

Culture Convergence 2026

Host, Emcee, Moderator and Panelist Bios

Chris Pederson

Host

Chris Pederson is a Medina entrepreneur, writer, and community advocate who founded LocalTies Media to celebrate local businesses, share meaningful stories, and bring people together. His work spans publishing, renewable energy, real estate, consumer products, and digital art, guided by a willingness to take risks and pursue ideas beyond his experience.

Through Medina Ventures, managing partner of Medina Venture Holdings, Chris brought Meander Park & Boardwalk from vision to groundbreaking without prior real estate development experience. The project reflects his belief that development can create places where business and community strengthen one another.

His entrepreneurial roots include working alongside his father and brother in the family business, Highway 55 Rental. He co-founded Verterra Energy, worked in independent sales for SolarPod, and helped develop products and lead national marketing for VedaloHD sunglasses, particularly in aviation and action sports. He also founded Order of the Egonauts, an NFT project combining original artwork with cryptocurrency history.

Chris's community involvement includes eight years as president of the Fields of Medina HOA and a run for Medina City Council in 2024. Whether publishing a neighbor's story, exploring emerging technology, or organizing Culture Convergence, he aims to inspire others, encourage innovation, and build connections.

Outside work, Chris enjoys writing, video games, movies, running, and travel. His favorite time is spent with his wife and their elementary-aged children.

Josiah Wilson

Emcee

Josiah Wilson is the founder of LIBREX Crypto Consulting and an advocate for crypto education and financial empowerment. He believes confident participation in digital finance begins with making the basics clear and accessible.

Founded in 2024, LIBREX helps individuals, businesses, and nonprofits navigate cryptocurrency and digital assets through education, practical strategies, and transparent guidance. Josiah works to simplify a space that can often feel overwhelming.

A supporter of decentralized finance, he sees its potential to expand financial freedom and give people greater control over their financial futures. His approach emphasizes honesty, accessibility, and informed decision-making.

Main Event Sponsor

GVolt Holdings

GVolt Holdings brings together energy, digital infrastructure, advanced materials, and industrial supply chains through the following platforms.

NRGX: Converts waste and biomass into power, renewable fuels, and advanced carbon products.

KDX: Connects powered sites with AI demand through standardized compute infrastructure and global supply chains.

GNX: Advances microreactor and modular nuclear reactor deployment for defense, computing, and industry.

GraphX: Commercializes graphenic carbon for concrete and industrial applications.

X Center: GVolt's flagship commercial-scale Energy Island integrates power generation, AI computing, advanced materials, and emerging technologies in a scalable model for nationwide deployment.

Panel 1

Brandon Ferdig

Moderator

Brandon Ferdig is the founder and president of the Minnesota Blockchain Initiative and an independent journalist and podcaster behind The Periphery. His work explores how people, culture, and emerging technologies shape society, connecting individual experiences with broader conversations about community and change.

Through MN Blockchain Initiative, Brandon brings together entrepreneurs, developers, educators, legal professionals, and policymakers to advance blockchain education and collaboration across Minnesota. He also hosts MNBlockchain Conversations, interviewing people building businesses and exploring applications for blockchain and Web3.

His journalism spans human-interest reporting, cultural commentary, and documentary storytelling. Through The Periphery, he has traveled across the United States to share overlooked perspectives, including those of people experiencing homelessness. His documentary The Wall helped inspire The Periphery Foundation, which connects storytelling with support for social causes.

Brandon has played a critical role in supporting Culture Convergence since its founding in 2024, helping connect the people and ideas behind the event. As moderator of the first panel, he brings an interviewer's curiosity and a community builder's commitment to thoughtful conversation about Minnesota's future.

Todd Albers

Todd Albers was elected mayor of Medina, Minnesota, in 2024 after six years on the City Council and four years on the Planning Commission. He also served on the commission that developed Medina's 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

Professionally, Todd works in Federal Reserve Financial Services at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, focusing on the efficiency, resilience, and security of the U.S. payment system. He and his wife, Kimberly, have lived in Medina since 2011, where they raised their two children. Outside work, Todd enjoys hockey, fishing, hunting, and mowing the lawn.

