

TEXT BY SHERRI K. OOSTERHOUSE PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK HERBOTH PHOTOGRAPHY LLC

# Charlotte Chamber Taps McColl Innovation Institute to Unleash Creativity, Create Vision for New Space

When's the last time you tapped into your creativity? Really, were forced to dig deep into the left-brain and leverage your creative side – that piece of you that may be screaming to escape but gets bogged in spreadsheets and buried in slop. Sound like a lot of pressure? As adults, it can be. Especially if your career relies on your right brain to bring home the bacon.

Sometimes it takes a big disruption to gain a fresh perspective and unleash the creativity we remember from our childhood. That's what Blair Mauldin Stanford was hoping for when she asked the Innovation Institute at the McColl Center to lead her Chamber of Commerce team through an exercise to help them re-imagine their new workspace.

"Our offices were undergoing a major renovation and I wanted everyone to have a voice in what they wanted this new space to be," said Stanford, chief operating officer of the Charlotte Chamber. "I knew if we all got together to collaborate we would bring out the best ideas."

The Innovation Institute has kept a low profile in the Charlotte community, but it's anything but a sleepy part of the McColl Center for Art + Innovation. Movers and shakers in the Queen City and beyond claim alumni status of the Institute's workshops – where they go to fuel their creative capacity through



intensive artist-led programs that have been known to change lives, and maybe a career path or two. Stanford herself is among the many to complete courses at the Institute.

"Everyone is creative, they just haven't tapped into it in a long time," said Sheila Mullen, director of the Innovation Institute. "We teach people how to solve their problems differently, we show that collaboration can be a fuel that ignites creativity."

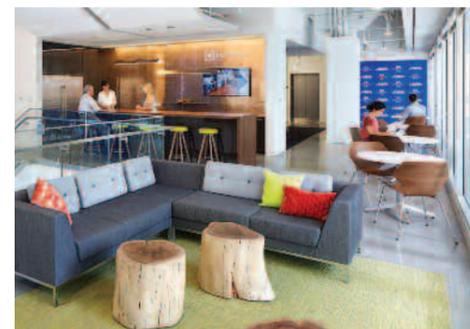
That's exactly what Stanford had hoped would



happen when she brought 45 people from her leadership team to roll up their sleeves, let go of conventional thinking and be creative in shaping a new space they all share for 40 hours every week.

There's an energy all its own at the McColl Center, where artists in residence work their craft, and hallways become galleries of their work representing varied art forms.

Shaun Cassidy, a sculptor, professor and lead artist for the Innovation Institute, guides workshops and share secrets to leveraging different perspectives, allowing creativity to thrive. He led the Chamber team through an experiential session challenging people to work collaboratively while incorporating



individual ideas to benefit the outcome of a new workspace.

In addition to collaborative art-based exercises, Cassidy led a prototyping experience that allowed groups to share what they wanted their new space and culture to look like centered on the Chamber's mission. Building on each other's thoughts and ideas made all feel like a part of the process proving that collaboration is key.

"I think they nailed it," said Stanford. "Our session had a big impact on the outcome of our physical space – incorporating lots of open spaces for meetings, patio space for outdoor meetings, a balcony for fresh air and a kitchen that welcomes more than just diners – I see groups informally working and sharing ideas all day long there."

To ensure the momentum was not lost with the completion of construction, committees were formed around the top three ideas from the rapid prototyping drill: Global, Spirit and Space to showcase the Chamber's global outlook; make the workplace productive and fun and, to keep the space current to reflect new people and initiatives.

The Charlotte Chamber staff has been enjoying their new digs since June and has enjoyed Popsicle breaks on the patio and impromptu meetings in the Innovation Institute inspired kitchen.

"We're living the outcomes of our time at the Innovation Institute every day," said Stanford.

## NEED A CREATIVITY RE-BOOT? HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

The Innovation Institute provides artist-led, experiential programs for teams, organizations, and individuals. The programs are not designed to make you an artist, but rather to instill the critical and innovative thinking that artists apply throughout their creative process. This experiential process of artist-led learning results in behaviors that challenge, connect and stimulate change within yourself and the people you lead.

Next individual session: *Think Like an Artist: Creativity, Curiosity & Courage*, February 25 & 26, [mccolcenter.org/innovation-institute/individuals](http://mccolcenter.org/innovation-institute/individuals)

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