

# Women Who Empower Innovators 2021

Empowering entrepreneurs and inspiring ingenuity





## FOREWORD

In 2021, Women Who Empower launched its inaugural Innovator Awards. Our goal: to recognize the boldest, most creative changemakers in Northeastern's vast entrepreneurial ecosystem and provide them with financial resources to elevate their ideas, products, businesses, and brands. Unlike traditional venture funding, this award celebrates the people of our community—the authentic, inclusive, innovative leaders.

The response to our call for applications was overwhelming and inspiring. More than 150 individuals shared their unique stories with us. Our innovators represent industries ranging from health and sustainability to fitness, fashion and technology; all Northeastern's schools and colleges; and more than a dozen countries spanning five continents. They each bring us an enormous sense of pride and confidence in their certainty to make a meaningful mark on the world.

With the support of generous donors and dedicated judges, we awarded 19 women and their 17 ventures a total of \$100,000 in grants to empower their aspirations.

All have a role to play in backing our inventors, groundbreakers, and creators. As you learn more about each recipient through the stories enclosed, I encourage you to consider ways you can fuel their futures.

This year was an important stepping stone toward our vision for the collective impact we can make by investing in people. Thank you for supporting this mission.

Diane Nishigaya MacGillivray  
Senior Vice President for University Advancement  
Northeastern University

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# NORTHEASTERN'S INAUGURAL INNOVATOR AWARDS RECOGNIZE 19 WOMEN FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

Molly Beck, a Northeastern graduate and mother of two, has been acting on her entrepreneurial dream of building internal podcast networks for companies via her startup, Messy.fm. She found a familiar partner by applying for and winning an inaugural Innovator Award offered by the university's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative.

The awards, announced Thursday, recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. They are receiving a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fuel 17 business ventures.

In a span of 10 days, Women Who Empower received more than 150 award applications representing more than a

◀ *Molly Beck, a Northeastern graduate and founder of Messy.fm. Courtesy photo.*

dozen countries and all of Northeastern's colleges, inspiring Diane MacGillivray, Northeastern's senior vice president for university advancement, to raise additional funds to recognize the worthy recipients.

"I'm completely overwhelmed by the number and the quality of the submissions we received," says MacGillivray, who created Women Who Empower with trustee and chair emeritus Henry Nasella to invest in women with entrepreneurial aspirations. "It is so reflective of the talent in Northeastern's student and alumni community in terms of innovation and entrepreneurship. It was really, really hard to delineate between those who won the top prizes, and the others who ultimately were selected as finalists."

The judges included Jill Bornstein, founder of UpNext Leadership and Executive Coaching; Julietta Dexter, co-founder and chief growth & purpose officer of Science Magic; Cathy Papoulias-Sakellaris, who has led global companies including Proctor & Gamble, Nielsen Marketing Research, ITT, and Dun & Bradstreet; Cristina Csimma, board chair of Caraway Therapeutics; Cheryl Kaplan, president of M.Gemi; and Nasella, partner and co-founder of LNK Partners, and the first president of Staples, the office supply retailer.

"We were not just looking on the merits of the business or the idea," says Nasella, a Northeastern graduate in accounting. "What really stood out to me was the outstanding leadership and contributions and skills that these women all demonstrated pretty significantly—and that's what I think should be celebrated the most. I've been an investor for a long time; you get excited when you meet people like this."

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**Five awards of \$10,000 each went to first-place winners in five categories:**

Emily Man (who holds undergraduate and master's degrees in bioengineering and biomedical engineering) and Valeria Martinuzzi (master's in bioengineering) for their work on Venova Technologies, which is developing a novel contraceptive device for women.

Natasha Ibori (undergraduate degree in international affairs) for Uwana Energy, a clean energy company in Lagos, Nigeria, that sells solar systems with affordable financing options.

Emily White (undergraduate degree in music business) for Collective Entertainment, a collective of progressive artist and athlete managers working together for their clients' and entrepreneurial projects' benefit.

Gabrielle Whittle (undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering) for Phoenix Footwear, which is developing a transformable high heel.

Molly Beck (undergraduate degree in business from Northeastern, a master's in international marketing management from Boston University, and is currently pursuing a master's in computer science) for Messy.fm.

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Runner-up awards of \$5,000 each went to eight businesses run by women. Another four women received honorable mention awards of \$2,500 each.

The winners covered a wide range of disciplines, notes Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women's entrepreneurship at Northeastern.

“We don’t really know what the problems of tomorrow are going to be, but we do know that they’re going to be more complex, more global, more interdisciplinary,” Ludwig says. “We have to teach the next generation of leaders all of these thinking skills of how to innovate and work with interdisciplinary teams.”

**“We don’t really know what the problems of tomorrow are going to be, but we do know that they’re going to be more complex, more global, more interdisciplinary.”**

– Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship, Northeastern University

The winners were grateful to be part of this newly formed community of women entrepreneurs, says MacGillivray. She plans to grow the annual Innovator Awards to become a signature event that aligns with relevant programs, such as IDEA (a student-led program that fosters the development of entrepreneurs), the Women’s Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE), and WeBuild, a community-based incubator that encourages women from diverse backgrounds to develop an entrepreneurial mindset.

“It is really a humbling experience to be part of the awards and hear the other honorees all make speeches about their entrepreneurial ventures and how Northeastern really intersected with them,” said Beck, whose goals include serving as Northeastern’s Commencement speaker someday. “Being part of the Northeastern community has just been life-changing for me, and I’m excited to see how I can use

this platform to help other people that are coming along beside me and after me.”

Beck’s startup has been live for three years and has seven employees. As a student at Northeastern, she says, she started a blog that “changed my professional life.” She moved into podcasting, where she recognized the need for messy.fm to democratize access to the medium. She has remained in contact with her mentors at Northeastern.

“The entire reason that I exist as a person is because my parents met in Snell library many years ago, and had just a wonderful experience in undergrad at Northeastern,” says Beck, who graduated in entrepreneurship. “The lessons that I learned back when I was in school are applicable to what I was doing four hours ago, when I was thinking through, ‘What’s our business strategy? What’s our vision? How do we compare to competitors?’ These are all things that I learned at Northeastern.”

Bornstein told Beck that she was “an amazing model for women” as she informed Beck of her award.

“One of the things we talked about was that the recipients will be setting the foundation for the future and leading the way,” Bornstein told Beck. “It was really important as part of our process to make sure that those selected can be the voice of women innovators. You are the future.”

# A CLASS PROJECT HELPED TWO ENTREPRENEURS DEVELOP A NEW CONTRACEPTIVE DEVICE

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern



It started with a class project in 2018. Emily Man and Valeria Martinuzzi hardly knew each other. Their idea for an affordable contraceptive device that was not associated with side-effects gained traction.

They became co-founders of a startup, Venova Technologies.

Now they have earned an inaugural \$10,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. They will receive a total of

\$100,000 in grants to help fuel 17 ventures.

Venova Technologies has been invited by the National Institutes of Health to perform non-human primate studies of the device. The Innovator Award will help fund those studies, says Man. Next will come a series of clinical trials.

"Because they're subject to such strict regulatory processes and clinical trials, there is a long time horizon for medical device development," says Man, who graduated in 2019 with master's and bachelor's degrees in bioengineering and biomedical engineering. "The average

▲  
*Emily Man, a Northeastern graduate and co-founder of Venova Technologies. Photo by Matthew Madoono/Northeastern University.*



time it takes from concept to market is five to seven years.”

Man and Martinuzzi met while taking a Design of Implants class two years ago. They were members of a team of four women engineers tasked with investigating unmet needs in women’s reproductive health. They presented their idea for a new contraceptive device to a panel that included Dr. Eric Lee, who would join them as a co-founder of Venova Technologies.

“At the beginning of his career, he also worked on a contraceptive solution,” Man says of Lee. “So I think it was close to his heart, because that’s where his career began as well. And I think he saw a very similar passion in our presentation.” Man and Martinuzzi are limited in publicly discussing the details of their device because the patent is pending.

“It’s completely different from everything else that you see on the markets,” Man says. “It has a first-of-its-kind barrier method that doesn’t rely on copper or hormones. But it doesn’t compromise on long-term effectiveness and reliability, as you see with other barrier methods.”

