

WOMEN WHO EMPOWER INNOVATORS 2021-2022

Empowering entrepreneurs and inspiring ingenuity





FOREWORD

The Women Who Empower Innovator Awards launched in 2021 to provide entrepreneurial changemakers with the financial resources, mentorship, and connections to help make a difference in their ventures and ambitions.

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.

The past two years have been important stepping stones toward our vision for the collective impact we can make by investing in people. As you learn more about each recipient through the stories enclosed, we encourage you to consider ways you can fuel their futures.

Together, we can magnify their impact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diane MacGillivray".

Diane Nishigaya MacGillivray
Senior Vice President for University Advancement
Northeastern University

OVERVIEW

When we launched the Women Who Empower Innovator Awards in 2021, we were excited about the program’s ability to help us reach some bold objectives. Yes, we wanted to amplify the power of Northeastern’s entrepreneurial ecosystem and, yes, we sought to strengthen investments in women by providing funds, recognition, and networks to propel their efforts.

Since the launch of the Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, we have awarded a total of \$320,000 to 41 Northeastern students and alumnae with demonstrated leadership, innovation, authenticity, and community-building.

These awards would not be possible without the engagement and generosity of members of the Women Who Empower network like you. We hope you will join us in advancing this work by making a gift to support our Women’s Entrepreneurship Fund.



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MEET OUR JUDGES

These experts used their seasoned knowledge to evaluate applications and final presentations to select our Women Who Empower Innovator Award winners:



**Cathy Papoulias
Sakellaris**

Member of the Board
of Trustees,
Leadership 100



Cheryl Kaplan

President, M.Gemi



**Jean Kovacs,
CPS'83**

Partner and
Co-Founder, Hillsven



**Cristina Csimma,
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Jill Bornstein, PNT'22

Founder, UpNext
Leadership and
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Leslie Kilgore, PNT'25

Board Member, Netflix



Julietta Dexter, PNT'20

Co-Founder and Chief
Growth and Purpose
Officer, Science Magic Inc.



Henry Nasella, UC'77

Chair Emeritus, Board
of Trustees
Co-Founder, LNK
Partners

IT'S ABOUT THE INNOVATOR, NOT THE INNOVATION

“It was an honor and a pleasure to participate as a judge. The participants were incredible and all were worthy of winning an award. It was a pleasure to work with the other judges and be part of the wonderful community that Northeastern has created and brought together.”

–Cathy Sakellaris, judge, Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, and member of the board of trustees, Leadership 100

“Part of the value of this competition is they will have each other. There is a tremendous amount of value in having a cohort where they are all at about the same stage of their business journey. Just having people to bounce ideas off of is really, really valuable.”

–Jean Kovacs, judge, Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, and partner and co-founder, Hillsven

“It is really inspiring to be around all of these women who really are taking ownership of their leadership, and taking ownership of ideas, and taking ownership of where they want to go in life.”

–Jill Bornstein, judge, Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, and founder, UpNext Leadership and Executive Coaching

“It has been an inspiring and exciting process for which I am grateful. The innovators are awe-inspiring and yet another illustration of the absolute excellence that Northeastern drives in their student body. I enjoyed and was so impressed by every single applicant”

–Julietta Dexter, judge, Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, and co-founder and chief growth and purpose officer, Science Magic Inc.



Amy Andes, PhD, S'17

Second Place, Young Alumnae Undergraduate, 2022

With a goal of figuratively and literally making space for everyone eating at the table, food scientist Amy Andes founded Banzo Brands. The brand brings awareness to food allergies, intolerances, and sensitivities by creating inclusive versions of classic staple spreads—like a no-nut butter made of garbanzo beans—which ensure people don't feel left out, uncertain about what they're eating, or forgotten by the food industry.

by Molly Callahan

THE 'GARBANZO BEAN QUEEN' IS PASSIONATE ABOUT MAKING ALLERGEN-FREE FOOD ACCESSIBLE FOR EVERYONE

Amy Andes' friends call her the Garbanzo Bean Queen, although her coronation was anything but expected.

"I really did not know this would be my future," says Andes, with a laugh. But Andes champions the humble garbanzo bean with an ardor that borders on passion, as she'll readily admit. "Garbanzo beans are a huge part of my life," she says. "I've eaten every hummus that ever existed."

Garbanzo beans are among the oldest cultivated foods in the world. They show up in early recordings in Turkey about 3500 BCE (before the common era), and can be tracked even further back in France, where they appeared 6790 BCE. They're packed full of good carbs, protein, fiber, and B vitamins, and are a staple in many diets around the world.

And, as Andes has discovered, the beans are endlessly adaptable. Like an old dog learning new tricks, garbanzo beans can shine in a variety of foods; not just hummus.

Andes, who earned her bachelor's degree in chemistry at Northeastern in 2017, became interested in food science after she joined a chemistry club at the university.

An early co-op taught her that medical chemistry wasn't for her, and she was searching around for a good fit for her practical approach to the field

when the club brought in a food scientist.

“Right away I knew that’s what I should be doing,” Andes says.

During her subsequent co-ops and later, during her doctoral studies at Ohio State University, Andes honed in. Fresh off a co-op at a food-science startup that specialized in making foods free of the top eight food allergens, Andes was interested in using her chemistry degree to make delicious, allergen-free food that anyone could eat.

At OSU, she quickly joined up with a group of students who were competing in a product development competition sponsored by Mars Wrigley—home of famous products such as Dove chocolates, M&Ms, and Snickers, among others.

Her team created a sandwich cookie—two crunchy cookies held together by a fudgy chocolate layer—that won the competition. The best part? The cookies and the fudge were both made out of garbanzo beans in a recipe that was free from the top 14 food allergens.

“That was really exciting, and the moment when I knew that product development, especially accessible product development, was where I wanted to go with my career,” Andes says.

Indeed, food allergies and sensitivities affect millions of people in the U.S., according to the federal Food and Drug Administration. Mild allergies can induce hives and swollen lips, while severe allergies can trigger life-threatening anaphylaxis in people. In 2004, Congress passed the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act, which identified eight major food allergens: milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, whey, and soybeans. These ingredients account for 90 percent of food allergies in the U.S., according to the FDA. Producers are required by law to label

their products if they contain or might contain one of these allergens.

European regulators go a step further, identifying an additional six food allergens: gluten, celery, mustard, sesame seeds, sulfur dioxide and sulfites, and lupin, which is a type of bean.

Flush from her team’s cookie victory, Andes continued tinkering with the recipe for the fudge, trying out different consistencies and flavors until she landed on a spread that was surprisingly similar to other nut butters (think: peanut butter, almond butter, etc.).

Out of this tinkering Banzo Brands was born, Andes’ company that she says aims to “disrupt the snack market for people with dietary restrictions.”

In addition to the original Banzo Butter (pronounced with an “ah” vowel sound, as in “gar-bahn-zo”), Andes created chocolate and strawberry flavors. She’s also experimenting with seasonal flavors, such as pumpkin spice and mint chocolate chip. Just as important as the taste, Andes says, is the fact that all of the butters are free from the top 14 food allergens.

“If we look at foods that are currently made as alternatives for people with dietary restrictions, most of them either taste bad, are bad for you, or are super expensive,” Andes says. “When I was thinking about my career, I first thought I could help people through medicine. But that transformed once I discovered that my passion was really in food science. I know so many people affected by dietary restrictions, and it’s not an insurmountable problem. It just requires a lot of public education, and some foods that actually taste good.”

Andes was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern’s

“There are so many times in this entrepreneurial process that I’ve felt discouraged, that my ideas were tossed to the side,” she says. “But even just one person who says, ‘I see you,’ changes the trajectory completely.”

—Amy Andes, founder and chief executive officer, Banzo Brands

Women Who Empower, that drew more than 100 entries in its second year.

The award, Andes says, was “a reminder to keep going.”

“There are so many times in this entrepreneurial process that I’ve felt discouraged, that my ideas were tossed to the side,” she says. “But even just one person who says, ‘I see you,’ changes the trajectory completely.”

Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern, emphasizes that the awards go to the woman, not the business.

“As a university, we’re in the business of creating amazing people, entrepreneurs, and innovators who will go do amazing things,” says Ludwig, who is also part of the Women Who Empower team.

“During our selection process, a woman’s current venture or project is important to the extent that it’s reflective of her innovative mindset. We are investing in the woman, the person behind the idea.”

“We want to honor and showcase women who are breaking the mold, solving difficult problems, looking for opportunity, and making a difference,” she says. “This award lifts up our innovators by recognizing them not just with a grant but through celebration, media opportunities, and by leveraging the power of our networks. We validate these women and what they are trying to do.”

Andes is still pushing forward. With the grant funding associated with the Innovator Award, she’ll

have a chance to explore new products as well as new streams of distribution in order to reach as many people as possible.

“Food is medicine,” she says. “What you put into your body affects everything, and I hope to be a positive force for people who usually have to be really paranoid about food. The whole goal of this company is to bring more people to the table—metaphorically and literally.”

BANZO BRANDS



Banzo Butter brings an exciting twist to a classic and trending product and does so by utilizing plant-based ingredients offered in a variety of flavors. Courtesy Photo from banzobrands.com.



Binja Basimike, BHS'12, MPH'14

Second Place, Young Alumnae Graduate, 2021

A known leader, innovator, and adventurer, Binja Basimike has hit the ground running after landing in her current home of Congo to develop Kivu Venture Capital. This VC firm's goal is to create a network of female African foodpreneurs who can identify the most lucrative, sustainable, and nutritious fish; help alleviate poverty and malnutrition in their own lives and in their communities; and grow their personal brands so other women and girls can see the fishing industry as one in which they can thrive. By supporting this unique group, Basimike's goal is to create a legacy of African entrepreneurship, as well as change the perspective of what women can accomplish.

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

by Ian Thomsen

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

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.”



Michelle Beaudette, DMSB'23

Honors, Undergraduate Student, 2022

Michelle Beaudette is a farmer, environmental activist, and passionate self-care and sustainability advocate. Her beauty brand, Kaolin Beauty, is an embodiment of her unique identity. Created to serve both people and the planet, Kaolin Beauty is poised to be one of the first-ever brands to use regenerative organic certified herbs in all its products, which means the beauty brand's production processes meet the highest standards in the world for soil health, animal welfare, and farmworker fairness.

by Molly Callahan

SHE CREATED A BEAUTY BRAND THAT'S MORE THAN SKIN-DEEP

Growing up on a small homestead farm in Lexington, Massachusetts, Michelle Beaudette learned early the value of leading a sustainable, self-sufficient lifestyle.

Beaudette helped her family care for goats, honey bees, and chickens—though the latter came only after she promised her mom she would take care of them personally. Her family composted religiously, and had a healthy appreciation (and a first-hand understanding) of how they interacted with and affected their environment.

So, in middle school, when Beaudette started getting curious about makeup and cosmetics, it was just as important to find a brand that was ethical and sustainable as it was to find the perfect shade of lipstick.

She found a few brands she liked, including Lush, a British retailer that uses vegetarian and vegan ingredients in its products and aims to reduce waste in its packaging.

“I love the creativity in their products and the environment in their stores,” Beaudette says, but still, she saw room for improvement. “Even though they’re one of the best, they still produce a lot of waste. I wanted something that was waste-free but still had high-quality values: non-toxic, ethically sourced ingredients, with empowering self-care and mental-health messages.”