Tom McKee

Tom McKee has served as mayor of Corcoran, Minnesota, since 2021 and is running for the Minnesota House of Representatives in District 37A. His priorities include public safety, responsible growth, infrastructure, and quality of life.

Tom works as a project manager and director of safety for a family-owned general contracting company. He also serves as president of the Corcoran Economic Development Authority and previously led the Northwest Hennepin League of Municipalities. He earned his undergraduate degree from Wake Forest University and his law degree from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Raised in Medina, Tom now lives in Corcoran with his wife, Erin, and their son, Logan.

Julie Maas-Kusske

Julie Maas-Kusske has served as mayor of Maple Plain, Minnesota, since 2017, following service on the City Council. She has helped lead projects including Gateway Boulevard, the redevelopment of Haven Homes, Veterans Memorial Park, and the city's street and capital improvement plans.

Julie is president of the Minnesota Mayors Association and the West Hennepin Chamber of Commerce, chairs the West Hennepin Public Safety Police Commission, and serves on the League of Minnesota Cities board. She received Orono High School's Distinguished Alumni of the Year award in 2020 and Minnesota Women in City Government's Elected Official of the Year award in 2023. Guided by her motto, "Your neighbor, your voice," she emphasizes accessibility, collaboration, and open dialogue.

Sarah Anderson

Sarah Anderson is a health care professional, longtime Plymouth resident, and candidate for Plymouth City Council in Ward 2. Her interest in local government grew after she and her sister began attending City Council meetings to better understand the city's direction.

Research into the GreenStep Cities program and its influence on Plymouth's future led Sarah to share her concerns publicly and ultimately run for office. Her faith, listening skills, and ability to evaluate information shape her approach to community issues and potential solutions.

Panel 2

Chris Pederson

Moderator

Wes Sanda

Wes Sanda is founder and managing partner of GVolt Holdings, the main event sponsor of Culture Convergence 2026. He brings more than 30 years of experience in corporate strategy, organizational transformation, mergers and acquisitions, and leadership development across aviation, aerospace manufacturing, private equity, and Fortune 500 companies. His career includes a senior leadership role in the \$17.7 billion Northwest Airlines–Delta Air Lines merger and the integration of operations supporting 35,000 employees.

At GVolt, Wes is building a portfolio spanning energy, digital infrastructure, advanced materials, and industrial supply chains. Through NRGX and KDX, the company is developing distributed infrastructure that combines behind-the-fence power generation, strategic energy assets, and modular high-performance computing. His work focuses on aligning leadership, technology, capital, and commercial partnerships around a shared strategy.

Tony Margarit

Tony Margarit is chief financial officer of Zcash Open Development Lab (ZODL), a company focused on expanding access to private digital money. Spun out of Electric Coin Co. in early 2026, ZODL is a core developer of the Zcash protocol and the team behind Zodl, its flagship wallet.

A CPA by training, Tony began his career in public accounting and has spent more than 15 years building and scaling finance teams in high-growth industries, particularly crypto. He previously led finance and operations at Electric Coin Co. and served as head of finance for a blockchain and NFT ticketing platform. Active in crypto since 2015, he has worked as an investor, advisor, and finance leader and previously co-chaired the Blockchain Association's Tax and Accounting Working Group.

Marcus Taplin

Marcus Taplin is an Emmy Award-winning creative, five-time IDEA Golden Matrix Award winner, and entrepreneur with 15 years of experience in sports production and storytelling. He has collaborated with hundreds of professional and collegiate teams on in-arena content, cinematic storytelling, and video production.

His credits include multiple Super Bowls, six consecutive years producing and filming the Los Angeles Lakers' season-opening videos, Netflix's The Quarterback, and more than 300 professional sports media days. His campaigns span major leagues and organizations, including the NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL, MLS, FIFA, NASCAR, Formula 1, and NCAA.