They developed their idea after discovering a gap in the contraceptive market, says Martinuzzi.

“We knew that if we were able to find a solution that would fill this gap, it would greatly benefit a lot of women across the globe,” says Martinuzzi, who earned her Northeastern master’s in bioengineering. “As engineers, we had a lot of brainstorming sessions until we came up with this idea.”

Their market research made them aware of the need for a new contraceptive.

“We started doing this research and talking to the people around us, and we realized that women are not really open about this,” Martinuzzi says. “It’s not a conversation that is commonly had. I was forced to have conversations with my friends, with my family members, and I realized that even the people around me had a lot of issues with contraceptives. That was eye opening.”

The two partners were able to work through the COVID-19 pandemic because they already had grown used to working remotely. Man is based in Cambridge, Mass., while Martinuzzi is in Miami.

“It’s very exciting,” Martinuzzi says. “It’s part of why we got into this industry, bioengineering—it’s the passion to create devices that would make people’s lives easier. When you find a gap like this and you find a potential solution, all you can do is push it forward. Because you can’t stop now.”



◀ Valeria Martinuzzi, a Northeastern graduate and co-founder of Venova Technologies. Courtesy photo.



▲  
Image on the left is from Getty Stock Photo.

▲  
Image on the right, Binja Basimike, a double Husky, came up with her idea while traveling through Africa last year. Courtesy Photo.



## SHE HELPS BRING WOMEN-LED FOOD BUSINESSES IN AFRICA OUT OF KITCHENS AND INTO THE BIG TIME

by Ian Thomsen,  
News@Northeastern

The idea occurred to Binja Basimike when she returned to Africa in 2020 after a dozen years in the United States, where she earned two degrees at Northeastern: During her ensuing travels to Congo, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Kenya, she noticed that small businesses in the food industry—especially those run by women—were struggling to grow.

Based on a solution that is as promising as it is audacious, Basimike has launched Kivu Venture Capital, based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with the goal of empowering and investing in 500 food entrepreneurs in Africa by 2026.

To help jump-start her venture capital fund, Basimike received an inaugural Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. They are receiving a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fuel 17 ventures.

It was during her travels through central, eastern, and southern Africa that Basimike experienced her revelation: She could address issues of malnutrition, poverty, and gender equity by investing in women who create and sell food.

“What I saw across the board was that there was so much progress being made” in terms of women starting their own businesses, says Basimike, who in 2020 won a Northeastern Emerging Leaders Award. “While there was progress, especially among female-run businesses, there wasn’t much growth.”

Most businesses run by women are sole proprietorships, says Basimike. “Which means they are not creating jobs for other people,” she says. “I started seeing these patterns where you had strong, innovative African women who were entrepreneurs in the food space, but their businesses were confined to their kitchens and the street corner.”

High-interest bank loans are not the answer, says Basimike, who has begun offering capital investment (funded by grants), as well as business advice to women who express entrepreneurial instincts. For her first client, African Food, which delivers meals in Kinshasa, Basimike helped streamline internal business processes to reduce waste and increase return on investment.

“It was very chaotic in terms of how orders came in,” Basimike says. “You start your day and you don’t really know, ‘Am I cooking for 50 or am I cooking for five?’ You have to create a cutoff point—after this point we cannot accept any more orders—because then how are you budgeting for the next day?”

Additionally, says Basimike, African Food transformed from a pickup to delivery service that now uses 15 motorbikers.

“Those are the people that I’m looking for,” Basimike says. “I’m looking for that person of innovation who is looking for that leg up, that extra step to take them to the next level.”

Before her return to Africa, Basimike appeared to be moving toward a career in healthcare. She earned a bachelor’s degree in health science and a master’s in public health and urban health, and she is a member of the Strategic Advisory Council at the Bouvé College of Health Sciences.

“I invited Binja to join the council because of her commitment to furthering Bouvé’s and Northeastern’s mission,” says Carmen Sceppa, dean of the Bouvé College of Health Sciences, who led a nutrition course Basimike took as an undergraduate. “Binja is a contagious and positive driving

force. She is very comfortable being outside her comfort zone while comfortably bringing others along.”

Basimike’s father, Mulenda Basimike, has worked with the United Nations and World Health Organization as a senior advisor and capacity builder for the Roll Back Malaria program. He’s an international consultant for malaria and other communicable diseases with the University of Congo and additional clients. He encouraged Basimike to create her own path.

“I was lucky,” Basimike says of her relationship with her father. “I’m very outspoken, I can go back and forth with him, and to have the ability to be that open with a different gender is not something that many African women get to have.”

Basimike is using the \$5,000 Innovator Award as funding to empower additional businesses.

“Enabling women to have that freedom is one of the tools that will get us to that gender-equitable place,” Basimike says. “Because then you’re self-reliant, you’re more independent, and your dollars actually have a say in how you operate and in your decision-making process.

“It’s about rewriting the stories of how we thrive, how we are resilient, and how we are able to lift ourselves out of poverty and malnutrition—everything that Africa has been labeled,” Basimike says. “It’s about us being able to tell our own stories.”

## THE WINNER OF THIS INNOVATOR AWARD IS INSPIRING PEOPLE TO VOTE

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

The \$10,000 award was especially gratifying to Emily White because she had applied for it from a hospital bed. White, the founder and chief executive of #iVoted, host of a record-setting digital concert held around Election Day last year, suffered a ruptured appendix in January.

White received an inaugural Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. They are receiving a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fuel 17 ventures.

White's #iVoted Festival in November drew more than 450 artists—including Billie Eilish, Trey Anastasio, and Living Colour—in an effort to activate voters for Election Day. Voters registered for the shows by sharing a selfie at home with their blank ballot or from outside their polling place.

White's original plan to create Election Night concerts in arenas had to be repurposed as webcasts because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We didn't have funding," says White, who earned her Northeastern degree in music industry. "So I assembled this team of over 200 volunteers that happens to be 92 percent women, non-binary, people of color, or LGBTQ+."

Assisting White was #iVoted chief operating officer and fellow Northeastern graduate Melanie Shark, member of the Women Who Empower community.

"For me, the biggest takeaway is that you can build anything if you have the right dedicated people," says Shark, a double Husky with degrees in music industry and music industry leadership. "This was my first time in a start-up environment and it was eye-opening to see the impact you can have there compared to a large organization.

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**"For me, the biggest takeaway is that you can build anything if you have the right dedicated people."**

– Melanie Shark, chief operating officer, #iVoted

"I grew more quickly as a professional under Emily's leadership than I ever had," adds Shark, who now works in the United Kingdom as a program manager for licensing at Mandolin, a digital platform for live music. "What makes Emily so successful, and in turn #iVoted so successful, is her sheer determination and ability to keep her eye on the prize no matter how many people said it couldn't be done. She is an athlete and a businessperson, and her athleticism bleeds over into her work ethic for sure."



◀ *Emily White, a Northeastern graduate, assembled the largest ever digital concert around Election Day last year. Photo by Adrian Buckmaster.*

White oversaw the 2020 #iVoted event while continuing to run the business she co-founded, Collective Entertainment, a talent management firm that supports music, sports, content creation, and activism. After the November elections, she pivoted #iVoted to engage with voters for the special U.S. Senate elections in Georgia in January.

“I worked too hard in 2020 and it put me in the hospital,” White says. “There is no doubt in my mind that running my for-profit company and producing the largest digital webcasts in history was all too much.”

White was a three-time all-conference swimmer who in 2004 won the Jeanne Rowlands Award as the top woman athlete at Northeastern. Her 2020 book, *How to Build a Sustainable Music Career and Collect All Revenue Streams*, was an Amazon bestseller.

Three months of medical leave enabled White to “pause and reflect and figure out a little bit more balance in my life,” she says. “It has allowed me to look at certain projects and realize that I want to focus

more on #iVoted.”

The Innovator Award will provide needed resources as White transitions #iVoted to focus on the 2022 midterm elections.

“I was running my company to essentially pay for #iVoted,” White says. “The funding component has deep impact. I’m spending my year focusing on fundraising for our #iVoted initiative: We’re already beginning our work for the 2022 elections.”

While presenting the Innovator Award to White, Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern, noted that the 19 winners represented every college at Northeastern.