That moment of wanting more for herself and her peers would ultimately lead Beaudette to create the company she sought: Kaolin Beauty, an ethical, non-toxic, zero-waste makeup and self-care com-

pany. Beaudette was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern University's Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 applicants this year.

"We started the Innovator Awards to be different from other awards," says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women's entrepreneurship at Northeastern University, and a member of the Women Who Empower team. "There are a lot of pitch competitions out there, a lot of accelerator programs, and a lot of resources and tools to focus on the business side of the venture—but the business is just one part of the success formula. This award is about the woman herself."

"... I wanted something that was waste-free but still had high-quality values: non-toxic, ethically sourced ingredients, with empowering self-care and mental-health messages"

—Michelle Beaudette, founder and chief executive officer, Kaolin Beauty

For Beaudette, who will graduate in May from the D'Amore-McKim School of Business at Northeastern, Kaolin Beauty is the result of years of ideation—tweaking and revisiting her plan time and again. She utilized the resources provided by university organizations such as the Women's Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE), and IDEA, a student-run venture accelerator, to learn how to start a small business.

She pinpointed the problem: Beauty companies generate tons and tons of plastic pollution. Then, with six months at the Sherman Venture Co-op—a paid opportunity for student entrepreneurs to develop their ideas—Beaudette worked out the

details and got a certificate in organic skincare through Formula Botanica, an online cosmetic science program. She also worked with Scout, Northeastern's student-run design lab, to build out her website.

"One of the main problems was the price point," she says. "Natural brands are really expensive, and while good quality products should be priced higher, I wanted something that my generation could use and afford."

By using ingredients such as beeswax from local beekeepers and sustainably farmed herbs, Beaudette has been able to mesh high quality recipes with a price point that works.

Her packaging is another key innovation: Kaolin Beauty utilizes compostable paper embedded with seeds that can also be planted in the ground, and glass containers with metal lids. No plastic at all.

Beaudette is careful with her pigments, too. She vets suppliers to ensure they use ethical labor practices, and seeks out natural dyes such as those from iron oxide and natural micas.

The products aren't just skin-deep, either. Each one comes with a QR code that links to a guided meditation or ritual for self-care. Her purifying rose aloe face mask, for example, comes with a meditation on self-love.

"I always wanted Kaolin Beauty to be fully engaging," she says, "something that was fun, but goes deeper than your average beauty brand."



Molly Beck, DMSB'09, MS'22

First Place, Graduate Student, 2021

Savvy, smart, and spirited, Molly Beck has always loved building, inventing, and having her hand in various entertainment revolutions. Once an avid blogger, Beck realized that the podcast revolution was starting up and decided to capitalize on that. Her company, Messy.fm, is offering podcasting software solutions to companies looking to fill the gap between their internal communication and the rising trend of the thin line between entertainment and infotainment.

by Ian Thomsen

BLOGGER, CODER, PODCASTER, MENTOR

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 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 Up-Next 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.”

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.

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.”

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,

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



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.”

“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



Courtesy photo from Messy.fm



Eliana Berger, DMSB'21

Honors, Young Alumnae Undergraduate, 2022

Seeing firsthand the lack of opportunity for underrepresented business founders, Eliana Berger wanted to make big changes in the VC space, and that's how her work with Envision began. Envision is a nonprofit virtual venture accelerator for young founders from underrepresented groups like BIPOC and women, which democratizes access to funding, networks, and opportunities by providing hands-on support, a welcoming community, and a broad network of mentors and investors.

by Molly Callahan

VENTURE CAPITAL ISN'T DISPERSED EQUALLY. SHE'S WORKING TO CHANGE THAT.

Venture capital companies invested a staggering \$300 billion in startups in 2020—an amount that's more than the entire economies of all but 40 countries in the world.

You might logically assume that women, who make up half the population in the world, received half of the funding. You'd be wrong: Women-led startups received a paltry 2.3 percent of VC funding in 2020.

"It's a stunning disparity," says Eliana Berger, who graduated from Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business in 2021. "Even more so when you consider that less than 1 percent of funding goes to Black or Latinx founders."

So, she's doing something about it. Envision, her inclusive startup incubator, provides resources, opportunities, and mentorship to underrepresented founders—namely, women and people of color.

Berger was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern University's Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 applicants this year.

Berger has always had an entrepreneurial spirit. In high school, she created a nonprofit organization that distributed care kits to children in cancer treatment at hospitals.

"Starting something of my own really changed my life," she says. "I learned so many skills in such a short amount of time, and always sought out a

community. I have a big passion for entrepreneurship.”

At Northeastern, Berger joined the entrepreneur club and became its vice president by her sophomore year. She noticed quickly, however, that it was mostly men who attended the club’s events, and mostly male founders who came to speak at those events.

“I started wondering what we could do to increase women in the field,” Berger said.

See a problem, solve it. Berger branched off from the entrepreneur club and started the Women’s Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE) at Northeastern in 2018. Four years later, WISE is a thriving organization with more than 20 student-leaders and four main programs: WeLearn, a professional development series; WeBuild, a design incubator; WeSupport, a mentorship network; and WeLaunch, a venture accelerator.

“I learned a lot about how beneficial it is to have a supportive, safe community that understands you,” Berger says. “WeBuild in particular was really helpful to people.”

Indeed, many of this year’s Innovator Award winners utilized some or all of the services offered through WISE.

The organization’s current co-directors, Valerie Robert and Stacey Pablo, say in a statement, “WISE’s overall role is to provide community and support to women who are new to entrepreneurship or already entrepreneurs from an interdisciplinary lens. One does not have to have a business background to be an entrepreneur and we strive to create an inclusive and entrepreneurial community.”

When Berger was transitioning out of her leadership role within WISE, she took a step back and

realized that there weren’t many organizations like it—at other universities, or anywhere.

That’s when she started Envision, a community-driven accelerator for young, underrepresented founders. Envision provides mentorship and non-dilutive grants to new entrepreneurs, which means that founders don’t have to give up a stake in their companies in order to receive funding.

It’s been wildly successful so far: More than 50 companies and 100 founders have gone through the Envision program. Those companies have raised more than \$30 million in outside venture capital, Berger says.

“What it comes down to is that if we provide a little bit of money and a supportive community, it helps spur entrepreneurship,” Berger says. “I feel incredibly honored to be part of this. Community is such an important pillar of my life in almost everything I do.”



Tabitha Boyton, NCH'22

First Place, Undergraduate Student, 2022

To Tabitha Boyton, a leader is someone who amplifies all voices, especially the ones that aren't always heard—voices of the underrepresented, underserved, and marginalized. Through her media platform, Res Publica, she's shaking up the status quo and lifting up women of color by ensuring that they have a place and a voice in academic and political discussions, debates, and publications.

by Alena Kuzub

THIS SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR SET OUT ON A CRUSADE FOR DISCOURSE, AND SHE'S WINNING AT IT

“A little bit of good can turn into a whole lot of good when fueled by the commitment of a social entrepreneur.” This quote by Jeffrey Skoll, a Canadian billionaire and eBay's first president, might very well describe Tabitha Boyton, a recent graduate of Northeastern University – London.

Boyton is somewhat of an outlier among the five winners of the 2022 Innovator Awards, given by Northeastern's Women Who Empower this summer. She won in the undergraduate student category and took home \$22,000 for founding and running Res Publica. This interdisciplinary magazine and academically rigorous platform promotes discussion and debate of various ideas and concepts among younger audiences. Its international team works on a volunteer basis.

“We aren't exactly a business, because we are more of a social enterprise,” Boyton says. “We have a team instead of employees.”

Res Publica is committed to politically educating and increasing engagement, Boyton says, while uplifting women of color in the industry.

“We are a women-led diverse platform, and this is something that publication really prides itself in and it is highlighting that people who look like us do have a place in discourse, and do deserve to have their voices heard, and also do have the platform to do so,” Boyton says.

As a woman of Asian descent, Boyton has experienced severe racism and sexism in and outside of

her professional life, she says.

“I didn’t let that genuinely horrific experience hinder me from building something that I thought would rebuild my confidence, but also be valuable to other people,” she says. “I basically ended up embracing my vulnerabilities.”

Without formal training in journalism, website or graphic design, Boyton embarked on establishing this new publication in 2020 when she was a law and international relations student, the world was shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic, and her own mother was at the hospital, undergoing a surgery.

In just under two years, Res Publica grew to 35 team members and about 250 contributors.

“The editors range from San Marino to Mexico, Hong Kong, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Russia, so it really is such an eclectic group of people,” Boyton says.

This year, the magazine will publish its 1000th piece.

Res Publica has been featured in several awards for journalism, style, focus or tenacity, Boyton says. It’s been selected as one of the best newcomers in London, a top-five specialist publications in the U.K., and was shortlisted for the U.K. Civility in Politics Awards.

It covers a variety of topics from politics and law to art and culture. The magazine is dedicated to the UN sustainability framework and a green approach to publication, primarily existing digitally online.

“We don’t print out absolutely every single one of our issues. We do up to three [printed issues] per year,” Boyton says.

But for her, Res Publica is not just a mere magazine or a media platform.

“My project isn’t just words on a page,” she says. “Because we are a career accelerator for young, marginalized writers who move on to bigger and better things. And for me, seeing those people who I’ve mentored, who have written for us, who have worked for us, grow into such young, confident, capable, especially young women, it’s such a big reward.”

Boyton says that uplifting others has been instilled in her from childhood both by her parents and her teachers. She was born to a British-German mother and a Hong Kong Chinese father and grew up in Hong Kong. Being a Hong Konger at heart, she says, made her very independent.

At the age of 11 she moved to the U.K. to attend an all-girls boarding school, Cheltenham Ladies’ College, which she approached as a new adventure.

“I am always looking to find new things that I can do,” Boyton says. “For example, I am trying to do sushi rolls at the moment.”

She tried a lot of sports as a child, including horse-back riding, figure skating and, unconventionally for U.K., lacrosse.

“My family has always been really supportive of all of my endeavors,” Boyton says. “They’ve always pushed me to work hard, and pursue my potential and always impressed upon me how important it is to give credit where it is due and also to practice gratitude.”

←
Photo by Matthew Modoono/Tabitha Boyton, founder and editor-in-chief of an interdisciplinary magazine Res Publica, says that the platform serves as a career accelerator for young, marginalized writers. Design by Zach Christensen/Northeastern University. Photo courtesy: Tabitha Boyton

Her parents and the boarding school instilled in her a desire to do the most, to make her mark on the world, but also bring other people up, Boyton says.

A renowned British philosopher A.C. Grayling, who started New College of the Humanities that became Northeastern University – London in July, says that Boyton showed herself to be ambitious “in the best possible ways” since she joined the college. He describes Boyton as a bright, very entrepreneurial, creative and committed individual. “She is marvelous proof of what can be done when energy, positivity and intelligence are brought to bear on a project. And she is always full of projects,” Grayling says.

Res Publica was born out of the Boyton’s strong believe that everyone and especially more marginalized people, should have an opportunity to voice and share their opinions, even if they clash with the mainstream.

“For me, the most important thing is about actually having this productive exchange of ideas, because ultimately, debate is fundamental,” Boyton says.

