

Built on Purpose:
Victoria's Path to Chief
Development Officer

“It’s not just about funding – it’s about belief.”

When Victoria Richardson speaks, she brings her whole self to the table – analytical and poetic, grounded and bold. A strategist with the heart of a changemaker, her 15-year journey with Ascendus is one of vision, evolution, and deep impact. Now, as she steps into her new role as Chief Development Officer, she’s not just leading development and communications – she’s redefining what it means to drive change through people, process, and purpose.

ROOTED IN JUSTICE, RAISED BY VISION

Victoria’s journey didn’t begin in a boardroom. It began in Louisville, Kentucky, where she was raised by a single mother and surrounded by powerful role models – especially her grandfather, a journalist and activist from Little Rock, Arkansas. “Even when I was a little girl,” Victoria shares, “I was drawing floor plans for housing for the unhoused. Equity and justice weren’t abstract – they were how I understood the world.”

From an early age, fairness wasn’t a concept. It was a calling. “The world should feel fair to all of us,” she says. “That’s always been an undercurrent in my life.”

Her academic path reflected this dual pull: she earned a degree in Business Administration with a focus in finance, and another in Philosophy with an emphasis on racial equity. “I was always drawn to the tension between structure and values,” she says. “Finance represented a lever for opportunity; philosophy, the moral compass to guide it.”

That combination took on new clarity when, in her senior year, Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize for microfinance. “It clicked,” Victoria says. “It was business meeting purpose.”

CALLED BY CHANGE, LIT BY IMPACT

Just as she was preparing to graduate, Victoria discovered an AmeriCorps VISTA posting with a Boston-based nonprofit doing domestic microfinance work. The organization? Ascendus, then known as Accion East.

“It was like a lightning strike,” she remembers. “It brought together everything I cared about – finance as a lever for change, and a deep social mission.”

That one-year VISTA assignment would go on to shape her entire career. From the start, Victoria experienced something she would later call the defining ethos of Ascendus: being seen and supported. “Senior leaders took the time to sit with me and explain their feedback on grants, not just to improve my writing but to coach me on how to articulate our mission.”

That level of dedication shaped her leadership style: hands-on, human, strategic. “I was poured into at every level,” she says. “A lot of the skills I use today were born in those first years.”

That investment in her potential mirrored the same journey of support we have with our clients, funders and team members. “People saw something in me. They pushed me. And when the time was right, they gave me space and freedom to lead.”

With every new challenge, she began connecting the dots. “It was fundraising, but it was also storytelling. It was impact. It was clarity. It was strategy.”

She also saw firsthand what made Ascendus unique – its approach to development as impact. “Fundraising here isn’t about asking for money. It’s about understanding a need, translating it into a strategy, and mobilizing support to solve a real problem. It’s about building trust, building bridges, and being ready when the moment arrives.”

That trust – offered early, without condition – became the blueprint for how Victoria would lead for the next 15 years.



LEARNING TO LEAD, LEADING TO LIFT

As Victoria grew at Ascendus, so did her role in shaping the voice and vision of the organization. With every proposal, conversation, and strategy session, she helped define how Ascendus presented itself to the world. She learned to bridge the language of funding with the lived experience of clients. “We’re not here to be flashy. We’re here to solve real problems. That’s what makes us different.”

Her own story mirrors the journey of the clients Ascendus serves. “I’m a first-generation college graduate. I had no model for how to navigate the professional world. But I had people who believed in me – and that changed everything.”

MEETING THE MOMENT – REDEFINING WHAT’S POSSIBLE

In 2023, Victoria found herself at a defining moment – one that would mark her shift from Senior Vice President to Chief Development Officer. The ask was bold: the organization needed to double its fundraising to make sustainable growth possible – and Victoria was asked to lead that charge. Together with the leadership team and the resource development & communications team, Victoria built a roadmap to deliver on that bold goal. “We needed to focus on people. We needed to focus on the process. We needed to focus on pipeline.” In other words: the right team, the right systems, and the right strategy to scale impact.

She didn’t just meet the moment – she transformed it into a new standard for what Ascendus could be, and what development leadership could mean.

The Architecture of Ascension

Victoria's leadership is deeply aligned with how Ascendus defines impact: through business, household, and community transformation. Her role in resource development is about unlocking capital so the mission can reach higher, faster, and deeper – and about ensuring that impact isn't just felt, but measured.

To make that possible, she co-developed the three-layer cake framework – Ascendus' theory of change. In partnership with the Operations and Innovation teams, that framework was brought to life through an online dashboard – a tool designed to help us measure what matters most: how clients are progressing across every layer of their financial journey.

That thinking also led to the creation of the Ascendus Borrowing Index (ABI) – a metric Victoria co-developed with Andrea Ierace, SVP of Lending, and Jennifer Spaziano, SVP of Operations & Innovation. The ABI is designed to serve as an objective, leading indicator of financial health across our client base. These tools give structure and visibility to the three-layer approach ensuring that ascension isn't anecdotal – it's trackable, reportable, and actionable.

At the business level, she ensures that small business owners have access to fair, flexible financing and the tools to grow. Fundraising becomes a strategic force that allows Ascendus to scale what works and deliver on its mission.

At the household level, her personal story drives her understanding of what stability means. "I know what it means to make hard choices for your family," she shared. "That's why dignity matters. That why Small Business Development Matters"

At the community level, she sees every partnership, every relationship, as part of something larger. "We're not just funding businesses. We're building systems that helps society move up."



Victoria's ability to hold all three layers at once – strategy, empathy, and systems-level thinking – is what makes her leadership vital to Ascendus' future.

A LEGACY OF BELIEF - REFLECTING FORWARD

As she steps into her role as Chief Development Officer, Victoria carries forward not just a title, but a legacy – one built on belief. Belief in people. Belief in purpose. Belief in the power of small businesses to transform households and communities.

"I came to this organization full of potential, and I was poured into. People believed in me until I could believe in myself. Now, I get to do the same for others."

That full-circle moment isn't just hers – it belongs to every entrepreneur, every team member, every partner walking their own path of ascension. Victoria's leadership isn't just about what she builds – it's about what she unlocks in others: colleagues, partners, funders, and clients alike.

When asked what bold idea she'd share with a funder, her answer is simple: "Invest in a model that works. Don't just fund us – believe in us."

That belief is what carries the mission of Ascendus upward – because when we invest in people with purpose, we don't just create outcomes – we unlock higher futures.

THIS WAY UP.



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