“This is really a vote of confidence in you as the innovator,” Ludwig said. “You should just keep on innovating and having a great impact everywhere.”

White was inspired by the competition. “Northeastern was my dream school, it’s been so much for me,” White says. “The other winners and people that applied were just mind-blowing. It was a blast to watch the other presentations and to be considered amongst this group of women.”



▲ *Natasha Ibori co-founded Uwana Energy to create a market for solar panels in her homeland of Nigeria. Courtesy Photo.*

## HER DREAM OF BRINGING CLEAN ELECTRICITY TO NIGERIA EARNED NATASHA IBORI AN INNOVATOR AWARD

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

Natasha Ibori launched her solar company, Uwana Energy, with the goal of providing clean and affordable electricity to her homeland of Nigeria. She was elated to learn that she had won an inaugural \$10,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative.

**“Especially in this very patriarchal country, I have had people just completely doubt my capability and my credibility. So having been able to show myself as a person on this application, and not just that it is a female-led business, is really, really important.”**

– Natasha Ibori, co-founder, Uwana Energy.

“Being able to do a grant application that focused on you as a person—as well as how viable your business is—was really important to me,” says Ibori, who earned her Northeastern degree in international affairs in 2018. “Especially in this very patriarchal country, I have had people just completely doubt my capability and my credibility. So having been able to show myself as a person on this application, and not just that it is a female-led business, is really, really important.”

With several partners, including two from Boston, Ibori launched Uwana Energy—Uwana being the Efik word for brightness—which sells, installs, and maintains rooftop solar panels. Ibori's company has been trying to break in by marketing its solar panels to small business owners, with the eventual goal of being sold in stores throughout Nigeria as a safer alternative to fuel generators.

The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at

Northeastern. They are receiving a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fuel 17 ventures.

"I'm so grateful for the opportunity to be amongst such wonderful businesses that are doing so much for the world," Ibori says of her fellow winners and applicants. "It's amazing to feel like somebody is believing in what we're doing."

Ibori took a class in global social entrepreneurship at Northeastern that changed her career direction and helped prepare her to become co-founder of Uwana Energy.

"Natasha is incredibly organized, highly focused, and exceptionally gracious," says Carol Rosskam, sustainability program manager at Northeastern, who supported Ibori's work on the university's Trash2Treasure recycling initiative. "One of Natasha's attributes is how her soft spoken, melodic voice works in tandem with her fierce strength, intelligence, and convictions."

Ibori also participated in the McCarthy(s) Venture Mentoring Network, which pairs Northeastern entrepreneurs with mentors.

"Natasha is an incredibly passionate and dedicated entrepreneur," says Wendy Eaton, program analyst for the network. "She has a passion for her product and a desire to make a tangible difference in the community in Nigeria. I am excited to see all that she will do."

Ibori was still at Northeastern when she began developing her plans to return home to Nigeria, where she says more than 20 million households create their own electricity with gas-powered generators that are expensive, polluting, noisy, and unreliable.

There is an urgent need for clean, affordable energy in Nigeria, where Ibori says 110 million people face daily blackouts, and more than 11,000 people die annually from air pollution. The COVID-19 pandemic added to the difficulties for her startup, she says.

Uwana Energy offers loan-to-own financing that enables people to make payments that allow them to eventually own the solar panels. The \$10,000 Innovator Award grant is helping Ibori's company improve its solar product and recruit more lenders to support Nigeria's energy transition, she says.

Establishing her company in the marketplace will require a long-term commitment, Ibori acknowledges.

"The biggest hurdle is getting customers to understand the value," says Ibori, who says the \$550 price of the solar panels is roughly equal to the cost of using a gas-powered generator for one year. "That's a lot of money for a lot of people, [especially] if they're not aware of the financing options."

## THE CAVIAR INDUSTRY WAS IN TROUBLE. THIS FORMER NURSING STUDENT IS SAVING IT.

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

An award that she has received from Northeastern will help revolutionize the caviar industry, says Deborah Keane, founder and chief executive officer of the groundbreaking California Caviar Company.

Keane's company is committed to the development of "no-kill caviar," which enables ripe eggs to be massaged from a female sturgeon without killing or cutting into the fish. Keane, known as the "Caviar Queen," is transitioning her sturgeon farm in California to implement the new process, which was designed by Angela Köhler, a German scientist.

The farming of sustainable stocks of sturgeon will enhance the quality and accessibility of caviar, Keane believes.

"It's vitally important to the species," says Keane, who has reinvented herself several times since graduating from Northeastern in nursing in 1986. "And it's important to California Caviar Company to continue to lead the way in sustainable farming and processing practices."

In support of her efforts, Keane has received an inaugural \$5,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distrib-



uting a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

The timing of the award is serendipitous: It arrives on the heels of a business transformation that was forced upon Keane by the COVID-19 pandemic, which wiped out restaurant demands for her caviar. By mid-March 2020, sales had plummeted by 95 percent.

Keane was forced to lay off almost all of her staff except for those on the fish farm. She responded by moving into online retail, locating and selling to customers who were now dining at home. The transition, taxing as it was, happened with unanticipated speed: By the end of last year, the company was earning more than it had 12 months earlier, which enabled Keane to bring back all of her staff.





“I was thinking, ‘Can I hire somebody to do these things I don’t know anything about?’” Keane says of the online skills that she was forced to learn. “I think it’s all about the Northeastern philosophy, where you just jump in, learn it, improve the process, and perfect it.”

Keane grew up in Foxborough, Massachusetts, less than an hour from Northeastern’s campus, where she sold hot dogs at the stadium of the New England Patriots. Her entrepreneurial mindset has led to careers in modeling, publishing, cooking (via a four-year sabbatical in Paris), and, for the past 14 years, caviar—the result of a fundraiser at the home of Michael Tilson Thomas, the renowned conductor, where she was introduced to an investor in a caviar-producing farm.

“Deborah is an inspiration,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern. “When she saw an opportunity in the world, she used her determination, grit, and authenticity to build a sustainable business by leveraging her entrepreneurial mindset even though business wasn’t her original field of study. That’s what it takes to build impactful, global businesses. You need to step out of your comfort zone.”

In an industry dominated by men, Keane has succeeded by building a company run by women.

“I have this incredible staff—all of them are single moms, all but one is a minority, and half of us are ‘me-tooers,’” Keane says. “If you want something done, give it to a working mom.”

The business of caviar was imperiled by unreliable sources and illegal poaching of wild sturgeon. Keane launched California Caviar Company in 2007 as the first company to exclusively sell farmed caviar prior to a 2011 worldwide ban on wild sturgeon fishing. The advent of “no-kill caviar” in the United States will make the food palatable and accessible to new generations, she believes.

“The nutrition of caviar is off the charts,” says Keane, citing its tissue-building properties. “The sturgeon is a prehistoric creature that is on the endangered list. Bringing this sustainable product to the marketplace has been fascinating. I love the science behind it.”

◀ The farming of sustainable stocks of sturgeon is “vitaly important to the species,” says Keane. Courtesy photo.

▼ Courtesy Photo.



## AS A NURSE SHE SAW THE PROBLEMS OF U.S. HEALTHCARE. HER STARTUP HEALS THEM.

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

Cassie Choi, a critical care nurse in San Francisco, was frustrated with the healthcare system. She had been trying to instigate better methods for delivering care to patients, but the system wasn't responding nearly fast enough to suit her.

"I didn't want to be a cog in the wheel," says Choi, who earned a nursing degree from Northeastern in 2013. "So I decided to move to startups as a way to make the impact that I felt was necessary."

Choi is co-founder and chief operating officer of Pair Team, which has been streamlining access to healthcare since 2019. The focus is on providing technology and remote care teams to clinics in underserved communities. Pair Team currently manages 5,000 patients in Southern California with plans to provide

services for an additional 30,000 patients this summer.

In support of her startup, Choi has received an inaugural \$5,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

Choi has spent the past five years seeking better healthcare solutions for people in need. One year after helping launch a health tech startup in 2016, she moved on to a leadership role with a health technology company. Those experiences inspired her to join with Neil Batlivala, her co-founder and chief executive officer, to develop Pair Team.