“Table whatever you want, but be open to the criticism or be open to the praise that you would receive from that. You’ll have to make your point stand up.”

To keep readers’ attention, Res Publica uses an interdisciplinary approach to content and delivery, Boyton says.

“I think that the key to it is understanding that different groups of people assimilate and learn information in so many different ways, and we have to mirror that,” she says.

Res Publica has 16 long-form thematic magazines under its belt, covering a plethora of topics, from

patriarchy to technology, to the pandemic, to theology.

“The conversations we have ranged from Nigerian youth culture to intersectional feminism, maladaptive perfectionism, eco socialism,” Boyton says. “There is something for everybody. And I think that’s what makes it so important because we engage at every single level.”

Besides physical and digital publications, a Sunday brief and a book club, Res Publica offers online and in-person discussions and panels with experts and academics and engages in collaborations with various organizations, universities and colleges, and other publications in the U.K. and abroad.

“I think that the only reason why we’ve had the success that we’ve had is because I’m so into collaboration, and I’m so into randomly cold-calling people,” Boyton says. “My literal philosophy all the time is that if you don’t ask for something, you don’t get anything.”

Currently, Boyton is trying to decide how she will spend the \$22,000 she has won in a way that will benefit Res Publica and its team.

“I would like to move into paid staff, but [it is] just not a reality at the moment,” she says.

Her next idea for Res Publica is to encourage people to share A-level university notes and exemplary essays to the platform so that others can freely download and use them.

“Access to education [is] becoming slightly more convoluted at the moment,” Boyton says.

She also participates in a number of other social initiatives, she says. She has been an ambassador for the European Youth Parliament and acts as



a mentor at Publish and Prosper, a U.S. based organization that helps youth build new academic student publications.

For all her activities with Res Publica, Boyton was named one of the recipients of the 2022 Diana Award, one of the most prestigious accolades a young person can receive for their social action or humanitarian work.

Her success complies with her overarching standard that she has set for herself at a young age.

“I suppose it’s all about being your best authentic self. And always asking yourself how you can evolve,” Boyton says.

Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University



Mya Brown, DMSB'21

Honors, Undergraduate Student, 2021

After suffering an immense loss and going through the motions to cope, Mya Brown felt ready to create a positive disruption in the fashion industry and built Jet Noire. Brown's goal with Jet Noire is to integrate environmental health, social equity, and economic vitality through fashion. All of Brown's pieces are built on a triangle sliding scale, meaning a Jet Noire item can be a shirt today, a pair of pants tomorrow, and a bag the next day. Uniquely, they are also constructed to be deconstructed, just as Brown knows life can be sometimes.

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

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

by Ian Thomsen

WHEN HER CLOTHES WENT MISSING, SHE STARTED A CLOTHING LINE

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.

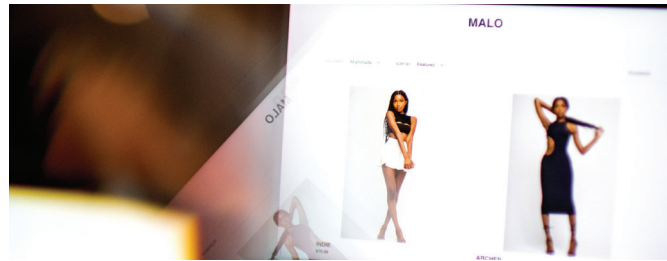
"So much of what I do is personal. Every piece is handmade, and you are investing in our story. Once you become a JET NOIRE girl, you're part of our family, our community."

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."



Michelle Calderon, MBA'21

Honors, Graduate Student, 2021

Michelle Calderon credits her success to her diversified career journey, which includes her venture, Addition Beauty, being selected to be part of Northeastern's NSF I-Corps program. This program puts a strong emphasis on customer discovery, which allowed Calderon to study what women want in terms of personal care products related to fertility and pregnancy. Based on her research, Calderon is using Addition Beauty to launch the first sustainable color cosmetic line that doesn't have harmful chemicals that affect pregnant women and their developing children, empowering women to make safer choices during this critical point in their lives.

by Ian Thomsen

HER STARTUP IS DEVELOPING SAFE COSMETICS FOR PREGNANT PEOPLE

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.

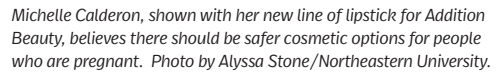
Most of the colorants that are used in cosmetics are derived from petroleum or coal tar, which may contain toxic heavy metals. The field is relatively unregulated. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has banned 11 chemicals for use in cosmetics, while the European Union has banned more than 1,300.

“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



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.

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.

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.”



Amanda Céspedes, MS'22, & Madhuri Iyer, MS'22

Honors, Graduate Student, 2022

Madhuri Iyer and Amanda Céspedes have spent the past five years gaining an understanding of regulatory challenges and exploring solutions. With skills and knowledge related to complicated regulatory pathways, the duo launched EzReg to help startups in the healthcare and medical device spaces understand regulations—saving their clients money and helping them comply with FDA and other requirements along the way.

Madhuri Iyer (left) and Amanda Céspedes (right)

by Ian Thomsen

THEY'RE UNTANGLING THE WEB OF REGULATIONS TO HELP LIFE-SAVING TECHNOLOGY REACH THE MARKET

Amanda Céspedes and Madhuri Iyer are familiar with the complex web of laws and timelines and documentation that comprise the federal regulatory landscape in the United States. Anyone creating a healthcare startup or building a new medical device needs to make their way through an astounding 18,000 requirements established by the Food and Drug Administration to determine which ones apply to their products.

These regulations are important—they help to ensure that drugs do what they're supposed to do with as few side effects as possible, and set standards for clinical trial outcomes, medical device functionality, and more.

Take the EpiPen for example. The life-saving device contains a retractable needle that delivers a precise dose of epinephrine to block anaphylaxis in people who are having severe allergic reactions. Users are instructed to press the tube-like device against their outer thigh to administer the drug. The inventor of the EpiPen (a Northeastern University alumnus) would have had to prove to regulators that users wouldn't accidentally hold the device the wrong way and stab their finger, instead.

“Governments put these rules in place to make sure products are safe and effective, and these are good laws,” Iyer says. “But their complexity can make them a barrier of entry between an amazing product and the market.”

These federal regulations exist in a tangled mass that's difficult to parse for even the most savvy entrepreneur. And it's not just the U.S.—federal regulations in countries around the world are often complicated to follow.

Céspedes encountered this in Chile. She'd spent five years working at a medical device startup that ultimately failed because of regulatory challenges, she says.

"It was five years, gone," Céspedes says.

And Iyer encountered the same challenge in Australia. For nine years, she worked at companies large and small and saw that in almost every instance, "it wasn't clear what the quality and regulatory expectations were," she says.

Frustrated with the murky regulatory environment, they each enrolled in a graduate level regulatory affairs program in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. They met and started talking, astonished at how closely their experiences halfway around the world matched.

"We both realized how difficult it is to understand these requirements if you don't have them set out in front of you from the start," Iyer says. "We asked ourselves: What can we do to fix it? We've each faced the problem, what is the solution?"

There are regulatory consultants that entrepreneurs can hire to guide them through the process, but they can be prohibitively expensive, Iyer says. In that case, there are blogs and websites by other founders, but often they're so laden with jargon that they can be impossible to parse.

"A lot of times, the novel medical device innovators are people who don't know the regulatory space

but just have a great idea and want to help people," she says. "Unfortunately, the FDA isn't something you bring in after the fact; you have to build it in before you even start conceptualizing a design."

So, the pair combined their experiences and strengths, and created a solution: EZReg, an online platform that clearly defines the federal requirements that healthcare and medical device startups must meet in order to get their ideas to market. Céspedes and Iyer were each recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award in a competition hosted by Northeastern's Women Who Empower.

"We asked ourselves: What can we do to fix it? We've each faced the problem, what is the solution?"

—Madhuri Iyer, co-founder, EZReg

Céspedes and Iyer are still building out the platform, which will eventually guide entrepreneurs through the regulatory landscapes in various countries, they say. It involves painstaking work, sorting through tens of thousands of laws and requirements, but it's work that inspires them.

"A lot of the technology that comes out of research labs could be life-saving advances," Iyer. "If companies are failing just because of regulatory challenges, for me that's an unacceptable reason. I want to do everything I can to help these companies reach the market and have the most impact possible."



Tahisha Charles, MA'20

Honors, Young Alumnae Graduate, 2022

In an effort to bridge the gap between online platforms that only cater to mainstream talent and emerging local talent, Tahisha Charles created Miixtapechiick. This site is the only woman-owned journalism platform in Massachusetts, and it shines a light on local talent from the state and helps musical artists build their fanbases.

by Molly Callahan

SHE'S BUILDING A COMMUNITY, ONE 'MIIXTAPE' AT A TIME

While other teenagers were making top-eight lists of their best friends on MySpace, Tahisha Charles was using it to do something else entirely. As young as 13 years old, Charles would make fan forums for musicians and artists such as Nicki Minaj, Janae Aiko, Omarion, Ciara, and more.

Charles would track news updates about the artists and share pop culture tips with a community of fans she helped to coalesce. It was a way to stay in the know about some of her favorite musicians.

During her junior year of high school, MySpace lost its cache, and Charles migrated her work to Twitter. "It was a great way to connect with the artists I followed, but not as good for letting people know what was going on," Charles says.

She started writing for blogs and other online news and entertainment sites, and started to gain some clout in the field. Charles worked with digital media strategist Karen Civil, who is known for creating and running a website that enabled rapper Lil Wayne to write to his fans while he was incarcerated at Rikers Island.

Charles also wrote prolifically under the moniker "Miixtapechiick" for HipHop87, a music news and entertainment site with a huge audience in the Philadelphia area.

Then, she graduated from high school. Charles, whose early music-writing career was beginning to take off, searched for a place where she could really make a name for herself; where she could get the kind of recognition she deserved for her

tireless coverage of local and national artists, but struggled to find one that fit.

So, she made her own site.

Charles, who graduated from Northeastern University in 2020 with a master's degree in journalism, created Miixtapechiick.com to be the go-to source for national music news, as well as coverage of Boston's local hip hop and rap scene.

Her biggest hit to date came in 2013, when Charles happened to be online in the early hours of Dec. 13. Beyoncé dropped her self-titled album without any formal announcement or fanfare, taking fans and critics alike by surprise.

"Nobody was really online when it dropped," Charles says. "But I was. I blogged about it and posted something really quick to my site."

The post took off. More than 4 million people clicked on it, she says.

"It was incredible. It absolutely did numbers," Charles recalls.

Unfortunately, the post isn't online anymore—a hiccup with her website a few years later caused Charles to lose everything. She rebounded and rebuilt the site, but her record-smashing post about Beyoncé's record-breaking album was lost to the internet ether.

Still, Charles pressed on, and now, she hopes to make Miixtapechiick a home for other up-and-coming arts and music writers. For her work, Charles was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern's Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 entries this year.

"Tahisha is an amazing example of a woman trying to help Black artists, whose work is underrepresented in traditional media outlets," says Betsy

Ludwig, executive director of women's entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

"Ventures are successful not just because of financial capital, but more importantly, because of human network capital," she says. "Our organization seeks to not only bring money and validation to these kinds of ventures but also be able to leverage the power of the Northeastern network to ensure the success of our young entrepreneurs."

