered. They knew that maximizing shareholder value alone would never serve the communities they were committed to supporting.

## Chapter 9: The Business Model Innovation (May 2025)

Drawing on their Harvard Business School training in disruptive innovation, Justin and Karibu made a strategic decision that would differentiate Kindora from every competitor: they would start with the customers everyone else was ignoring.

### The Underserved Market

Traditional fundraising platforms focused on well-funded nonprofits that could afford \$200-500 monthly subscriptions with annual commitments. Justin and Karibu saw a massive underserved market:

- **Small nonprofits** led by founders without family wealth to tap
- **Community-rooted organizations** without access to high-net-worth individual donors
- **Startup nonprofits** that couldn't afford expensive consultants or software

### The Accessibility Innovation

Their pricing strategy was revolutionary for the sector:

- **\$25/month Community tier** making professional tools accessible to organizations that had been completely priced out
- **Monthly billing with no annual contracts** removing the barrier of upfront financial commitments
- **Public Benefit Corporation structure** ensuring mission alignment over pure profit maximization

### The Technical Advantage

While competitors were still relying on keyword matching and basic algorithms, Kindora was leveraging:

- **Advanced AI reasoning models** that thought like experienced program officers
- **Comprehensive web scraping** that captured real-time funder intelligence
- **Behavioral analysis** of foundation giving patterns and decision-making
- **Contextual matching** that understood nuanced organizational fit



## Chapter 10: The Public Benefit Corporation (August 2025)

In August 2025, Kindora officially incorporated as a Public Benefit Corporation in Delaware, cementing their commitment to balancing profit with social impact.

### The Charter Mission

Their legal charter explicitly stated: *"The specific public benefit to be promoted by this corporation is to democratize philanthropic giving to under-resourced nonprofits."*

This wasn't just marketing language—it was a legal commitment that would guide every business decision, from pricing to product development to customer service.

### Accountability Metrics

The Board adopted specific metrics to measure progress toward their public benefit:

1. **Number of active nonprofit organizations** using the platform annually
2. **Total hours returned to nonprofits** through automated prospecting, research, and application support
3. **Grant dollars secured** by organizations in their subsidized access program
4. **Year-over-year revenue growth** of platform users compared to nonprofit sector baseline

### Stakeholder Commitment

Kindora identified three key stakeholder groups materially affected by their operations:

- **Nonprofit organizations** using the platform
- **Communities served** by those organizations
- **Kindora employees** building the platform

This stakeholder-centered approach would influence everything from pricing decisions (keeping Community tier accessible even if less profitable) to feature development (prioritizing tools that save time over those that generate revenue).

## Chapter 11: The Beta Launch (August 2025)

After months of stealth development and testing, Kindora was ready to emerge from stealth mode with a limited beta program.

### The Beta Strategy

Rather than launching publicly, they chose a selective approach:

- **Invite-only access** to maintain quality control and gather focused feedback
- **Free beta access** using code KINDORA100 to remove financial barriers during testing
- **Waived setup fees forever** for beta participants, even after the program ended
- **Direct feedback channels** to influence product development

### The Platform Features

Beta users gained access to:

- **AI-powered funder matching** based on comprehensive organizational profiles
- **Intelligent funder briefs** providing 5-8 page strategic analyses of specific foundations
- **Dashboard management** for tracking all funder relationships and outreach
- **Peer-based discovery** identifying funders who support similar organizations

## The Vision for Scale

Looking ahead, Justin and Karibu outlined an ambitious roadmap:

- **Kira AI Grant Writer** (launching Q3 2025) for automated application assistance
- **Open-source platform components** to benefit the entire sector
- **National expansion** serving thousands of nonprofits across all 50 states
- **International scaling** to support global civil society organizations

## Chapter 12: The Founding Principles

As Kindora prepared for its public launch, Justin and Karibu crystallized the founding principles that would guide their work:

**1. Democratization Over Optimization** Rather than building the most sophisticated platform, they prioritized making professional tools accessible to organizations historically excluded from quality fundraising support.

**2. Relationships Over Transactions** Technology should amplify human connection, not replace it. Kindora's tools were designed to help nonprofits build authentic relationships with aligned funders, not to automate away the relational aspects of philanthropy.

**3. Community Over Competition** Their long-term vision included open-sourcing key platform components to benefit the entire sector, prioritizing collective impact over market dominance.

**4. Sustainability Over Scale** Growth would be pursued in service of mission, not at its expense. Maintaining accessibility and impact would take precedence over rapid scaling or maximizing revenue.

**5. Lived Experience Over Theory** Having worked on both sides of philanthropy—as funders directing hundreds of millions and as founders desperately seeking support—they would build from deep understanding of real pain points rather than theoretical solutions.

## Epilogue: The Vision Realized

By late 2025, Kindora represented more than a successful startup—it embodied a vision of what technology could accomplish when built with intentionality around justice and accessibility.

### The Impact Multiplier

Every hour saved by a nonprofit founder on funder research was an hour returned to serving communities. Every grant secured through better targeting was funding that reached organizations closest to the problems they were solving. Every barrier removed from the funding discovery process was a step toward a more equitable philanthropic ecosystem.

### The Network Effect

As more organizations joined the platform, the intelligence grew richer. Funder profiles became more comprehensive, matching algorithms more sophisticated, and success patterns more clear. But unlike typical platform businesses that extracted value from network effects, Kindora's Public Benefit Corporation structure ensured that increased value flowed back to users through better service and maintained accessibility.

## **The Movement Beyond Technology**

Justin and Karibu understood that Kindora was ultimately about more than software. It was about fundamentally shifting power dynamics in philanthropy—from a system that rewarded connections and credentials to one that recognized merit and impact.

"We're not just changing how nonprofits raise money," Justin reflects. "We're changing who gets to change the world."

## **The Personal Journey**

For Justin and Sally, Kindora represented the solution to their own founding struggles with Outdoorithm Collective. But more than that, it was their contribution to ensuring that other mission-driven founders wouldn't face the same barriers they had encountered.

From floating credit card balances to building a platform that could transform the nonprofit sector—the journey exemplified what becomes possible when personal pain points intersect with deep expertise, strong partnerships, and unwavering commitment to justice.

As they prepared for full public launch, Justin and Karibu carried with them the knowledge that every feature they built, every dollar they charged, and every user they served was part of a larger story about who gets access to resources and opportunity in America.

The founding story of Kindora was ultimately the story of two friends who refused to accept that good ideas should be limited by bad systems—and who had the skills, experience, and determination to build something better.

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*"When nonprofits spend time building relationships instead of wrestling with spreadsheets, communities thrive. When funders discover organizations they never knew existed, innovation flourishes. When those closest to problems have equal access to resources, real change happens."*

**— Justin Steele & Karibu Nyaggah, Co-Founders, Kindora**