Pair Team, a startup co-founded by Cassie Choi, a Northeastern graduate, is providing streamlined healthcare for underserved communities. Photo by Ruby Wallau/Northeastern University.

“We really want to serve the patient populations that are more meaningful to us,” Choi says. “My co-founder grew up in India, where there are drastic socio-economic disparities. I grew up in New Hampshire and worked alongside patients in Roxbury [in Boston, Mass.] and the [emergency rooms] in Boston and Washington Heights in inner-city San Francisco—and I knew that the [tools] that we had built in Silicon Valley would have a greater impact on them. Pair Team is on a mission to bring technology innovations to clinicians that serve those patient populations in rural areas across America.”

Pair Team deploys automated systems that enable people to find the care they need and access it more quickly, including chronic care management and outreach to patients who need preventive care.

“We come in as a remote team to offload the work that needs to happen,” Choi says. “It’s getting patients to labs, getting them to mammograms, and helping these complex patient populations navigate the healthcare system. When they’re working three jobs and taking care of kids, they don’t have the time to sit on hold for 10 minutes to schedule a mammogram, even if they know what number to call.”

Their aim is to bring services to states that have expanded Medicaid coverage, including Texas, Ohio, and Florida.

**“In places where there’s a lot of rural healthcare, it comes down to cost. If you’re fiscally conservative, you end up being a healthcare liberal because that’s the way to solve the financial problem of healthcare.”**

– Cassie Choi, co-founder and chief operating officer, Pair Team

“We partner with health plans to bring our services to their clinical network,” Choi says. “In places where there’s a lot of rural healthcare, it comes down to cost. If you’re fiscally conservative, you end up being a healthcare liberal because that’s the way to solve the financial problem of healthcare.”

As a student, Choi was told that she wouldn’t continue her work as “a bedside nurse for long” by Catherine O’Connor, clinical instructor and director of Mobile Health at the Bouvé College of Health Sciences. O’Connor wasn’t surprised last year when Pair Team received \$2.7 million in seed funding to take on the fragmented U.S. healthcare system.

“Her previous experience as a critical care nurse in multiple acute care settings was the obvious catalyst for Cassie to identify what was broken in American healthcare,” says O’Connor. “I hope that in the future Cassie will have the opportunity to disseminate her experiences to other nurse entrepreneurs in successfully merging tech-enabled support to enhance the delivery of patient-centered care.”

Which strikes at another of Choi’s goals: She says her dream job is to become director of innovation and entrepreneurship at Bouvé.

“I really believe that Northeastern can breed innovative and entrepreneurial nurses,” says Choi, who encourages nursing students to take computer coding and other courses to broaden their approach. “I never knew that nurses could be founders or could create technology. I just think it’s important to have exposure to different career paths in nursing.”

▼  
Cassie Choi says her dream job is to someday return to Northeastern to empower entrepreneurship and innovation among nursing students.  
Courtesy Photo.





## AN INNOVATIVE COSMETICS IDEA TURNED HER INTO AN ENTREPRENEUR AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

by Ian Thomsen,  
News@Northeastern

Aniyah Smith's imminent career was disrupted—happily—by the Husky Start-up Challenge shortly after she began studying for an MBA at Northeastern.

She had been planning to pursue her entrepreneurial ambitions later in life. But the timeline underwent a radical adjustment last year at the startup challenge for Northeastern students where Smith placed second, based on her idea to create inclusive and accessible cosmetics for a diverse population.

“I did not expect to be building a company at 22 years old, but I’ve learned to be an opportunist,” says Smith, founder of the cosmetics startup Push Beauty. “Being an opportunist has allowed me to meet so many new people, to find those resources,

to experience what it means to build a company—and just how hard it is.”

In support of her efforts to develop Push Beauty, Smith has received an inaugural \$2,500 Innovator Award from Northeastern’s Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

Smith had been focused on a career in cosmetics since she was 15. She graduated in 2020 with a bachelor’s degree in cosmetics and fragrance marketing from New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology. She earned graduate certificates in entrepreneurship from the University of Pennsylvania and in organizational leadership from Northwestern.

She says her goal of creating an inclusive line of cosmetics has evolved to include products for disabled people that can be opened and used with one hand.

“I realized that diversity goes past color, wealth, and background—it’s really about environments and experiences that people have, and a lot of the time they are very different from your own,” Smith says. “And so my goals have changed. My career choice to be a founder of a brand has stayed the same, but what that brand is and what it means to people has definitely evolved.”

Smith is using the \$2,500 Innovator Award to develop packaging for her line of color sticks that are meant to be applied by hand, rather than with a brush.

“In my research, speaking to people who are both disabled and able-bodied, they say that they love being able to blend it out with their hand,” says Smith, who models the products on her website [anayahsmith.com](http://anayahsmith.com). “It’s this super-versatile product that can be used on your lips, your eyes, and your cheeks. It’s convenient and easy to do your makeup the way you need to do it.”

Smith’s mentors have included Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern.

“Aniyah saw a great need not only for more cosmetics targeted to dark skin—from color palettes to skin type—but also for accessible packaging that is easier to open, use, and apply,” says Ludwig. “Aniyah is using her innate passion for and expertise in the beauty industry to create products and solutions for people that have been traditionally underserved. We are very proud to be supporting such a young, ambitious innovator.”

The opportunity that emerged during the 2020 Husky Startup Challenge has been life-changing and eye-opening. She has continued to develop her startup while also serving a co-op with the analytics, insights, and measurements team at Hasbro, a toys and games manufacturer in Rhode Island—with the long-term goal of learning to apply data to her own business ventures.

“My plan actually initially was to graduate with my MBA, work somewhere for three or four years, and then build a company,” Smith says. “It’s all happened much quicker than I was expecting, and since then I’ve had the amazing support of the Entrepreneurs Club, Women Who Empower, and all of the resources at Northeastern.”

◀  
*Aniyah Smith’s strong showing in the Husky Startup Challenge inspired her to launch a startup, Push Beauty, that is developing inclusive and accessible cosmetics for a diverse population. Photo by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University*

## HOW THE NATURAL PIGMENTS IN MARINE LIFE INSPIRED A BEAUTY PRODUCTS STARTUP

by Ian Thomsen,  
News@Northeastern



While earning a PhD in chemistry at Northeastern, Camille Martin worked with Leila Deravi, assistant professor of chemistry and chemical biology, who had been exploring the pigments and proteins of marine life for six years.

Martin recognized an opportunity to develop beauty products drawn from marine ecosystems.

Martin and Deravi co-founded Seaspire Skincare, a promising 2019 startup. The headway Martin was making inspired fellow budding entrepreneurs to contact her for insight and advice. As a result of those relationships, Martin formed Alexandria Growth Brands, a Massachusetts-based business that supports aspiring entrepreneurs seeking to launch technology-based companies.

In support of her efforts, Martin has received an inaugural \$5,000 Innovator

Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

Martin didn't envision becoming an entrepreneur.

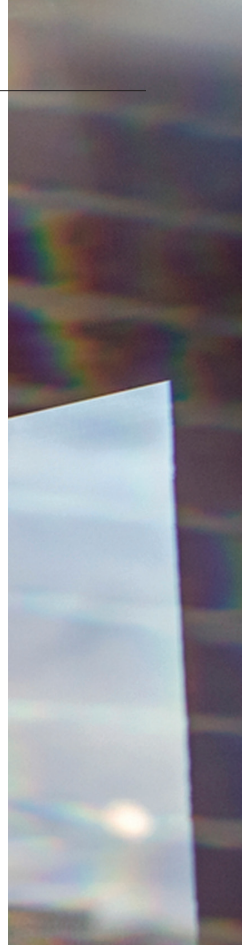
"All of my early efforts were focused on building a great resumé to secure a job at a multinational beauty company," says Martin. "I never thought I would be able to execute the type of work that I'm doing now—leading a raw material company and thinking about how we can support emerging brands."

Her career plans shifted when she connected with Deravi. Their partnership resulted in the filing of two provisional patents within their initial three months together.

"We had been working on studying color-changing animals like octopus, squid, and cuttlefish," Martin says. "They're known to rapidly change their appearance in regards to their texture, color, and shape. We were initially interested to see how a molecule that is found in these animals could be used as a new colorant for cosmetics."