What's next for Miixtapechiick? Charles plans to expand the site's coverage to include other cities and states, and eventually to hire full-time writing staff.

For Charles, it all comes back to helping others. Whether it's the local artists she works with, or the students she hopes to someday employ, it's about giving back.

"I have a big heart, and I'm always looking for ways to help people," she says. "At the end of the day, I feel fulfilled when I can accomplish that."



Cassandra Choi, BHS'13

Second Place, Young Alumnae Undergraduate, 2021

Cassie Choi has always had a passion for healthcare and knack for serving others. Her years in medicine run the gamut, from working as an ER tech and critical care nurse to serving as director of operations for a health technology company. These experiences allowed Choi to realize that her passion lay in helping vulnerable populations and improving primary care practices, so she co-founded Pair Team with a friend who felt the same. Pair Team is a platform with a mission to simplify healthcare by creating more meaningful relationships between patients, providers, staff, and administrators, providing more support for everyone involved in the process.

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

by Ian Thomsen

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

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.

“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.

“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 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.

“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.”



**Theodora Christopher, S'22, &
Anastasia Mavridis, S'21, MS'22**

*Second Place, Undergraduate Student,
2021*

Theodora Christopher and Anastasia Mavridis are navigating the patriarchy of business and healthcare with the help of several instrumental female industry leaders. Inspired by a grandmother with a rare disorder, Christopher has always been interested in increasing access to quality care, while Mavridis' firsthand account of social and linguistic barriers to healthcare have played a significant role in launching their product, a temperature sensing device. Through SaluTemp, the duo looks to help traditionally under-represented and vulnerable populations tackle issues they disproportionately face, like diabetes.

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

by Ian Thomsen

A CLASS PROJECT INSPIRED THIS HEALTHCARE DUO TO SOLVE A COMMON DRUG STORAGE PROBLEM

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.

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.”



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

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.

“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

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.”

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.”



Priscilla Marie Colon, MBA'22

Second Place, Graduate Student, 2022

After witnessing a near-fatal birthing experience in Bihar, India, Priscilla Marie Colon dedicated herself to ensuring more women receive quality care during childbirth. She received funding to start an initiative focused on educating nearly 200 birth attendants in Nigeria on how to respond to obstetric emergencies during childbirth. Now, Colon seeks to make a larger impact by creating a nonprofit aimed at reducing preventable maternal deaths and improving overall maternal health using her Northeastern business education.

by Ian Thomsen

SHE'S ON A QUEST TO REDUCE MATERNAL MORTALITY—IN THE US AND ABROAD

Priscilla Marie Colon has traveled to 22 countries and all seven continents. She's learned from midwives in eastern India, where she also helped save the life of a newborn baby. She's certified as a doula with two master's degrees. She was named one of Boston's "Latino 30 Under 30" from *El Mundo Boston* in 2018. And she's just getting started.

As a Latina woman working in healthcare, Colon knows first-hand that someone's race can affect the care they receive. Indeed, a study by the National Academy of Medicine found that "racial and ethnic minorities receive lower-quality health-care than white people—even when insurance status, income, age, and severity of conditions are comparable."

These are not small things. By "lower-quality healthcare," researchers from the National Academy of Medicine meant concrete, inferior care: People who are not white are less likely to be given "appropriate cardiac care, to receive kidney dialysis or transplants, and to receive the best treatments for strokes, cancer, or AIDS."

These disparities were only exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander people experienced higher rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths compared to white people, numerous studies have found.

For Colon, who studied women's health while earning her master's degree in global health at the

University of California, San Francisco, the most jarring disparities appear in maternal health.

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finds that “Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women,” a rate that only increases with the age of the pregnant person. The federal agency also finds that as many as 80 percent of those deaths are preventable, with the right education and timely care. This summer, President Joe Biden declared it a “maternal health crisis,” and developed a 70-page plan for improvements.

“Women of color in this country are dying at disproportionate rates, something that links back to structural racism, implicit bias, and variation in quality healthcare,” Colon says. “Women of color face greater health, social, and economic disparities. And it has a real cost on achieving health equity.”

So, Colon, who graduated from the D’Amore-McKim School of Business at Northeastern this year, is doing something about it.

Together with her co-founders, Anita Nwanna-Nzewunwa and Bre Calhoun, Colon is creating a national nonprofit organization to reduce maternal mortality rates. The group is still working out a name for the organization, and eventually hope to take the organization global. But for her work in maternal health over the past seven years, Colon was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 entries this year.

Nwanna-Nzewunwa, who is a resident doctor in the Maine-Dartmouth Family Medicine Residency Program; Calhoun, a certified doula and doctoral

student at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; and Colon, a certified doula with experience building global maternal health programs, are attacking the problem on a few different fronts.

The first goal of their nonprofit organization is to educate mothers and families about what to expect during their pregnancy and births—and how to recognize warning signs. The second goal is to establish a network of doulas who can advocate for women within the healthcare system and guide them through their pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period. Finally, they plan to leverage simulation training to address structural biases within the healthcare system, including implicit biases that contribute to adverse and potentially dangerous outcomes for people of color.

“When we see women who come in for prenatal visits, we see them monthly until they’re 28 weeks along,” says Nwanna-Nzewunwa. “What happens during the other 29 days in the month? Who addresses their physical, emotional, and informational needs? The same goes for the postpartum period: You see your doctor after six weeks, but what happens between when you have a baby and that six-week mark?”

Doulas, they say, can provide support the rest of the time. Studies from the American Health Association have shown women who receive doula support reduce their odds of a cesarean delivery by almost 41 percent, lowered their odds of preterm birth by 22 percent, and were two times less likely to experience a complication involving themselves or their baby. Importantly for Colon and Nwanna-Nzewunwa, community-based doulas can also help to mitigate racial maternal health inequities and advocate for equitable care. Colon understands this critical role intimately.

In 2015, while she was studying for her master's degree in global health, Colon spent three months in India studying the care that people giving birth received. She lived among midwives in Bihar, and interviewed them about the systemic roadblocks they faced in caring for pregnant people.

One day, Colon, her mentor, and her academic advisor traveled to a hospital in Delhi to observe the maternal wing. While walking around the floor, she noticed a newborn baby, placed on a table away from its mother, and laying silent. The baby was alive, but couldn't breathe, something the nurses hadn't identified by the time Colon walked by, she says. Colon rushed to seek help and her mentor resuscitated the baby, who then belted out a nice strong cry, Colon says.

It all comes back to education and preparation, she says. The following year, Colon teamed up with two of her UCSF classmates to create a global health program that focused on training traditional birth attendants in Nigeria to respond to obstetric emergencies. The organization won a grant from the D-Prize organization that enabled them to train 200 birth attendants, distribute more than 1,000 packets of the lifesaving misoprostol tablets (used to treat hemorrhaging during birth), and produce 200 birth-delivery kits to ensure safe birth deliveries.

It's in that spirit that Colon and her co-founders plan to expand education about birthing and equip women with the tools to have a safe pregnancy and birth.

"For me and my co-founders," Colon says, "it's about working diligently to make an impact because we care about women. Girls who dream become women with vision, and I want to maintain the integrity of my own promises to myself—as well as those of women everywhere."



*Courtesy Photo from D'Amore-McKim School of Business
"Becoming a healthcare consultant and social entrepreneur
to improve global healthcare quality".*



Ashley Girard, S'07

Second Place, Experienced Alumnae, 2022

Living by the belief that all individuals should have access to affordable, healthy, and delicious foods, Ashley Girard looks to revolutionize the convenience store industry with her business, Welly's Wellness. Described as a "7-Eleven, but on wheels," Welly's Wellness is the first mobile, self-contained storefront that sells prepackaged snacks, functional beverages, and small household goods—with a bold plan to tackle food deserts across the U.S. by opening 1,000 storefront trailers in the next five years.

by Molly Callahan

SHE HAS A MOBILE SOLUTION TO AMERICA'S FOOD DESERTS

Millions of people in the United States live in areas that are known as "food deserts" by the federal Department of Agriculture—parts of the country where household incomes are low and access to fresh food is limited or nonexistent.

The USDA estimates that nearly 39.5 million people live in food deserts in the U.S., a figure that represents roughly 13 percent of the total population. And within these food deserts, the nearest grocery store might be more than 20 miles away and inaccessible by public transportation, leaving families with few options for finding fresh, healthy food.

People still have to eat though, so families rely upon small corner stores, convenience markets, or fast-food chains—all options that are also more prevalent in lower-income communities, according to the USDA.

This all means that maintaining a healthy, rounded diet within a food desert is difficult and expensive, if not impossible.

But one Northeastern graduate has a solution, and she's taking it on the road.

Welly's Wellness is a low-cost, healthy, convenience store—on wheels. "We're the next healthy 7-Eleven," says Ashley Girard, a 2007 graduate of Northeastern University's College of Science, and the driving force behind the business. "Healthy food should be affordable and accessible for everyone," she says.

Girard was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern's

Women Who Empower, that drew more than 100 entries in this, its second year.

“Ashley is solving pressing problems in the U.S. related to food insecurity, access to nutrition, and education of healthy lifestyles—especially in marginalized communities,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

“The Women Who Empower Innovator Award is about celebrating and empowering women who are solving large, complex problems across the world,” she says. “Access to nutritious food for all is one of many complex problems we need to solve for a stronger future.”

“It just really sets my blood on fire,” she says. “I want to democratize access to healthy food for everyone.”

— Ashley Girard, founder and chief executive officer, Welly’s Wellness

Living in Los Angeles, a city where more than 66,000 people were experiencing homelessness at the start of 2020, Girard says she saw how difficult it could be for many people to find healthy, affordable food.

She’s starting with a 13-foot, Airstream-like trailer that pops open into a self-contained storefront featuring pre-packaged food, beverages, snacks, and other goods such as lip balm and chewing gum.

It’s the first trailer of what Girard expects to build into a fleet of 1,000 mobile storefronts spread across the U.S. over the next 5 to 10 years. Welly’s Wellness has done a swift business so far in the Southern California communities where Girard has opened. Near the shore, surfers and beach-going

families stop by to refuel. At a local horse show, Girard popped Welly’s Wellness between a taco stand and a funnel-cake stand, offering fresh, healthful alternatives to equestrians all weekend.

“The reception has been awesome,” she says. People have described the pop-up shop as “an oasis” of healthful food in an otherwise barren landscape.

“We’re selling yummy things—none of our items are too precious or premium. It’s grab-and-go.” Vegan cheese puffs, crispy onion-ring snacks made of pea flour, and mushroom jerky sit alongside fresh fruits, vegetables, and granola bars. And, Girard says, more than half of the brands she partners with are women-owned.

The trailer is small enough to tow with an SUV or a truck; no commercial drivers’ license is necessary, Girard says. And as she expands, she plans to hire people from the local communities to run the storefronts and partner with local food brands. Girard envisions Welly’s Wellness trailers parked outside antique fairs, high school football games, national parks, or anywhere people congregate.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Girard also opened up an online marketplace, where people from around the country can purchase snacks and goods to be shipped to them. She crafted snack bundles with specific themes—all gluten-free snacks, for example—that have shipped to 16 states so far.

“I believe that health truly is wealth, and everyone should have access to that,” Girard says. “Healthier individuals lead to healthier environments and healthier communities.”



