Where do I get started with evaluation?

First, let's define evaluation.
If you ask five evaluators what evaluation is, you will get five different answers. However, all will include a variety of key factors. Program evaluation was born out of a need to understand a program's efficacy, specifically in education. It is also related to monitoring, which ensures a program is implemented as designed or expected but goes further with an intentional focus on improvement. So, where does this leave us? I believe **Evaluation is an intentional and systematic approach to designing, implementing, and using strategies to learn about a program with the aim of improving.** It may involve surveys, logic models, focus groups, pre- and post-tests, spreadsheets of demographic information, or reports sharing impacts.

Second, why are we evaluating?
I almost always use this question to start the evaluation discussion with new organizations. Often, the answer is "Because I think I'm supposed to?" (The shoulder shrug is never convincing.) From my humble perspective, we can evaluate for three primary reasons:
1. To meet the requirements of a funder. I call this monitoring more than evaluation. It is designed to report back to a funder or a group of stakeholders that work is happening and that the program has an impact. These vary significantly in scope and depth.
2. To improve your program. If we want to learn about how well our program works, it's important that we develop a system to track and measure how what we did resulted in what we got.
3. To build an evidence base for our field. Most nonprofit organizations are in a network of similar organizations addressing challenges in our society. As we collectively work towards our visions of a happier, healthier, more equitable society, an evaluation can provide evidence that certain models, programs, or activities work.

All three are viable and important (as are reasons such as sustainability, because my boss asked me to, and, because you love data). You may work toward one or all of them. But, knowing why to evaluate will inform how you carry forward.

Finally, let's get started! Design. Implement. Use.
1. **Create, review, or revise your guiding evaluation documents.** Many times, organizations develop evaluation plans, a Theory of Change, and Logic Models. These will help center your work and your organization. **(Design)**
2. **Develop and collect.** Once we've got our intention and goals set, we can develop tools and processes to collect data. The data should inform our answers to our "Why" and align with our guiding evaluation documents. Data collection often looks like program attendance, pre- and post-tests, surveys, interviews, focus groups, educational attainment, improved health behaviors, etc. It is just as important to consider how you are collecting as it is to consider what you are collecting. Be considerate of the burden each data collection activity places on staff and participants. **(Implement)**
3. **Analyze, summarize, and share!** While all the work you just went through may have been a blast and everyone loved every step, please don't forget to make it actionable. Think about who could use it and how they could use it. Being responsible with program data means protecting participants just as much as it means honoring their contribution to it. Don't keep your challenges or successes secrets. **(Use)**