Deravi would become scientific advisor of Seaspire. Martin, the chief executive officer, focused on commercial applications of the science with support from Kevin Scanlon, a professor of practice in entrepreneurship and innovation at Northeastern.

"She [developed] a business plan, investor presentation, and customer survey of the product," says Scanlon, who has been advising Martin for several years. "Camille





is one of the best entrepreneurs that I have met at the university—intelligent, a balanced personality, and she listens carefully.”

Seaspire is in the process of selling its proprietary ingredient blends to partners who may apply it to their product lines, says Martin. Along the way, she has been applying the lessons of her startup to counsel the three entrepreneur teams that may sign on with Alexandria Growth Brands.

“Women are my premier target group,” says Martin. “But I also hope to expand to other people who may also be under-

served for entrepreneurship. It may be a racial demographic; it may be by location, to help people in rural areas.

“This capital,” she says of her \$5,000 Innovator Award, “is going to go toward helping these groups.”

Martin hopes to build a long-term relationship with Women Who Empower.

“I look forward to further developing relationships with the entrepreneurial ecosystem at Northeastern and creating a pipeline to engage with the students,” says Martin.

▲  
*Camille Martin's development of a second startup earned her newest venture a \$5,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. Photo by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University*



▲  
 Khailah Nichole-Robin Griffin drew from her own experiences while launching UnorthoDOCx, a nonprofit organization that helps non-traditional pre-medical students. Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University.

## HER FAMILY HISTORY INSPIRES HER TO HELP ASPIRING DOCTORS FROM NONTRADITIONAL BACKGROUNDS

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

Khailah Nichole-Robin Griffin realized last year that preparing for and applying to medical school was more difficult and expensive than she had imagined—and that the admission system was tilted against people from unusual backgrounds. She responded to those challenges by creating UnorthoDOCx, a nonprofit organization that provides resources for nontraditional pre-medical students. In support of her efforts, Griffin has

received an inaugural \$2,500 Innovator Award from Northeastern’s Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

Since the launch of UnorthoDOCx in January, 254 people have subscribed to receive monthly emails from the program, and close to 1,000 follow the organization on Instagram.

The Innovator Award has helped fund seven UnorthoDOCx scholarships to help pre-med students cover the costs of applying to medical school. Additionally, MCAT-Prep is offering four students a bundle of resources to help them study and prepare for the medical school entrance exam.

Griffin, a fifth-year student who is on the pre-medical track while majoring in business administration and management information systems, is planning to offer more need-based assistance to pre-med students as UnorthoDOCx continues to grow. In addition to personally reviewing the scholarship applications, she also recruits and pairs mentors in the health-care field with a pre-med student.

“The mentorship program is our biggest thing,” says Griffin, who has matched 10 pre-med students with a mentor. “We’ll probably automate the process as we get bigger and bigger, but for now I really want to read through these applications and match each person with someone who has had a similar experience—a med student, someone in a residency position, or maybe another pre-med student who is really on top of their stuff or is a tutor.”



Griffin, the founder and chief executive, has been supported by her four-person UnorthoDOCx team. Together, they've hosted online events at least once per month to introduce pre-med students to role models who provide advice and support.

"The evidence is clear: People innovate for problems they relate to," says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women's entrepreneurship at Northeastern.

"Khailah's perspective and experience as a business student with an interest in pre-med has led her to an innovative solution to encourage a more diverse set of medical school applicants—and the innovation doesn't stop there. In the long run, a diversified pool of doctors and medical professionals will innovate better treatments for a diverse patient set. It's a win-win. Khailah's passion is infectious and we are so happy to support her and UnorthoDOCx."

Griffin is serving a co-op as a patient care technician at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. She is also preparing for her final season of spring track and field—she competes in the 100 meters, 200 meters, the 4×400 meter relay, and the long jump—as she looks forward to graduating in May. Griffin has been a team captain since her sophomore year, an unusual honor for someone so young.

She says her hero is her late grandmother, Dollie C. Griffin, a sharecropper in Georgia with no education beyond middle school who raised nine children.

"She passed when I was very young, but it's as if I know her," says Griffin, 22, who was born on her grandmother's birthday. "From the stories that my dad shares with

me, she was a very hardworking and intelligent woman. It just blows my mind that she was my grandmother—not some ancient relative—and that she was able to get the house that she had at that time period, and to create enough money to put nine kids through school who all ended up being incredibly successful. It motivates me in ways that people cannot relate to.

"I want to carry that same spirit. Obviously, I grew up way more privileged than she and my dad did, but I want to make sure that I never lose that understanding that you have to work hard for things and stay on your feet and be intelligent about the decisions you make. It's because of the sacrifices she made that we're all able to live the way we're living now."

More than a year ago, as she began to look into the medical school application process, Griffin realized how hard it must be for nontraditional students who wish to become physicians.

"In the pre-med world, you basically do your undergrad program—typically majoring in the sciences—and in your senior year you apply to med school and matriculate the following year," she says. "But it doesn't work out that way for everybody."

According to UnorthoDOCx, the demographics of "nontraditional" pre-med students include people who are 25 or older, who may have a non-science degree, or are contemplating a career shift to healthcare from another profession.

## **A CLASS PROJECT INSPIRED THIS HEALTHCARE DEVICE TO SOLVE A COMMON DRUG STORAGE PROBLEM**

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern



It is a problem of refrigeration. Almost half of the pharmaceuticals sold in the United States are biologics that must be kept at a specific temperature.

Millions of people worry about properly maintaining their prescription drugs, says Theodora Christopher, who came up with a potentially affordable and reliable

solution during an honors seminar at Northeastern. She and Anastasia Mavridis are leading a new venture, SaluTemp, to develop a temperature-sensing device that will provide patients with alerts as well as drug facts, enabling them to safely store and use their medications.

▼  
*A user explores the website of SaluTemp, a startup created by Northeastern students. Photo by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University.*



Christopher became aware of the issue of drug storage during a 2018 Dialogue of Civilizations visit to Britain when a classmate fell ill after her medication had been exposed during a power outage.

“She had a flare-up [of her illness] and it was awful,” says Christopher, who is studying biology.

Christopher recalled that incident two years later at a Northeastern seminar, Entrepreneurship in Health Sciences. She and classmate Benjamin Dottinger created a Shark Tank-style presentation for a theoretical healthcare product that would help people take care of their medications.

“Initially, we didn’t think anything of it,” says Christopher. Then the judges urged them to pursue their idea. “So we started looking for avenues to make it real.”

Christopher co-founded SaluTemp with Dottinger. A Northeastern Honors Propel Grant provided the funding for a prototype with the help of software and mechanical engineers.

“Our team started getting so big that I felt I needed help on the business side,” says Christopher.

She contacted Mavridis, who at that time was pursuing a bachelor’s degree in biology, and is currently earning a master’s in biotechnology. They had been close friends since freshman orientation, and they shared a passion for healthcare.

In support of their startup, Christopher and Mavridis have received an inaugural \$5,000 Innovator Award from

Northeastern’s Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fuel 17 ventures.

The SaluTemp leaders were surprised that an affordable solution to medication storage hasn’t been addressed in the marketplace. With the assistance of an interdisciplinary group of fellow students and an array of Northeastern academic advisers that includes Christa Dhimo, Holly Jimison, Misha Pavel, and Laurie Bishop, they’re hoping to limit the price of their product to \$60 in order to make it affordable to low-income users.

“We’re not in it for the money, which is not the traditional entrepreneurial mindset,” Christopher says. “Our priority is: How do we help the most people?”

They are planning to launch the second phase of testing in August. Mavridis says the \$5,000 award will help fund iterations of the prototype as well as patent applications. The project has also received \$3,000 via Northeastern’s Undergraduate Research and Fellowships Summit.

In addition to the money, they are grateful for the support of Women Who Empower.

“We’ve heard, ‘You’re just two pre-med girls, how is your idea going to make it?’ And straight-up we’ve heard, ‘The idea isn’t going to make it,’” says Christopher. “We just had to push past all of that.”