Khailah Griffin, DMSB'22

Honors, Undergraduate Student, 2021

A childhood filled with many moves taught Khailah Griffin to constantly look at the big picture. And though she always saw herself as more of a problem solver as opposed to an inventor, her venture, UnorthoDOCx, is nothing short of an innovation. The goal of UnorthoDOCx is to empower and diversify individuals in the field of medicine, show those who are interested in medical professions that there's room for everyone in the medical world, and encourage people to unapologetically take an unconventional path to become a medical professional, like Griffin did herself.

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.

by Ian Thomsen

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

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 healthcare 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.



Thai-Anh Hoang, DMSB'06

Second Place, Experienced Alumnae, 2021

When Thai-Anh Hoang was on an international vacation, and her toddler got a severe rash, the ointment she had brought along did not suffice. A friend gifted Hoang's family with a homemade remedy consisting of ingredients that grew in their garden. The rash cleared up—and Hoang's wheels started turning. Through her brand, EmBeba, she has merged generation-tested remedies with technology to create clean, effective, easy, safe, and fun products, while launching a support system for families dealing with skin issues like the ones she faced with her toddler.

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.

by Hillary Chabot

THIS BABY RASH BALM ENTREPRENEUR BOOMED IN THE PANDEMIC ECONOMY

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 Hoag brought from home weren't helping. The host offered Hoag 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.

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.



Natasha Ibori, SSH'18

First Place, Young Alumnae Undergraduate, 2021

Women in the energy industry are few and far between, but Natasha Ibori is looking to change that. Through Uwana Energy, a company focused on the importance of human connection, Ibori is adding her own flare to the male-dominated field. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life and proved how intertwined connection and energy truly are, Uwana Energy helped Nigerians receive free or reduced-cost electricity, allowing them to overcome their scarcity mindsets and return to prioritizing their mental health, finances, productivity, digital connections, families, and more.

by Ian Thomsen

SHE REALIZED HER DREAM OF BRINGING CLEAN ELECTRICITY TO NIGERIA

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.

"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.

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

“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

“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.

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.”



Temidola Ikomi, DMSB'17

First Place, Young Alumnae Undergraduate, 2022

Propelled by her mother's creativity and work ethic, and the way Northeastern values resilience and perseverance, Temidola Ikomi launched Irawo Studio. This female-owned and family-run business creates showstopping pieces specifically for women who are unapologetically blazing their own trails and claiming their own destinies.

by Alena Kuzub

A NORTHEASTERN DEGREE EMPOWERED THIS ENTREPRENEUR TO START A WOMEN'S FASHION BRAND IN NIGERIA

Temidola Ikomi, a 2017 graduate of the D'Amore-McKim School of Business, really missed the Northeastern community, so she joined Women Who Empower.

Ikomi wanted to build new connections with like-minded women who wished to help each other grow and might have their own businesses, she says, because she is a co-founder of an African-inspired fashion brand in Nigeria, her home country.

"The people I have met so far on this journey have been amazing," Ikomi says.

This year Ikomi was honored with a 2022 Innovator Award, presented by the Women Who Empower, in the young alumnae undergraduate category along with a \$22,000 cash prize. She entered the competition last year as well, but didn't win.

"It shows that being an entrepreneur doesn't mean that you are going to give up when you don't get what you want. You just keep on pushing and pushing," Ikomi says.

Together with her mother and two sisters she owns a Nigerian fashion brand called Irawo Studio. Irawo means "stars" in Yoruba, one of the three main languages spoken in the country.

They always knew they wanted to do something in the fashion world, Ikomi says.

"Fashion has been a great way for me to express how I feel, my identity without necessarily saying

anything,” she says. “We all do love fashion. We all also want to embrace our Yoruba culture, [and] that’s something we’re able to do with a modern twist.”

Ikomi was born in Kano, in the northern part of Nigeria, and grew up between Lagos, Nairobi, Kenya, and South Africa because of her father’s travels in corporate banking. She attended a number of international schools and became familiar with meeting people from different cultures.

In 2012, she enrolled in a college in Virginia, but didn’t feel like it was diverse enough for her. She decided to transfer out and chose Northeastern for its diversity and the co-op program.

“I believe I grow the best through challenges at times, and I felt the co-op program would really allow me to see how it would be to be a full-time employee before I graduate,” she says.

While at Northeastern she was an adviser and the president of Northeastern African Student Organization. She graduated from the D’Amore-McKim School of Business in 2017 with a bachelor’s degree in marketing and business administration.

Her first job was in corporate communication. In 2018, Ikomi moved from Boston to Brooklyn, New York, where she currently resides.

When both Temidola Ikomi and her sister Ama Ikomi graduated from college in 2017, the women in her family decided that it was time to start a fashion business back in Nigeria.

Ama Ikomi went to New York University Stern School of Business and took on the accounting and finance of their new company. Temidola Ikomi focused on marketing and advertising. Their younger sister Anire Ikomi, a graduate of Parsons School of Design, helps with the brand’s public image.

The day-to-day operation of the business is overseen by their mother, Abby Ikomi, who is the creative director of Irawo and lives in Lagos full-time.

Ikomi says she gets her entrepreneurial nature from her mother. In every country they lived in, her mother had a business: hair, furniture, jewelry.

“I think that’s how I am, too. When I’m very passionate about something, I give it my all, and I want to make sure that it is successful,” Ikomi says.

Working with her family was a bit tricky the first year, she says, because they needed to understand the dynamics between themselves.

“Because it’s family, you can just be very blunt and be honest. And sometimes that’s what you need in the business,” she says.

They try to keep their focus on what is the best for the business. They all participate in the creative development process, brainstorming collectively about the brand’s messaging or the next lookbook, Ikomi says.

At the same time, Ikomi says, they are a Nigerian family first, and her mother will always have their unconditional respect. The business comes after that.

In the first year of operation, they decided to participate in one of the biggest fashion shows in Lagos called Arise to make a grand entrance to a rather saturated market, Ikomi says. Irawo Studio also participated in the Glitz Fashion Week in Ghana.

“We did all these fashion shows to help us embark [on this journey],” Ikomi says.

She describes the Irawo clothes as African-inspired womenswear that is modern and elegant as well as very comfortable and professional. She says, Irawo garments are for trailblazers who are



Irawo Studio designs from the 2022 spring-summer collection. Photos courtesy of Temidola Ikomi

chasing their dreams in their own way. They can be mothers, students or working professional women.

“We want to really bring out your inner star,” Ikomi says. “We always say, our pieces are investment pieces, meaning regardless of the trend, it is still something that you can wear, for many, many years.”

They also make bespoke pieces for milestone birthdays, weddings or wedding receptions.

The company carries out all parts of the production process in-house, from conceptualizing the fabrics and garments’ design to execution and shipping to clients. A team of in-house artisans designs all the fabric patterns, which allows Irawo Studio to completely control their supply chain, Ikomi says.

In five years, the company firmly established itself within the West African markets, Ikomi says, with biggest sales in Nigeria and Ghana. They have also seen growth in the U.K. and U.S., primarily in New York City and Atlanta, Ikomi says. They ship worldwide as well.

Their goal now is to expand more on the U.S. market in an authentic way, to grow sales and get into more retailers.

“We have utilized influencers to help us break into the U.S. market,” Ikomi says. “We do a lot of paid advertising as well.”

This experience with launching and running Irawo Studio taught Ikomi that an entrepreneur needs to have a complete 360-degree view of their business.

“You really need to be fully equipped to know your business inside and out,” she says.

That is why she moved back to Lagos in 2019 for a year and a half to better understand the operations of the business and its expenses.

Ikomi still continues working in marketing and communications outside of Irawo Studio.

“I believe in being very well-rounded and utilizing what I am learning on my job for the business,” she says. “It’s not necessarily about choosing one, but it’s about making time for whatever is important to you and prioritizing your time.”



Samantha Johnson, E'21, MS'21

First Place, Young Alumnae Graduate, 2022

Driven by a mentor and former coach, and her own experience on a unified track and field team, Samantha Johnson knew early on that she wanted to make a positive impact on others. Johnson is doing just that through Tatum Robotics, an organization that creates low-cost robotic solutions for the DeafBlind community.

by Alena Kuzub

THIS ENGINEER WITH A PASSION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS COMMUNITIES DEVELOPS A ROBOTIC SIGNING ARM FOR DEAFBLIND PEOPLE

Samantha Johnson, bioengineer and founder of Tatum Robotics, vividly remembers meeting a DeafBlind person for the first time.

She was in her sophomore year at Northeastern University, taking an American Sign Language class, which required her to learn more about the local Deaf community by attending local Deaf events. At one of the events, she met a DeafBlind woman.

“I thought it was truly like magic how they could somehow understand [what was being communicated] purely into their hands,” Johnson says.

DeafBlind people communicate via tactile ASL with the help of a partner or an interpreter, holding onto their dominant hand while the interpreter signs. Signing with the woman, Johnson immediately thought of a robotic device that could sign for DeafBlind people. But she didn't have the time or skills to develop such a device during her sophomore year, so she stored the idea away in her head.

Last month, however, Johnson, who is now 23 years old and a 2021 alumna of the College of Engineering with a combined bachelor's and master's degree in bioengineering, was announced to be the first place winner of the 2022 Innovator Awards given out by the Northeastern's Women Who Empower platform in the young alumnae graduate category for developing a robotic arm that can sign in ASL.

The award came with a \$22,000 cash prize that Johnson is planning to spend on further research and development, as well as on costs to hire Deaf-Blind consultants to help brainstorm ideas and evaluate prototypes.

Johnson grew up in Hudson in Central Massachusetts and describes herself as an optimistic person with high energy, who checks in on everyone and makes sure that everybody is happy.

“I really do see that we can accomplish anything we set our minds to,” Johnson says. “I can work for 20 hours a day, especially if I see progress being made, I can keep going.”

Johnson started working with special needs students in middle school as a part of a conversation club that helped them practice making eye contact, asking questions and showing active listening.

In high school, Johnson was one of the first members to join a unified track and field team, where special needs athletes competed alongside abled partners. This experience allowed her to learn more about the impact of assistive technology, including wheelchairs and prosthetics, which gave students the abilities they otherwise wouldn't have had, she says.

“I decided to do bioengineering with the assumption that I either will do prosthetics or assistive technology,” says Johnson, who still works as a life skills aide for adults with disabilities after work.

Johnson revived her idea of creating a communication device for DeafBlind people in her last year of college. In 2020, she was supposed to work on her thesis in a lab but all the labs closed due to COVID-19 pandemic along with the university. Instead, Johnson transitioned to working on the thesis at her small studio apartment.

She set up 3D-printers, bought soldering irons and started building a signing hand in collaboration with the Deaf-Blind Contact Center in Allston. She designed all of the parts herself, 3D-printed them, assembled them and started writing code. After the initial prototypes had been built, her father Todd Johnson, a software engineer, took over developing software for the hand to make it sign.

To ensure the device is the most effective, Johnson enlisted help from Northeastern's Institute for Experiential Robotics and its director Taskin Padir; assistant professor in biology Jon Matthis and his motion capture software project FreeMoCap; associate professor in bioengineering and thesis advisor Chiara Bellini; and assistant professor in chemistry and chemical biology Mona Minkara. She also established collaboration with the New Dexterity group at the University of Auckland.