Marcus founded Deep Freeze Data, which provides off-grid, off-cloud storage for long-term digital preservation; Ice Camp Outfitters, an outdoor recreation business he successfully exited; and CoSota Rentals, a real estate business serving the Upper Midwest. His experience combines hands-on creative production with business operations and company development.

Mike Killeen

Mike Killeen is chief financial officer of First Avenue Productions, the Minneapolis venue operator and concert promoter. He oversees finance, accounting, and legal functions and previously oversaw human resources for a business presenting more than 1,200 concerts annually across six company-operated venues and more than 20 outside venues and festival sites.

Over the past decade, Mike has led the financing and acquisition of four new venues, built the company's enterprise resource planning and accounting infrastructure, and guided the business through the zero-revenue period of the COVID shutdown.

A CPA by training, Mike began his career at Grant Thornton, where he spent two years leading audits in Hong Kong. He later held finance leadership roles at venture-backed and public medical device and technology companies. He holds a B.A. in Accounting and Management Information Systems from Luther College.

Panel 3

David Espindola

Moderator

David Espindola helps organizations adopt AI responsibly, combining technical understanding with business strategy. He brings more than 30 years of experience spanning Silicon Valley startups and senior leadership roles at Oracle, Zebra Technologies, and Flexera Software.

As founder of Brainyus, David works with businesses, government entities, nonprofits, and universities on AI strategies, policies, and public understanding. His work explores how technology can serve human dignity, purpose, and sustainable abundance.

David is the author of *The Exponential Era* and the award-winning *Soulful: You in the Future of Artificial Intelligence*. His background includes Fortune 500 business transformation, startup innovation, and academic advising. Learn more at DavidEspindola.com.

Matt Kramer

Matt Kramer is the founder of Kramer Tech, where he builds AI tools following a career spanning professional sports, medical research, and surgical technology. He studied biology and played baseball at Harvard before spending five years in professional baseball with the Atlanta Braves and Boston Red Sox organizations.

Matt later coached strength and conditioning, conducted sports medicine research in Boston, and spent two years in medical school. He then worked alongside surgeons for seven years in the surgical device industry before helping introduce clinical AI tools into health systems.

Across these roles, Matt has focused on helping athletes, clinicians, engineers, and executives understand one another. He lives in the Twin Cities and plays town ball for the Hamel Hawks.

Benjamin O’Laughlin

Benjamin O’Laughlin is a litigator at Larkin Hoffman, a full-service law firm serving organizations and individuals. He focuses on efficiently resolving real property, construction, and business disputes.

Ben has represented homeowners, contractors, businesses, insurance companies, and financial institutions in complex civil litigation in state and federal courts.

Violetta Zironi

Violetta Zironi is an Italian songwriter and interdisciplinary artist whose work spans music, film, visual art, and immersive experiences. After placing third on *X Factor Italy* in 2013 and signing with Sony Music, she became an independent artist.

Over the past decade, Violetta has performed across the United States, Europe, and Asia, released five albums, and sold 10,000 musical NFTs. Her film work includes a starring role in Netflix’s *Rose Island* and a David di Donatello win with the Piazza Vittorio Orchestra.

A pioneer in blockchain-based music, Violetta has built a global community of collectors while exploring new ways for artists and audiences to connect.

Greg Burt

Greg Burt is a photographer and entrepreneur who founded Time Into Pixels, a Minneapolis-based business specializing in corporate event photography, professional headshots, and photo booth experiences. Working alongside his wife, Irina, Greg emphasizes natural imagery that captures each client’s personality and story. The company’s clients have included Target, Mayo Clinic, Comcast, and the X Games.

Greg also founded Photo Booth Support, helping photo booth operators troubleshoot technology, strengthen their systems, and streamline daily operations. His work combines creative production with practical experience in the technology behind live events.

Through photography, technical support, and industry education, Greg helps businesses create engaging experiences while building more reliable processes. His perspective connects the creative possibilities of emerging technology with the everyday needs of business owners and event professionals.