**“We’re not in it for the money, which is not the traditional entrepreneurial mindset. Our priority is: How do we help the most people?”**

– Theodora Christopher, co-founder, SaluTemp

Says Mavridis: “Women Who Empower have been way more open to having a full discussion with us. They’ve put their faith in us, and that has helped our confidence. When we go for grants, when we go for presentations, we’re more confident in ourselves and the idea.”

▲  
*Theodora Christopher (left) and Anatasia Mavridis received a Women Who Empower Innovator Award for their temperature-sensing device. Courtesy Photo and Photo by Alyssa Stone/ Northeastern University.*

## HOW AMAZON HELPED TO SMOOTH SALES FOR THIS BABY RASH BALM ENTREPRENEUR IN THE PANDEMIC ECONOMY

by Hillary Chabot, News@Northeastern

Thai-Anh Hoang had been ramping up for a May 2020 launch of EmBeba—her line of family-focused skincare featuring a healing, all-natural baby balm—when she began noticing delays in the product’s sustainable packaging from China.

“We were supposed to start our influencer program in March with an eye towards a full launch in May,” says Hoang, who earned her international business degree from Northeastern in 2006. “I remember telling people about the issues with coronavirus in Asia, and I warned them that we might want to get prepared to see it here.”

Once COVID-19, the disease caused by a specific strain of coronavirus known as SARS-CoV-2, reached the U.S., Hoang’s original rollout plans were wiped out.

“We essentially couldn’t get our inventory out. Everything was on lockdown. We couldn’t even get any ingredients. It just completely disrupted the supply chain in a way I’ve never seen before,” says Hoang, who had been building her sensitive-skin-friendly skincare line behind the scenes for the previous two years.

Both Hoang and her husband contracted the virus last March, yet another setback

that she was able to overcome thanks in part to her confidence in her own product.

“My thing was always to do it right, and not to rush the rollout just to get it out there,” she says.

Hoang’s signature product, the “Don’t Be Rash” diaper balm, was created after she visited family in remote Bosnia. Her infant daughter had diaper rash and an eczema breakout, and the creams Hoang brought from home weren’t helping. The host offered Hoang a homemade, all-natural balm that worked like a charm and inspired EmBeba.

“I wanted something clean and all-natural that borrows healing properties from many cultures,” says Hoang. She plans to release other sensitive skincare products that use healing recipes from Vietnam, Tunisia, and Polynesia.

Her “Don’t Be Rash,” baby balm has calendula extract along with propolis cera, a type of beeswax known for its anti-inflammation and anti-microbial properties. The balm also comes in a recyclable and reusable tube that children can color and use to hold crayons once the product is finished.

“Children just absolutely love the product and it was designed for them. If you think about going down an aisle at a store, most products are not made for kids, they’re made for the adult, the purchaser,” she says.

“Our brand really thought about the ultimate user of the product, so we designed it so that the child can hold on to it, a child can actually apply it by themselves. Babies can play with it because it’s bright, it’s a very sensory experience,” says Hoang.





▲  
Thai-Anh Hoang, who earned her international business degree at Northeastern in 2006, created the diaper balm to provide an all-natural rash-soother for sensitive skin. Photo by Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University.

She had planned to sell EmBeba directly to consumers, following the lead of successful brands like Warby Parker and Glossier, but that market was flooded during COVID-19 as both producers and consumers focused on remote internet sales.

“The pandemic accelerated e-commerce for just about everyone. There were just so many businesses waving their hands to get attention, it was like being in the middle of Times Square during New Year’s Eve,” said Hoang. “It was impossible for a small brand without money to get attention that way.”

Hoang decided to sell through Amazon, a place that would ensure visibility as well as customers who are highly motivated to purchase her product. But the pivot required at least three months of preparation.

“We shifted to Amazon in the last quarter of 2020, and we put a lot of time into that. It takes like three months to do it correctly,” says Hoang. “There’s a lot of rules and many things you have to do in order to be successful listing your product on Amazon. A lot of people don’t realize that.”

The effort paid off, says Hoang. Her diaper balm, launched in January 2021, has received an award from *Parents* magazine, as well as a National Parenting Product Award for its smooth, all-natural and sensitive-skin-friendly uses. The balm was Amazon’s top selling diaper cream in March.

“With all of these accolades, we’ve been getting so much interest. We weren’t planning to go into retail so soon, but we might be eyeing that,” says Hoang.



## SHE SAW A NICHE FOR AN ARTS MAGAZINE. NOW IT'S BEEN EMBRACED BY THE BOSTON ARTS COMMUNITY.

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

As a student at Northeastern a half-dozen years ago, Jameson Johnson wanted to write about the arts in Boston. But there was no vehicle to publish her work. So she created her own.

*Boston Art Review*, a magazine printed twice annually, will be publishing its seventh edition this fall. Johnson, its founder and editor in chief, has received no salary for her work in rallying the Boston art community to put out the magazine and support it with donations and grants.

"I've had artists tell me that because of *Boston Art Review*, they've decided to stay in Boston, which is amazing," says Johnson, who graduated in 2018 with a degree in political communication and a minor in art history. "There are studies conducted on how to keep artists in Boston, and we're figuring out how to do it with a magazine. So connecting with the community has been super important to us."

In support of her startup, Johnson has received an inaugural \$5,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

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**"I saw the importance of arts journalism in other cities, and the role that it played for the artists that lived in those cities."**

— Jameson Johnson, founder and editor in chief,  
*Boston Art Review*

Johnson was inspired by co-ops she served in New York and Los Angeles—in particular with ForYourArt, an independent clear-



◀  
Image on the top  
Boston Art Review  
a beautiful print  
magazine in the  
digital era. It will  
be publishing its  
seventh edition  
this fall.

Photo by Matthew  
Modoono/  
Northeastern  
University.

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Image on the  
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Johnson creator  
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Review. Photo by  
Matthew  
Modoono/  
Northeastern  
University.

inghouse of art information and events in California. “I saw the importance of arts journalism in other cities, and the role that it played for the artists that lived in those cities,” Johnson says. “That was something that was so lacking in Boston.

“I spent about two years going around and asking people, like, Hey, I bought this domain name, do you want to do something with it? And of course no one else is going to build your idea for you.”

As the first person from her family to graduate from college—having moved to Northeastern from San Juan Capistrano, California—Johnson was used to setting out on her own way. And so, in spite of her inexperience, she launched the Boston Art Review website in advance of the inaugural Boston Art Book Fair in 2017.

“We built the most rudimentary website ever: I think it had two pages and four articles,” Johnson says. “We made business cards and I went around to pretty much every table at the Boston Art Book Fair. It was there that I met people that really have become key stakeholders. After that point, we’ve operated as a volunteer team.”

The raw and unfinished nature of the project in its earliest days was attractive to artists who wanted to help create something for their community. They would meet in Johnson’s living room for workshop events to discuss what the magazine could be. Its title was ironic.

“The name is presumptuous—people think it’s this publication that’s been around for 50 years,” Johnson says. “I’ve met people who say, ‘Of course I know *Boston Art Review*, I’ve been reading it for decades.’ We picked this name that had some authority to it, and it turns out we were

really scrappy, fresh-out-of-college students who were working on this.”

The editions are presented beautifully on 30-pound stock paper. Gloria Sutton, associate professor of contemporary art history at Northeastern, was a crucial ally as Johnson built a print magazine in the digital era. Sutton notes that Johnson has increased the reach of each issue without compromising on quality, enabling *Boston Art Review* to be available in museums and stores.

“*Boston Art Review* is a marquee project for Northeastern because it demonstrates how the classroom can be used to generate a public space for the exchange of cultural ideas,” Sutton says of Johnson. “While she founded and led *Boston Art Review* while still at Northeastern, she saw it as a platform to connect with a broader audience and amplify and extend the ideas of others, not just her own.”

Johnson is in the process of converting *Boston Art Review* to a nonprofit organization. The \$5,000 award will provide her team with breathing space after operating hand-to-mouth for the past four years.

“I have this team of individuals who really believe in this work, and I’d like to figure out a way to make it more sustainable for all of us,” says Johnson, who for the past two years has worked full-time as a communications and development manager at MIT List Visual Arts Center. “Another thing we’re looking at is a collaborative workspace where members of our team could come, but also where we could invite artists to do something in the space, to have a space for our community. So between the nonprofit, looking for space, and making this a sustainable endeavor, we have our work cut out for us.”