“Samantha employed a truly experiential approach to her project,” Padir says. “Rather than looking for an application for a technology, she identified an unmet need within the DeafBlind community and set course for her project to make an impact. This is the recipe for success.”

He also notes that Johnson is a true entrepreneur and go-getter, able to attract talent and motivate her team toward the goals of her project.

By the time Johnson graduated Northeastern, she had created a hand-wrist system that could finger-spell words texted to it from a computer. Johnson looked for jobs but none of the options involved

Samantha Johnson, founder of Tatum Robotics and the first place winner of the 2022 Innovator Awards in the young alumnae graduate category presented by Women Who Empower, graduated from the College of Engineering with a combined bachelor's and master's degree in bioengineering in 2021. Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

working directly alongside disabled communities, which was important to her.

In a turn of fate, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind saw an article about Johnson's work and offered her a small grant to continue working on a robotic arm. This allowed her to start her own company, Tatum Robotics, and move to a new space at MassRobotics, an innovation workspace in Seaport.

Tatum Robotics currently has one full-time employee, a linguist and fellow Northeastern alumna Nicole Rich, two graduate co-ops, and a large number of volunteers, Johnson says. Her father continues to be the lead software architect and her mother, Tammy Johnson, who is an accountant, helps manage the finances.

"We are hoping that once we get funding, we can bring on a few more employees, especially get more DeafBlind folks on staff," Johnson says.

Since the thesis project grew into a real business, Johnson has formed collaborations with the Perkins School for the Blind, National Technical Institute for the Deaf and Helen Keller National Center. She brings in DeafBlind collaborators as frequently as possible to better understand tactile ASL and the needs of the community.

Tatum Robotics currently continues to work on a low-cost, anthropomorphic robotic hand that will fingerspell tactile sign language and a safe, compliant robotic arm so that the system can sign more complex words and phrases. They are creating a user interface and gesture recognition software with the help of some Northeastern clubs, so that DeafBlind people can respond back and have two-way communication all by themselves, similar to video relay services that sighted but Deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired individuals use in real-time via a sign language interpreter.

"We are bringing in native Deaf and DeafBlind signers to come in and sign so we can actually map their signing motions right to our robot," Johnson says.

Brian Mansur, program director at the Deaf-Blind Contact Center, says he sees a lot of potential in the devices Johnson is working on. They would make things like reading newspapers and emails, going online, texting with a friend or even watching movies accessible to DeafBlind people.

"If you have somebody come in and try to sign into their hand all day, the task is too tremendous to get every bit of information," Mansur says. "They can touch a robot wherever and whenever and get nuances and changes that are occurring in the language because the language is always evolving."

DeafBlind people would become more employable with these communication devices, Mansur says.

He emphasizes how committed Johnson and Tatum Robotics are to the project.

"It is very impressive. I haven't seen anybody that dedicated as of yet," Mansur says.

Johnson has received positive feedback from other engineers and entrepreneurs, and they often suggest focusing on other bigger audiences or more lucrative markets, Johnson says.

"The technology itself is novel," Johnson says.

"What we are doing could do more than benefit DeafBlind people."

But for now she prefers to focus on the DeafBlind community, which has been historically underserved, and, maybe, expand to other sectors later.

"We can really make such an impact on the lives of these people who currently don't have any means of communicating. And this could be the first," Johnson says.



Tatum Robotics, a company founded by Samantha Johnson, is developing a low-cost, anthropomorphic robotic hand that will fingerspell tactile sign language and a safe, compliant robotic arm to help DeafBlind people receive information and communicate with the world without an interpreter. Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University



Jameson Johnson, AMD'19

Second Place, Young Alumnae Undergraduate, 2021

A lover of storytelling and collaborating, Jameson Johnson founded the *Boston Art Review*, a publication to foster conversations around a diverse selection of writing, art, and perspectives, during her time at Northeastern. Johnson's goal in creating the *Boston Art Review* was to bridge the gaps between coverage, criticism, and community engagement in Boston, ultimately creating a platform that gives voice to people who are often underrepresented in this space..



by Ian Thomsen

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

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.

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



Deborah Keane, BHS'86

Second Place, Experienced Alumnae, 2021

When Deborah Keane asked her daughter what an innovator was, her daughter described the term as somebody who loves her job, does greater good for others, and keeps setting new goals with no limits. And Keane couldn't agree more, as someone who founded the first sustainable and woman-owned caviar company in the U.S. Her business, the California Caviar Company, is run by her and other fearless women, many of whom are minorities, single moms, and/or abuse survivors. Together, they make sure that the California Caviar Company is practicing what it preaches, sparking change, and seeing success after thoughtful, persistent work.

The farming of sustainable stocks of sturgeon is "vitally important to the species," says Keane. Courtesy photo.

by Ian Thomsen

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

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 distributing 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.”



**Emily Man, E'19, MS'19, &
Valeria Martinuzzi, MS'18**

*First Place, Young Alumnae Graduate,
2021*

After realizing the percentage of women deprived of reproductive rights around the world, Emily Man and Valeria Martinuzzi sought to launch an acceptable and affordable solution to bettering women's health outcomes—and Venova Technologies was born. The duo chose the name Venova, which combines the word venus to represent women and nova meaning new, to represent a new, empowered woman, the way they hope users feel after accessing the novel contraceptive device they've created.

by Ian Thomsen

A CLASS PROJECT HELPED TWO ENTREPRENEURS DEVELOP A NEW CONTRACEPTIVE DEVICE

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 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.”

←
Emily Man (left), a Northeastern graduate and co-founder of Venova Technologies. Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University.
Valeria Martinuzzi (right), a Northeastern graduate and co-founder of Venova Technologies. Courtesy photo



Camille Martin, PhD'20

Second Place, Young Alumnae Graduate, 2021

Camille Martin is reimagining the future of consumer goods one industry at a time. Her journey started with co-founding Seaspire, a company that focuses on bringing new ingredients to the market to treat cosmetic and chronic skin conditions. As a first-time founder, Martin was able to obtain \$1 million in funding with the support of countless resources and experienced mentors. She now wants to leverage her ever-growing network and skillset to create a more equitable environment for entrepreneurs through her latest venture, Alexandria Growth Brands. Martin is focused on growing the businesses of a diverse group of entrepreneurs who, like her, are finding solutions to common problems.

by Ian Thomsen

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

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 underserved 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



Yewande Masi, SSH'09

Honors, Experienced Alumnae, 2022

Yewande Masi believes that with the daily stress, dehydration, and toxic ingredients women face day to day, basic body care just won't cut it—innovative healing and restorative action is crucial. That's why she founded Ornam Skincare, a brand that helps make women feel confident, built on the tenets of empowerment, sustainability, and toxin-free living.

by Molly Callahan

'LOSE THE GUY, GAIN THE BUSINESS'

When Yewande Masi and her boyfriend would visit family in West Africa, they'd often return stateside with a block or two of raw shea butter, an ivory-colored fat that's extracted from the nuts of shea trees—and that makes for an excellent moisturizer for your skin.

The blocks of rich, creamy butter were easier and less expensive to buy in West Africa, Masi says, and once the pair was home in Hershey, Pennsylvania, she set about using them to create super reparative, natural hand creams.

Masi mostly made them just for herself, and her boyfriend at the time. Occasionally, friends would ask to buy her luxurious, homemade creams, and she'd laugh, flattered by their support, she says.

Not long after one trip, Masi and her boyfriend broke up. Nursing a heartache, she just kept moving forward, working harder at her day job and pouring herself into her homemade salves, which had become something of a salve for her whole life, too.

"You know that saying, 'If you stay in motion, you won't stay in your emotions'? That's exactly what I did," she says.

Soon, friends of friends were asking Masi about her skincare, as word spread about her all-natural products. Interested to see where it would lead, Masi opened up a few one-off pop-up shops at various events to sell her skincare products.

"It was incredible," she says, of the reaction to her products. Not only did they sell, but Masi found a community of women who supported her as a sister, an entrepreneur, and as a woman finding

her way through an emotional breakup.

“I would tell people the story of these products—how it started out just with me making them for my ex-boyfriend and myself—and they would joke, ‘Lose the guy, gain the business!’” she says. “It was this camaraderie of women.”

At the same time, Masi, who graduated from Northeastern University with her bachelor’s degree in 2009, was also having what she calls a “self-care moment,” learning to love herself and take care of herself. She was slowing down, getting introspective, and turning her morning moisturizing routine into something more akin to a ritual.

“As I learned that I deserved better in my personal life, I was learning that I deserved more from the products I used to nurture my body, too,” she says.

The enthusiastic reception to her pop-up offerings, combined with the relative dearth of pure, toxin-free body moisturizing products on the market inspired Masi to turn her homegrown products into a full-blown business called Ornami.

Ornami products have the kinds of tongue-in-cheek names that offer a wink to Masi’s own journey. “Let that Mango Body Butter,” and “No Scrubs EX-Foliator Sugar Scrub” are the kinds of names you might share with a best friend, recalling all the heartbreak and laughter over the course of your friendship.

That’s intentional, Masi says. Ornami is as much about fostering community as it is about the products themselves. The company offers a “Bestie Combo” of both products, and a rewards program for “Glow-Gettas.” And Masi says she’ll test out new fragrances and products in pop-up shops so that would-be customers can weigh in on what they like best.

“At least once, the scent that I thought was going to be the most popular was at the bottom, and the one I thought would be at the bottom was the most popular,” Masi says, proof that being in community with her customers is also just good business.

Mary McNamara, director of MBA admissions at Northeastern, and one of Masi’s mentors, describes the entrepreneur as “resilient.”

“That strength flows from Yewande’s curiosity and humility, which drives her habit of iterating,” says McNamara, who also co-directs the McCarthy(s) Venture Mentoring Network at the university.

“Whether it is with Ornami’s formulations, pricing, packaging, website, or social media, Yewande will try something, consider the data or feedback, make adjustments, and forge ahead, again, and again, and again. Yewande doesn’t see obstacles; she sees opportunities to adjust. And, Yewande always keeps it 100—her authentic voice inspires Ornami’s community of “Glo-gettas” and reveals the reality that a founder’s journey is not linear.”

The products also—and this is at the core of Masi’s mission—offer people a natural balm for their beleaguered skin.

“Skincare so often just means the skin on your face,” Masi says, “but most of the skin is on the rest of our bodies. And those bodies also absorb stress, dehydration, hyper-pigmentation—the list goes on.”

Masi was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower, that drew more than 100 entries in this, its second year.



Melissa Mullen, Khoury'22

Honors, Graduate Student, 2022

Melissa Mullen created her venture, Smile, to harness the power of artificial intelligence and humor compatibility to create meaningful connections. After moving on from Smile, Mullen has learned a lot from the entrepreneurial process and is now looking for her next project.

by Molly Callahan

SOME STARTUPS FAIL. BUT IT DOESN'T MEAN THE ENTREPRENEUR BEHIND THEM DID

Melissa Mullen's quandary is likely familiar to many: She was tired of the revolving-door experience of online dating, and wanted a relationship to last. She realized that her most successful dates had been with people with whom she shared a sense of humor, and inspiration struck—a dating app that matches people based on what they each found funny.

The idea spread like wildfire. Mullen's app, Smile, was featured on the Drew Barrymore Show, in the Boston Business Journal and the Boston Globe, and by the time it launched in the Boston area, in May 2022, more than 10,000 people had downloaded the app.

