
eNews: September 2021

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FOUNDER 2 FOUNDER

Q&A With Two Michigan ClimateTech Founders



Darren Riley
Co-Founder and CEO, [JustAir](#)



Kai Cui
Founder and CEO, [CarbonTag](#)

Why did you decide to build a venture ClimateTech? What core problem are you hoping to solve?

JustAir: Launching JustAir was rooted in a combination of both lived and professional experiences that brought me to the realization of how air quality impacts underserved communities. There is a real need to ensure that no matter what neighborhood you are born in that you have access to clean air and we hope to build the infrastructure so that decision-makers can move us to a more equitable breathing environment.

CarbonTag: When I imagine what the world will be like in 50 years, I see people wearing astronaut helmets filled with fresh air traveling with compact spaceships between planets. Trees and flowers are grown in labs and museums. I don't want my future self to live that way. And the way we currently operate is depleting precious resources. Change is needed before it's too late. The fashion industry is the second most polluting and wasteful industry to oil. It accounts for 4% of the global GDP, and emits 10% of the greenhouse gas. The industry profits at the expense of the environmental. My goal is to make the fashion industry more sustainable, meaning no more damage to the planet and people.

What are the pros and cons to doing this kind of work in the Michigan tech ecosystem?

JustAir: I really value the collaborative nature of Michigan's ecosystem, as I hear in some markets it can feel quite competitive. I truly feel that everyone here is rooting for others and are open to going the extra mile to help them

succeed. There is still room to improve in the ecosystem when it comes to attracting talent for future industries such as smart cities and mobility.

CarbonTag: Traditional belief is that Michigan is just about automobiles and manufacturing. Silicon Valley is more about tech and greentech. I can't speak to other states, but in terms of Michigan, I feel super appreciative for the level of support people give me. There are a decent number of sustainable fashion brands in Michigan. The conversations I've had with the owners are super encouraging and inspiring. They are a group of people that care about positive impact over money. They are the real changemakers in the industry.

Regulations and policy seem to be substantial obstacles for high-growth ventures in this space, relative to most other sectors, what is your take on this and do you/how do you hope to influence changes in this arena?

JustAir: The nature of our businesses in ClimateTech indeed has some degree of dependency on policymakers to initiate change. Speaking from JustAir's perspective, we are committed to being community-first in our solution. We believe that by focusing on community engagement and awareness efforts around air quality, we will (1) have a more informed community that is empowered to advocate for environmental changes and (2) provide policymakers with the data to support their decisions in making our breathing environment better for all.

What do you see as the biggest opportunities for ClimateTech companies moving forward?

CarbonTag: Regulations around the environmental impact of corporations might be the biggest opportunity in the future. My perspective is that currently, most companies in the US implement sustainability goals for PR or as a result of investment pressures. China and European countries established regulations to make corporations take their CSR (corporate social responsibility) seriously and they enforce them. Carbon tax is one of the effective ways to incentivize businesses to accelerator their climate-neutral journey.

Any key pieces of advice you would like to share with other entrepreneurs who are thinking of starting a ClimateTech company?

While we are typically building technical solutions to solve climate-related issues, I think it is important not to lose sight of the people. Our technology will impact lives, but the degree to which that impact is realized will be through intentional involvement in the communities that we serve.

-Darren Riley, JustAir

Find your champ! There will always be people who won't believe in you. You don't do things to prove them wrong. You do things to show your supporters that they are right to believe in you!

-Kai Cui, CarbonTag



- [Nutshell](#) co-founder and CEO, Andy Fowler, makes the Michigan pledge and joins A2EF
- A2EF Member VCs adopt DEI termsheet pledge and look for impact. Checkout [eLab VC's impact page](#)
- Detroit-based [DeepHow raises \\$9 million pre-seed funding](#)
- SaaS company, [Algo, raises from Plymouth Growth VC](#)
- [Northern michigan angels expanding its investor network](#)
- [Frontinalis Partners closes Fund 3](#) to invest in mobility startups
- A2 [Tech Leaders on how to improve DEI](#) in their industry
- A2GO, free, [autonomous shuttle service operated by May Mobility, launches in Ann Arbor](#) Oct 11th

NOTEWORTHY NONPROFIT

Huron River Watershed Council

Founded in 1965, the Huron River Watershed Council (HRWC) protects and restores the river for healthy and vibrant communities throughout the 900+ square miles in southeastern Michigan.



HRWC is a nonprofit coalition of residents, businesses, and local governments – building partnerships between and among communities. HRWC monitors the Huron River, its tributaries, lakes, and groundwater, and leads programs on pollution prevention and abatement, wetland and floodplain protection, public education, and natural resource and land-use planning. Hands-on volunteering opportunities for residents include habitat monitoring, water sampling, and river clean-ups!



As a 2018-2020 grantee of the Community Foundation's Community Grantmaking program, and an AAACF nonprofit endowment partner, HRWC is committed to strong financials, high-quality programs, and effective leadership.

Want to get involved? Learn more at: hrwc.org



- Sep 28: [Fall Mobility Show & Tell](#)
- [Startup + Tech Virtual Happy Hour](#) hosted by Purpose Jobs
- TechTown Detroit's [Toast of The Town benefit](#) happens Sep 30
- A2Tech360, hosted by Ann Arbor SPARK, returns Oct 1 - 8! [Click here for more info and registration](#) to the week-long series of virtual and in-person events celebrating entrepreneurship

RESOURCE ROUNDUP

- 📞 Calling early-stage startups: Renaissance VC is compiling their 2021 Fall hotlist. [Companies can apply here by Sep 27](#); Investors and partners: [register now to attend Fall UnDemo Day](#) on Oct 13th
- Bamboo blog: [9 Accelerators for Minority Founders](#)
- Interested in navigating startup resources in Michigan through a global network? Checkout [StartUp Grind's Grand Rapids Chapter](#)

The Ann Arbor Entrepreneurs Fund (A2EF) is a vibrant hub for peer learning and networking that enables local entrepreneurs to turn business success into positive community impact. *Interested in becoming a member?* Please contact us at community@a2ef.org.