## STARTUP DEPLOYS UNDERWATER DRONES TO SAVE OCEANS FROM BACTERIA

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

▶ Waters has starred in a series of cultural YouTube videos that present serious issues in a lighthearted way. Courtesy Photo Shital Waters.



Shital Waters was a newcomer to computer science. The COVID-19 pandemic forced her to find novel ways to connect with her fellow graduate students. She joined several organizations that communicated via Zoom.

“I still can’t believe it sometimes,” says Waters of the career possibilities that have ensued.

With five Northeastern classmates, Waters developed a project that has turned into a startup, BluePlanetAI, that will deploy underwater drones to detect dangerous bacteria before it can develop in oceans, lakes, and other bodies of water.

In support of her efforts to create BluePlanetAI, Waters has received an inaugural \$5,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern’s Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

BluePlanetAI is focused on mitigating harmful algae blooms—including red tide—that proliferate in sea and fresh water to create toxins that can harm people, fish, shellfish, marine mammals, and birds.

Waters’ team is developing a system in which drones would identify the harmful bacteria before the blooms can cause widespread damage. BluePlanetAI is in the early stage, and the Innovator Award is being applied to research and develop its technology.

“Most of us were planning to work on this project throughout the master’s program for two to three years,” Waters says. “But it’s become so much more than just a school project.”

Waters, whose mother is from India, has had a diverse career. She has starred in a series of cultural videos that present serious issues in a lighthearted way. The most popular of their efforts, “Dark Skinned & Indian,” an eight-minute comedy of love overcoming prejudice, has earned more than two million views on YouTube since its 2014 release.

“We were always coming up with ideas of what we could shoot next,” says Waters, who had previously filmed a commercial with the production team. “We decided there are so many problems in our own

culture and community, why don't we try to raise awareness—but in a way that is lighthearted, so people are entertained but still get the message.”

In 2010, Waters survived a townhouse fire that was ignited by the explosion of a neighbor's propane tank.

“I had just got back from India—my parents were still in India—and I was sleeping when I heard a little crackle and my neighbor's dog barking,” says Waters, who woke up to see flames closing in on both sides of her second-floor room. She escaped without harm but she and her family lost everything they owned, including her father's business as a mechanic, which he had operated from the garage. Waters worked three jobs to help support the family while she earned a bachelor's degree in biology and biological sciences at San Jose State.

In one of her jobs, as a lead brand ambassador in the Bay Area for Models In Tech, Waters was trained to use, explain, and demonstrate tech products at trade shows and other public events.

“I was around people who had years of experience, and I realized very quickly that it was a male-dominated field,” Waters says. “When I would ask them questions, hoping to get some quality advice, I felt like I wasn't taken seriously and kind of pushed to the side. Or if I felt they were going to give me some great advice, it came with expectations—they had some intention behind it. It discouraged me a bit.”

She enrolled in Northeastern's Align program to pursue a master's in computer science. Waters says she has been inspired by her role in BluePlanetAI as a co-founder and software engineer, her in-

clusion in a variety of campus groups, and the support of Women Who Empower.

“The award was so great because of the support I was getting from such powerful women,” says Waters. “It's something I strive to do as well—I hope I can help other young women to be successful.

“I'd like to motivate women who have gone through the same path as me and have had the same kinds of struggles. I want them to know they should never give up and keep pushing through, because if you do, you will make it.”

The Innovator Awards are meant to strengthen Northeastern's community of entrepreneurs, says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women's entrepreneurship at Northeastern.

“With BluePlanetAI, Shital is seeking to solve one of the world's biggest, most complex challenges of our lifetime: monitoring and protecting our oceans from climate change,” says Ludwig. “As we know, our oceans affect everything from the air we breathe to the food we eat. We admire Shital's commitment to ambitious innovation and are thrilled to be supporting her with a Women Who Empower Innovator Award as an entrepreneur, scientist and innovator.”

The experience has elevated Waters' career expectations.

“If this really takes off, which I'm hoping it does, then I'll be focusing on this,” Waters says of BluePlanetAI. “But I would also like to do other things in terms of entrepreneurship. There are just so many problems out there that can be solved using new advanced technologies.”



▲ *Gabrielle Whittle was inspired to pursue her entrepreneurial instinct during a Semester in San Francisco last year. Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University.*

**Gabrielle Whittle was searching for the means to express herself creatively. She found her way forward last year at Northeastern's Bay Area location while attending the Semester in San Francisco program.**

Her immersion in an entrepreneurial environment inspired Whittle to develop a transformable high heel for womens' shoes.

Whittle, who recently graduated in mechanical engineering, received an inaugural \$10,000 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. They are receiving a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fuel 17 ventures.

Whittle has been working with a Northeastern consultant to develop an adjustable sole and removable heel that will enable her product to be worn as a flat or a high-heel shoe.

"Anyone who has worn heels understands the inconvenience and the pain associated

## HOW A BUSINESS IDEA 'HEELED' HER NEED TO BE AN ENTREPRENEUR

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

with them," says Whittle, who has formed Phoenix Footwear to develop her shoe. "The goal is to make it easier, more convenient, and just more fun to wear high heels."

Whittle had been on co-op in the Bay Area for the preceding six months when she began her Semester in San Francisco in January 2020. She switched out of a group project in order to tackle an age-old problem in women's fashion.

"I thought of all the times when I would go out and have to compromise my high heels for a more practical option that didn't go with my outfit," Whittle told the Innovator Award judges in a speech last month. "I learned that although others had made similar products, no one had made a super great shoe of this kind. Creating a product like this is a really challenging optimization problem that would require an engineer who could design for structure and functionality, while keeping visual aesthetics at the forefront."

Whittle says she was inspired by the creative environment in San Francisco.

“The professors are just amazing—they’re all career entrepreneurs so they know what they’re talking about,” Whittle says. “San Francisco is a very entrepreneurial-spirited place, and the students I was in class with also had that spirit.”

Whittle is representative of the women who are being discovered and empowered by the Innovator Awards, says Diane MacGillivray, Northeastern’s senior vice president for university advancement, who created Women Who Empower with trustee and chair emeritus Henry Nasella to invest in women with entrepreneurial aspirations.

“Gabbie is an engineer who was feeling a lack of direction when she did the semester of entrepreneurship in Silicon Valley,” MacGillivray says. “And that’s where she discovered herself as an entrepreneur. It’s the classic entrepreneurial thing: You identify a problem and say, ‘I have a solution to this.’”

Whittle says her involvement in the Innovator Awards has deepened her commitment to entrepreneurship by exposing her to a group of like-minded women.

“I’ve always thought about running a business—I thought it would be cool—but I genuinely never thought it was something that I could do,” Whittle says. “I just felt like I didn’t have the knowledge, I didn’t have the money to do it, and I didn’t know anyone like me who was an entrepreneur. So I do definitely think there’s a need for” the Innovator Awards.

“It was so nice seeing other women in the entrepreneur space sharing their journeys,” Whittle says. “It’s really inspiring, and I think all of these people inspire more women to get into entrepreneurship as well.”

The \$10,000 award provides a vital boost in funding for her project, says Whittle.

“We’ve moved past 3D printing and prototypes,” Whittle says. “Longer term, [the goal] is to raise a little bit more money so we can hire a contract manufacturer to get actual samples of the ready-to-sell products. I’m hoping by next year that I’ll be able to market an actual product and start a presale launch.”

Whittle says her experiences with depression influenced the change in her career path.

“Throughout college, I experienced really heavy levels of depression for a lot of reasons,” Whittle says. “I was working in great companies. I was doing great work. But I didn’t feel satisfied in the work I was doing, and then I experienced a lot of loss that led me to a very depressive state.

“My depression really got me thinking, how do I create a life for myself that involves happiness and doesn’t allow me to be in this space anymore? I just felt like I had to build something for myself. And so that’s what brought me to entrepreneurship. It was a blank slate. It was what I created it to be. And I felt like I needed that in order to really be satisfied with myself.”

Whittle values the inspirational nature of the award.

“Winning this award has validated that, as long as I empower myself and I educate myself on what I need to do, I can do this thing,” Whittle says. “It will not fail as long as I put into it the passion that I already know I have for it. And knowing that other people see that in me and in my product, it’s just really validating.”