Mullen, who put the brakes on a graduate program in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences at Northeastern University to focus on her startup full time, was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern's Women Who Empower.

But there was a problem. For all those new users, very few stuck around, Mullen found. Then the U.S. economy tanked, inflation ballooned, and raising new rounds of funding proved nearly impossible.

By the end of the summer, Mullen had shut the whole thing down.

"We just didn't have a product that was exactly in line with what people wanted and needed," she says. And without a clear direction forward, Mullen decided it was best to pull the plug.

“It was hard,” Mullen says. “There were a few weeks afterward that were challenging because you put your whole self into this thing, with the knowledge that it could fail, but you convince yourself that it’s worth it and that you’ll bounce back if it does fail. When it actually happens, it feels like the rug has been pulled out from under you.”

Indeed, Mullen’s experience isn’t unique among startups—90 percent ultimately fall short of success—nor does Smile’s closure mean it was a failed idea. The media blitz that formed around Mullen’s concept and the 10,000 users who signed up sight unseen “are proof that the idea has legs,” she says.

Most important, it doesn’t mean that Mullen isn’t still an entrepreneur at heart. This is just what happens sometimes.

“Many ventures succeed and fail for a host of variables that we can neither predict nor control,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

“We’ve seen that women tend to tie their self-worth to the outcome of their venture. We’re trying to decouple this relationship. Men will fail at several businesses and keep going, just look at Adam Neumann of WeWork,” adds Ludwig. The businessman, known for his questionable business decisions and abrupt departure from WeWork amid a fraught initial public offering, just snagged a \$350 million investment from the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz for another real estate-related venture.

“Women then tend to take failure very personally, so they don’t keep innovating, they stop at the first sign of failure,” Ludwig says. “We want this award to be a validation of the woman as an entrepreneur

and innovator, no matter the outcome of today’s venture.”

“We want this award to be a validation of the woman as an entrepreneur and innovator, no matter the outcome of today’s venture.”

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

Mullen took some time to heal, and to process a whirlwind year. She read a lot, and eventually found the motivation to get back in the game, she says. She began a job at a new startup, AdeptID, in September—as a data scientist, not a CEO this time.

Mullen gained a lot from the entrepreneurial process, as tough as it was. She learned “pretty concrete things” about taking a product to market, she says, as well as lessons that are harder to put on paper. Mullen learned how to lead a company, plus how to manage a project and the people on that project at the same time. “I learned how to think more strategically,” she adds.

As to whether Mullen will ever found a company again, the jury’s still out—for now.

“As each day goes on, I become a little more open to it,” she says. “A lot of people say that entrepreneurship is like a bug: You catch the bug, and everyone goes through this phase of it being really hard until eventually they go back to working for someone else. But then you miss it, and it all happens again. I could see that happening for me.”



Birta Ólafsdóttir, DMSB'14

Honors, Young Alumnae Undergraduate, 2022

Following her father's advice that in order to reach your full potential, you must first pursue happiness by tapping into your curiosity, Birta Ólafsdóttir launched her dream venture, Salotto, meaning living room in Italian. Ólafsdóttir has since changed the name to LDV, but the sentiment remains the same: To bring the world a retail platform for luxury vintage furniture design, where art deco meets the seventies.

by Molly Callahan

HER LUXURY RETAIL COMPANY COULD BECOME THE NET-A-PORTER OF VINTAGE FURNITURE

When Birta Ólafsdóttir moved to Los Angeles, California, at the end of 2019, she had plans to become an interior designer. But, those plans were soon scrambled by the COVID-19 pandemic and everything was put on hold.

"All of my plans had to take a U-turn," Ólafsdóttir says. "It was a very strange, confusing time."

Soon, though, that U-turn revealed a new passion—and a new direction.

Ólafsdóttir started working on a project for a fashion brand, and met Guido Callarelli, the person who would become her partner. By the time the project ended, they'd discovered a shared love for vintage furniture, particularly from the 1920s and 1930s art deco era.

By 2020, that shared love bloomed into something more: Ólafsdóttir and Callarelli launched LDV, a retail platform for curated, luxury vintage furniture and decor.

They rely on their own exacting taste to handpick the items they'll sell, seeking out estate sales, small auctions, and private dealers in Italy, France, and the United States to procure pieces from some of the most sought-after designers of the time.

Ólafsdóttir has collected works by the famed Italian photographer and designer Willy Rizzo; art from American sculptor and designer Paul Evans; and master designer Karl Springer, arguably one of the most influential fixtures in American furniture

design in the late 20th century.

“We know what we’re after, which is what allows us to make fast decisions during auctions or estate sales,” says Ólafsdóttir, who graduated from the D’Amore-McKim School of Business at Northeastern University in 2016.

She and Callarelli maintain a vast network of art and furniture dealers around the world, and can move quickly to scoop up an important piece for their retail collection.

“Our aesthetic is very glamorous; revitalizing glamour is in our mission statement,” Ólafsdóttir says. And indeed, there is something of a symmetry in the historic arc of their mission.

Arts Décoratifs, as the style was known in France, was a celebration of luxury, glamour, exuberance, and faith in progress. It was a truly global artistic phenomenon, pulling from French, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Egyptian traditions—and monuments to the style can be found in the arching craftsmanship of the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building in New York City. The style celebrated beauty and expression, and moved toward a design sensibility that furniture could be beautiful as well as functional.

Nearly 100 years later, Ólafsdóttir sees a parallel movement beginning, as people emerge from the isolation of COVID-19 and begin to celebrate beauty once again.

“History is repeating itself,” she says. “There’s this revitalization of glamour.”

In some cases, Ólafsdóttir says, the century-old furniture she and Callarelli procure requires some restoration. This requires a delicate touch—a balance between the craftsmanship of the past with the functionality of the present. For such critical work, the LDV founders contract with artisans

throughout Italy, Ólafsdóttir says.

The company is at the brink of going live. Ólafsdóttir and Callarelli opened their retail website to friends, family, and select designers throughout Los Angeles before holding a public launch. Many of the pieces they’ve curated for sale have already been scooped up.

Ólafsdóttir was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern University’s Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 applicants this year.

“It was a great honor to get this award,” Ólafsdóttir says.

“Birta is an amazing entrepreneur and innovative talent,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

“She understands the seminal importance of building a strong community of entrepreneurs to combat issues such as impostor syndrome, the fear of failure, and the need for perfectionism—especially for younger innovators and for those who might come from underrepresented groups,” Ludwig says. “Birta understands that feeling surrounded by support is a key to success, no matter where you are, where you’ve come from, or what you are trying to do.”

While she has big dreams for LDV, Ólafsdóttir is taking things one day at a time.

“Maybe it’ll become the Net-a-Porter of vintage furniture, but I’m just doing this because I love it,” she says. “No matter what happens, I’m going to continue. This is just the start for me. Maybe I’ll grow with LDV, or maybe it will take on a life of its own. All that matters to me is that at the end of the day, I love what I do.”



Cynthia Orofo, BHS'19, PhD'24

First Place, Graduate Student, 2022

Determined to address the countless health disparities that came to light during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cynthia Orofo founded the Culture Care Collective. This hybrid health support program integrates community health workers into clinical care teams to properly coordinate care for marginalized groups and increase access to healthcare at low costs.

by Molly Callahan

THIS PHD CANDIDATE BOOSTS ACCESS TO EQUITABLE HEALTHCARE FOR MARGINALIZED PATIENTS

Growing up, Cynthia Orofo knew she would do something with medicine.

Her mother, sister and four aunts were nurses, and some uncles were also in the medical profession. She liked seeing her mother and aunt meticulously care for people, both applying their medical training and giving them personal attention.

“I just thought the dichotomy of being skilled as a clinician, but then also being skilled in caring for a human being was so powerful,” Orofo, 24, says. “I was like, this is something I can do for the rest of my life.”

Orofo, a first-generation Nigerian-American, couldn't have imagined, however, that her journey in nursing would take her to pursue a doctoral degree, push policy recommendations to the White House and become an entrepreneur. With her startup—Culture Care Collective—she won a 2022 Innovator Award, presented by Northeastern's Women Who Empower, in the graduate student category.

Culture Care Collective, a hybrid health support program and app, is slated to launch in collaboration with some Boston-based hospitals by the end of the summer or early in the fall, Orofo says. The program integrates community health workers into hospital clinical care teams to provide the missing link in equitable care delivery to marginalized populations.

The program aims to increase health literacy, improve disease self-management and reduce unnecessary health care utilization that results from a lack of knowledge, transportation, structural racism or other reasons.

“I do believe this will be a viable long-term solution for people ... who are just coming to this country, who have English as a second language, who have low socio-economic status, people who are struggling with drug addiction,” Orofo says.

Orofo grew up in Randolph and attended Randolph High where she says some students didn’t imagine attending schools like Northeastern due to various barriers. She was inspired by her father, who earned a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees after coming to the U.S. from Nigeria in the 1980s and not knowing English well or having any family here.

Valeria Ramdin, assistant clinical professor and director of Global Health Nursing at Bouvé College of Health Sciences, first got to know Orofo during a six-week Dialogue of Civilizations program that she led in London.

Ramdin remembers Orofo as a very shy student who had never been abroad. She helped Orofo find a scholarship to pay for the London trip and became one of Orofo’s mentors, advising her academically, helping her build character, exposing her to events, and sometimes lending a shoulder to cry on.

“Thinking of where she was, and where she is, is a big difference,” Ramdin says.

Now, Ramdin describes Orofo as resilient and aspirational, able to concentrate on the bigger picture and think critically through processes.

After graduating from Northeastern in 2019, Orofo worked as a nurse in the cardiothoracic intensive care unit at Tufts Medical Center, transitioning to the COVID-19 ICU six months later. She has also worked on the Northeastern Health and Wellness Van for the last five years as a student volunteer first, then as a public health nurse, and now as a Ph.D. student. Engagement with the van helped her realize her love for community health work, Orofo says.

“She understands that vulnerable people need non-traditional support that makes more sense for them, related to their lived experience and culture,” says Catherine O’Connor, clinical instructor and director of Mobile Health at Bouvé College. “She has the gift of doing more listening than talking, and she is able to extricate the important information to plan care for patients in a very comprehensive manner.”

Orofo sees the patient as an active collaborator in their care, O’Connor says. She calls Orofo a “champion of the underserved” and credits her with helping Black and brown LGBTQ+ community members access pre-exposure prophylaxis, which prevents transmission of HIV.

“She is quiet, low-key and determined. She is fierce,” O’Connor says. “She just has that stick-to-itiveness, and she does what she needs to do. She quietly advocates for people.”

←
Cynthia Orofo, a doctoral degree candidate at the Bouvé College of Health Sciences, is launching a hybrid health support program, Culture Care Collective, in collaboration with some Boston-based hospitals that integrates community health workers into hospital clinical care teams to provide the missing link in equitable care delivery to marginalized populations. Photo by Matthew Modono/Northeastern University



Cynthia Orofo, a doctoral degree candidate at the Bouvé College of Health Sciences and founder of the Culture Care Collective, won a 2022 Innovator Award in the graduate student category. Photo by Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

Orofo thought of Culture Care Collective while an undergraduate student. She says her father, who has diabetes, was an inspiration and guinea pig for the app.

