



Traffic rushes past Miami's iconic Art Deco district. Long considered the gateway to Latin America, with a laser focus on tourism, hospitality, transportation and real estate development, Miami is working on broadening its global reach.(Charles Ommanney/The Washington Post/Getty Images)

MIAMI — Johanna and Juha Mikkola personify Miami's emerging economy: entrepreneurial, creative and shaped by cultures ranging from the Americas and the Caribbean, to Europe and Asia.

In less than five years, the [Finnish](#) couple has scaled up their tech education business with a little help from some new friends. They've completed a first capital raise – \$1 million from Academic Work, a global [Swedish](#) staffing company with just a handful of U.S. partners.

The Swedes chose Wyncode, the Mikkolas' company; they chose Miami. Millennials with a small child, the Mikkolas relocated from Toronto and left jobs in other sectors – corporate for her, retail for him – to live the good, beachy life and train computer coders in the artsy Wynwood neighborhood. They say cosmopolitan Toronto seems vanilla in comparison.

After growing up in the European melting pot, they feel right at home in Miami. "For me, it's all I've ever known," says Juha, who studied at the International School of Helsinki.

"Cultural diversity speaks to us, but it's a real thing here," Johanna adds. "It brings different ideas, forcing you to think about things in new ways."

Long considered the gateway to [Latin America](#), with a laser focus on tourism, hospitality, transportation and real estate development, Miami is working on broadening its global reach. Community leaders are reimagining the city as an idea generator for technology, education, banking, the arts, media and fashion. High-concept incubators are gaining on traditional brick-and-mortar operations.

"It is becoming a place where things are made, products and services are created, businesses are locating, and that has helped transition the narrative of who Miami is," says Steven Pedigo, an urbanist on the faculty of [New York University](#). Pedigo is research director of the Miami Urban Future Initiative at [Florida International University](#), a think tank for quantifying the trends that are reshaping the city.

One money-backed booster of Miami's cultural energy is Naeem Khan, the Indian-American fashion designer whose star rose when he dressed former first lady Michelle Obama for her premier state dinner in 2009.

Based in Manhattan, Khan is moving his production to a sleekly modern complex on the Miami River that will also house a fashion design high school, scheduled to open in 2020. He's investing \$30 million because, he says, "Miami has incredible potential to become a very important part of the fashion world."

Khan, a part-time Miami resident, will draw upon the city's homegrown wealth of Latin American artisans and channel the globalism – materials, expertise and consumers from everywhere – that he prizes in his business.

"It's a transient city, Miami. It has Art Basel for a week in December, but we need permanent jobs in order to create a vibrant and full circle of a city," Khan says. "You need manufacturing, and we felt that Miami could be perfect for that." He aims to add 70 to 100 jobs to the local economy.

Khan struck out on his own after apprenticing with the iconic designer Halston as a 19-year-old immigrant. He's at the top of the entrepreneurial heap, but he represents a universal wish.

"We have people who are looking to have the American dream, which isn't home ownership anymore, it's entrepreneurship," says Susan Amat, founder and chief executive of Venture Hive. Her Miami-based company produces software and helps corporations, governments and educators enhance innovation.

"We have so many people here who want to be entrepreneurs, it's crazy, which is great because they can," she says.

Statistics show that Miami has the raw materials to support their efforts, especially internationally. Here are four key findings from a May 2018 Miami Urban Future Initiative research paper called "[Benchmarking Miami's Globalization](#)":

- Miami is first among large U.S. metros in foreign-born population, with more than 40 percent.
- Many foreign-born residents are well-educated. More than 41 percent have a bachelor's degree, at least, and 39 percent have an advanced degree. That places Miami second only to San Jose in the Silicon Valley, and ahead of New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco.
- "Miami is an export powerhouse." Exports for 2015 totaled \$33.3 billion in goods and services, for a seventh ranking among large metros; it was first for international freight transport in 2016.
- Adjusted for population size, Miami International Airport ranks first for international passengers, with 437,921 in 2017.

Other research shows that while business start-ups abound in Miami, they tend to hit a wall instead of growing and prospering. The Kauffman Foundation, a nonprofit that studies entrepreneurship and education, has ranked Miami No. 1 for [start-up activity](#) for a decade. However, the city ranks 36th out of 40 metro areas for scale-ups, or fast-growing companies, according to a 2017 study by the group.

The takeaway: Miami companies are born at a rapid pace, but they fail to thrive.

Five years ago that disparity drew the attention of the Knight Foundation. The legacy of brothers John S. and James L. Knight, publishers of the Miami Herald and other newspapers, the foundation is known as a strong supporter of Miami's cultural institutions.

The foundation's leadership decided to spend six months measuring whatever was driving change in the city, Miami program director Raul Moas says. They learned "Miami had a strong entrepreneurial undercurrent, but not everybody felt that Miami was the right place to launch a high-growth venture," he says. There were too few Miami-based Fortune 500 companies.

They found that a lot of ambitious 20-, 30- and 40-year-olds want to grow in place and savor Miami's richly diverse lifestyle. And, there are many high-income individuals – some who sold successful businesses elsewhere and moved to Miami, others from the Brickell corridor in downtown Miami, U.S. headquarters of Latin American banking.

The challenge was bringing those two groups together to bankroll progress. The foundation would commit \$25 million to support Miami's "creatives, entrepreneurs and change agents," according to its [website](#).

The money was used for both micro and macro projects. It created co-working spaces for techies to collaborate on ventures and consumer goods; it seeded strategic approaches to funding and mentorship.

Notably, the foundation helped convince Endeavor Global to launch its first U.S. venture in Miami. Over the past 20 years, this nonprofit chaired by Seagrams heir Edgar Bronfman Jr. has helped promising companies in emerging markets like [Argentina](#) ramp up rapidly through mentorship.

The Endeavor board put a lot of thought and diagnostics into selecting Miami as an affiliate five years ago, founding managing director Laura Maydón says. "Entrepreneurs said they liked Miami because of the quality of life, access to markets and geography. It was lacking access to mentors, capital and talent, and those are the three things Endeavor focuses on."

The move seems to be paying off. Last year Endeavor Miami's 16 companies booked \$130 million in revenue. They employed 1,600 people and raised \$15 million in capital, according to the affiliate's October 2017 [annual impact report](#). That's a 37 percent rise since 2014, the Miami Herald reports.

Since then, six more Miami companies have joined the ranks, Maydón says. The Miami affiliate's success encouraged Endeavor to launch in other underserved U.S. markets: Detroit, Louisville, Atlanta and, most recently, Puerto Rico.

Endeavor was the crucial catalyst for Wyncode's beneficial partnership with Academic Work, the Mikkolas say.

"Endeavor was perfect because here we were, building a business together for the first time. We loved what we were doing, but we needed experience and expertise," Johanna says. "It was a source of vetted, trusted people who we could lean on."

[Noreen Marcus](#), Contributor

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