## HER STARTUP IS DEVELOPING SAFE COSMETICS FOR PREGNANT PEOPLE

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

For the past year, Michelle Calderon has been working to create a line of sustainable color cosmetics for people who are pregnant, trying to become pregnant, or post-partum.

After testing more than 20 blends of lipstick personally and among volunteers, Calderon is preparing to launch the initial products of her startup, Addition Beauty.

“We are the first sustainable makeup line that supports fertility and pregnancy,” says Calderon, who earned a Northeastern MBA in September. “Our goal is to empower women with the knowledge to select safer cosmetics during a critical time of their lives without compromising beauty.

“Oftentimes, women who are about to get pregnant in one to two years, or who are pregnant, may just stop wearing makeup altogether. Or they may use it much less often because they hear that they need to change their lifestyle. But women shouldn’t have to do that. There should be safer options available.”

In support of her efforts to launch Addition Beauty, Calderon has received an inaugural \$2,500 Innovator Award from Northeastern’s Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who

are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

Calderon, who from 2014 to 2017 was a color cosmetic chemist for a major beauty company, spent the summer developing lipsticks in her lab. Most of the colorants that are used in cosmetics are derived from petroleum or coal tar, which may contain toxic heavy metals. The field is relatively unregulated. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has banned 11 chemicals for use in cosmetics, while the European Union has banned more than 1,300.

“The reason I’m starting with a focus on lip products is because the lips are a vulnerable area for ingesting cosmetics, and chemicals can also be absorbed,” says Calderon, who has been developing a line that does not involve heavy metals and other toxins that people may wish to avoid as they approach pregnancy. “There is a need for this, and it’s surprising to me that there has not been a focus on fertility and pregnancy in the beauty space—especially with such non-stringent regulations from the FDA.”

Calderon didn’t realize her entrepreneurial potential until 2015, when she created a geolocation app that peaked at more than 2,000 users before going under. That experience provided her with lessons and motivation that she has been applying to Addition Beauty.

She has combined the Innovator Award with a National Science Foundation grant to develop prototypes. The money is also being applied to website development and logo and packaging design.

“Michelle’s latest venture, Addition Beauty, seeks to protect women from harmful, often hidden or unknown chemicals in everyday beauty products which affect fertility and pregnancy,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern. “This is a great example of women solving problems for women. Michelle is a fabulous, forward-thinking innovator and entrepreneur and we are thrilled to be supporting her with a WWE Innovator Award to help women everywhere.”

Calderon has been identifying strategic partnerships for research and development, website and IT security, and packaging. Education via blogs and other content creation will be a big part of the company’s marketing. She encourages people who are interested in her company’s mission to contact her at [info@additionbeauty.com](mailto:info@additionbeauty.com).

She hopes to put her first products on the market early next year.

“I’m leveraging my chemistry education and real-world experience to help make things easier by providing information around the safer ingredients that you can use during pregnancy or fertility,” Calderon says. “I want to provide an option that’s easy for you, so you don’t have to go online and research these long chemical names and avoid the countless hours of sifting through the conflicting information that leads to frustration.”

“It’s time that there’s a focus on general good hormone health, fertility, and pregnancy in the beauty space.”

▶ Michelle Calderon, shown with her new line of lipstick for Addition Beauty, believes there should be safer cosmetic options for people who are pregnant. Photo by Alyssa Stone/ Northeastern University.





## WHEN HER CLOTHES WENT MISSING, SHE STARTED A CLOTHING LINE

by Ian Thomsen, News@Northeastern

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, forcing thousands of Northeastern students off campus last year in line with health and safety protocols, Mya Brown packed up her belongings for delivery to her family's home in Atlanta.

"I shipped three massive boxes, and only one of the three arrived," says Brown, a recent graduate from Northeastern in international business. "The boxes with my clothes and shoes are the ones that didn't make it."

Her favorite clothes had been lost by the shipping company. With no better option, Brown rummaged through the back of her closet for things she hadn't worn in years. She began altering them with scissors and a sewing machine. And so, much sooner than expected, she found herself acting on her long-term dream of creating a clothing line.

Soon her fashion startup, JET NOIRE, was born.

"I'm a big believer that everything happens for a reason," says Brown. "I don't know if I would have been as motivated to push myself to start my brand if I'd had a closet full of clothes. I was already locked down during COVID. It was the perfect time to launch my brand."

In support of her startup efforts, Brown has received an inaugural \$2,500 Innovator Award from Northeastern's Women Who Empower inclusion and entrepreneurship initiative. The awards recognize 19 women who are graduates or current students at Northeastern. The organization is distributing a total of \$100,000 in grants to help fund 17 ventures.

Brown recently moved to New York to begin a full-time job at Saks Fifth Avenue



as an executive trainee in the retailer's ready to wear department. She continues to operate JET NOIRE early in the morning, after work at night, and on weekends.

The Innovator Award has helped Brown fund a production run in Brooklyn of JET NOIRE's newest line of clothing. The manufacturing component will enable the business to grow, says Brown, who had been making everything by hand with recycled materials.

"I basically buy fabric that has been discarded, and that's part of our story," says Brown of JET NOIRE's sustainability mission. "Everything is super limited. When the fabric is gone, that piece isn't going to be available anymore.

"So much of what I do is personal. Every piece is handmade, and you are investing in our story. Once you become a JET NOIRE girl, you're part of our family, our community."

JET NOIRE pursues a fusion between fashion and identity. "Mya is known for empowering women to express their identities authentically through fashion," its website reads. "Just like any other art form, fashion can be shaped to reflect emotions."

Brown has been a sole proprietor in every sense. "I handle everything from outreach, customer service, logistics, fulfillment, social media, design, user experience, marketing, philanthropy, and more," says Brown, who learned to sew at an early age and recalls trying to alter her private school uniforms. "I started the brand with a white sheet tacked to my bedroom wall, my little sister as head photographer, and \$200 for the licensing. There was no marketing budget, no materials budget, no budget at all."



Brown's success with JET NOIRE has not surprised Heather Hauck, a senior co-op coordinator and director of student engagement, affinity, and inclusion at the D'Amore-McKim School of Business.

"Mya is a force," says Hauck, who mentored Brown at Northeastern. "Not only immensely talented, innovative, and entrepreneurial, she is incredibly kind, compassionate, and committed to social justice and bettering the lives of others. During her time at Northeastern, she made an impact on our community that will be felt for many, many years to come."

JET NOIRE is approaching 300 customer orders, and has attracted more than 2,000 Instagram followers.

Brown was 19 when her mother, Tiesha, died after a 12-year fight against non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer that starts in white blood cells. In the darkness of her loss, she says she coped by helping her family in all kinds of ways—from cooking to carpooling—as her mother would have done.

"I was able to be strong for myself, and now there's no challenge too great to conquer," Brown says. "I wish she was here to see this. She would be by my side. She would be so proud. She was always my biggest supporter."

▲ JET NOIRE, a clothing brand created during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University.

▲ Brown, a recent Northeastern graduate in international business, models the clothes that she designs. Photo Courtesy of Mya Brown.



### What are the economic costs of sexual harassment in the workplace?



#### To the employees:

- Negation of both emotional and physical health (e.g. stress, or early depression, PTSD, anxiety)
- Reduced opportunities for advancement (e.g. lack of networking, direct assignments, research collaboration)
- Frequent change, unemployment, and abandonment of high-paying careers

#### To the employer:

- High costs (e.g. investigations and compliance, court costs, settlements)
- Employee turnover
- Lower productivity (e.g. low morale, absenteeism, disengagement)
- Loss of talent (e.g. brand name, customer loyalty)



The Women Who Empower Innovator Awards were developed to support the next generation of inventors, groundbreakers, and creators in the Northeastern community. We were awe-inspired by the 150 applications we received, but even more impressed by the innovators themselves. This piece encompasses the passions, personal stories, and insight of the 19 award winners who, with the support of the Innovator Awards, are positively impacting their communities, the world, and future generations.

To learn more about our Innovator Awards and the Women's Entrepreneurship Initiative, contact Betsy Ludwig at [b.ludwig@northeastern.edu](mailto:b.ludwig@northeastern.edu).