“He is the ideal candidate for Culture Care Collective. He is a person with multimorbidity, English is his second language, and somebody who doesn’t really have great health literacy because his degree background is in business,” she says.

Community health workers are individuals with basic health training, Orofo explains, who can be an intermediary between the patient and the clinical care team of doctors and nurses. They are able to provide basic health knowledge, coach and facilitate disease management, help individuals navigate the health system, and do all the things necessary to manage their disease.

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled the switch to virtual health care, and Culture Care Collective is leveraging this transition through a mobile app to connect marginalized patients with trustworthy members of the community that look like them and speak their language.

“We hope to shine in implementing this program on a wide scale,” Orofo says.

The pilot program will run for three months, which is enough time to solidify disease learning and behavior change, according to research, Orofo says. Community health workers will both communicate with patients through the app and engage face-to-face, going on home visits or to hospital appointments.

In the beginning, the Culture Care Collective services will be financed by the hospitals. The company is planning to transition to working with Medicare/Medicaid in the future.

In December 2021, Culture Care Collective was selected to be a part of the MassChallenge Health-Tech 2022 cohort, which provides access to mentorships, collaborations and funding. Orofo met industry experts and government officials from the Centers for Disease Control, Food and Drug Administration, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

“It was an incredible six months to really understand the federal side of things and to understand the need from that end,” she said.

As her company grows, Orofo would like to offer volunteer opportunities to middle and high school students from overlooked school districts so they can receive the same mentoring and exposure that she received.

“I’m going to dedicate my life to making sure folks that come from Randolph-like towns and cities—that don’t have a chance, don’t have a pipeline and don’t really have a lot of exposure—get that exposure and get interested,” Orofo says.



Wendy Farnen Price, BHS'94, MS'00, DPT'14

Honors, Experienced Alumnae, 2022

With years working in direct patient care and her experience in her current role at Healthcore, Wendy Farnen Price has learned that in order to make lasting healthy lifestyle or behavioral changes, women need to feel and be heard and supported. One of Healthcore's pillars includes educational, lifestyle medicine and health coaching programs—and Price is hoping to create and lead a new one titled Together With Tea, a group women's health coaching program to empower women to make healthy lifestyle changes.

by Molly Callahan

HER HEALTH COACHING PROGRAM HEALS AND SUPPORTS

When several of Wendy Price's family members and friends were diagnosed with cancer, she knew something had to change. The punishing treatments drastically changed their quality of life, and Price, then working in an outpatient orthopedic physical therapy practice, sought out therapeutic services specific to cancer patients and survivors. She found few organizations—if any—that offered such a thing.

So, she started her own.

Price was determined that Healthcore Lifestyle Medicine, the comprehensive women's health and wellbeing practice she founded, would be holistic. She would care for the whole patient, and build a community for people sharing similar health challenges.

"It was really the patients; their needs drove everything I did, and the services I provided," says Price, who was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern University's Women Who Empower.

"Wendy is a true innovator and community builder," says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women's entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

"The Women Who Empower Innovator Awards seek to build a community of like-minded women who are at similar stages of their innovation journey. We all know that life experiences can feel isolating at times, whether you are building a company or suffering from cancer," she says. "There

is great power in the collective where women can share stories, best practices, and inspire each other.”

Price is a Triple Husky, having earned three degrees at Northeastern. She graduated with her bachelor’s degree in physical therapy in 1994, her master’s degree in the same subject in 2000, and returned for a doctorate in the field in 2014.

The funding associated with the award will help Price start a health coaching group for women who’ve survived ovarian cancer, the first meeting of which she held in September. It was an apt choice: September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month in the U.S.

Price’s focus on holistic therapy and group healing comes from experience. During her years as a physical therapist in an outpatient practice, she says she grew frustrated with what felt like a “revolving door” treatment. She and her colleagues would treat a patient’s symptom or injury—rehabilitating after a knee replacement, for example—but had limited influence to treat the rest of that person’s life.

“In those cases, it’s just as important to heal a person’s lifestyle as it is to heal their knee,” Price says.

Add to that the isolating effects of COVID-19, and Price saw that women—particularly those dealing with cancer—needed more than strict physical therapy alone. They needed a community of care.

In the first version of Healthcore, which Price founded in the late 2000s after witnessing her family members’ and friends’ lives upended by cancer, she offered physical therapy, exercise, mind-body stress-reduction classes, and nutrition programs.

It was a great success and Price’s patients reported feeling healthier, more energetic, and more like

healthcore

LIFESTYLE MEDICINE

PHYSICAL THERAPY

HEALTH COACHING

themselves again. Often, she says, they would linger after classes or treatments, sipping tea and connecting with one another.

Price’s pioneering work drew the attention of clinicians at Yale-New Haven Hospital in Connecticut, who recruited her to help start a new women’s health physical therapy program both for the hospital’s general population and its oncology patients.

But the image of her patients laughing and bonding over tea never left her, and Price soon realized that this connection was just as important as the exercises, nutrition, and physical therapy.

So, in 2020, Healthcore 2.0 was born, featuring a new mobile health platform that patients can access on their smartphones or computers, weekly health coaching, and a host of support groups.

“As a physical therapist, you feel like you can’t treat just the symptom, you have to look at the whole picture of someone’s life,” Price says. “I love group classes and health coaching because I feel like we learn so much from one another—and that connection is so important.”



Valerie Robert, Khoury'23

Honors, Undergraduate Student, 2022

Valerie Robert believes in the power of ventures “by Gen Z for Gen Z.” Cognizant of the increasingly digital age and its intersection with our daily lives, she created The Circuit, a tech-loving student-run editorial and media platform that highlights today’s technology-related trends, developments, effects, and more, helping others stay up to date on the everchanging tech world.

by Molly Callahan

SHE LAUNCHED TECH EDITORIAL BY GEN Z, FOR GEN Z

One of the first headlines on The Circuit gives you a clue that this isn’t just any old media platform. “WTF R NFTs” is an explainer about those elusive digital files that tech investors and even celebrities are betting on. But unlike most of the ink that’s been spilled in an attempt to demystify what NFTs actually are, this piece was written by a Gen Zer, for Gen Zers. And that’s right at the heart of The Circuit’s mission.

The Circuit is a student-run media and editorial platform that focuses on technology in all its forms. Valerie Robert, who will complete her degree in computer science and political science at Northeastern University in May 2023, is the creator and driving force behind it.

“The Circuit explores all the ways that technology infiltrates our daily lives,” Robert says. “As Gen Zers, there’s almost no aspect of our lives that isn’t touched by tech in some way.”

She’s right.

Generational cutoff points are typically hard to pin down, but the Pew Research Center defines members of Generation Z as those born between 1997 and 2012, and the ubiquitousness of technology is in part what helps to distinguish this generation.

The generations before Gen Z were slowly introduced to the new technologies of the day. Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) grew up as television expanded dramatically. Generation Xers (born between 1965 and 1980) matured as computers were gaining traction as household devices. And (oft-maligned) Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) came of age as access to the internet exploded.

What’s unique about Gen Z is that all of this has always been part of their lives. The iPhone launched in 2007, when the oldest Gen Zers were 10. “By the time they were in their teens, the primary

means by which young Americans connected with the web was through mobile devices, WiFi, and high-bandwidth cellular service,” Pew researchers write. “Social media, constant connectivity, and on-demand entertainment and communication are innovations Millennials adapted to as they came of age. For those born after 1996, these are largely assumed.”

This means that members of Generation Z have a completely different relationship to technology than any of their peers in prior generations—and as such, Robert says, they should have a completely different place to talk about and explore those technologies. That’s where The Circuit comes in.

“When you look at traditional media—and I’m an avid reader of The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Economist, and others—those platforms have amazing writers, but it’s not content that’s relatable,” Robert says. “They’re not talking about what’s happening in my life.”

The Circuit is somewhat decentralized: Anyone with a good idea can write about it for the platform.

“Let’s say you love bees,” Robert says. “You could do a piece on bees and technology, all the innovations in that space and how they intersect.”

Robert was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern University’s Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 applicants this year.

Robert says she had the idea for The Circuit back in high school, but a program by the Women’s Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE) at Northeastern, called WeBuild, gave her the push to make it a reality.

The semester-long program gives budding entrepreneurs the opportunity to build out their ideas, and Robert used the time to create a roadmap for her media platform.

“I hammered out the mission, the vision, the team structure, what the site would look like—all of it,” she says.

Stacy Pablo, a co-director at WISE, says that creating the “breathing room” for women entrepreneurs is critical.

“With this space, women often feel more confident to pursue their business ideas,” Pablo says. “This breathing room is also important because it allows for our members to build at their own pace without being rushed. Through WISE, we strive to ensure that all women graduate from our programs confident and comfortable with entrepreneurship—and know that they belong in entrepreneurship.”

Then, Robert entered the Husky Startup Challenge, another Northeastern program designed to provide early-stage startups with knowledge, resources, and mentorship. An affiliated competition allows student-founders to win funding for their projects, too. Robert took third place in 2021. With the grant money, she turned to yet another Northeastern organization, Scout, which is a student-led design studio. She hired a team to help redesign and rebuild her website from the ground up. This fall, she’s working with the Intellectual Property Law Clinic, run out of Northeastern’s School of Law, to trademark her designs.

Now, Robert co-directs WISE with Pablo, and The Circuit has a team of more than 20 people. Robert is thinking hard about what the next chapters for her, and for The Circuit, look like.

“How do I grow The Circuit into its adult stage?” she wonders aloud. She could spin it off into its own startup, or work with other colleges to install The Circuit at their campuses, too. “At the end of the day, it’s a community first, and I’m so proud to have created this community for myself and my peers.”



Natasha Shazana, DMSB'13

First Place, Experienced Alumnae, 2022

Growing up in Malaysia, Natasha Shazana remembers walking through countless malls and wondering why nobody in bra ads looked like her. To change that paradigm, she quit her private equity job at Morgan Stanley in New York City, moved back to Malaysia, and launched her own bra company, Soko, with its name deriving from the Malay word *sokong*, meaning support. With comfort and empowerment top of mind, Soko brings Malaysian women utter satisfaction during what is typically an overall frustrating experience.

by Molly Callahan

THIS ENTREPRENEUR EMPOWERS MALAYSIAN WOMEN, ONE BRA AT A TIME

When Natasha Shazana meets her Instagram followers in real life, some can't even recall her name. To them she is @brapreneur, the force behind a new bra company, Soko, whose mission is to bring empowerment and comfort to everyday women in Malaysia.

To launch the bra business in her home country, Shazana, a Northeastern graduate, Class of 2013, quit a private equity job in New York City. But she hasn't regretted the move, she says. In just a year after the launch she has grown her revenue to six figures. She won a 2022 Innovator Award, presented by Northeastern's Women Who Empower, in the experienced alumnae category, and \$22,000 in June.

"I am a big extrovert, I derive my energy from other people," Shazana says. "That is why I love and [am] so excited to be a part of the Women Who Empower supportive community."

Her old college friend Jessica Pogranyi confirms, "She is super sociable, probably the most sociable person I know.

"She has a lot of energy. She is a go-getter."

While Pogranyi is preparing herself to launch an environmentally-friendly mezcal brand in Mexico, she and Shazana often discuss their businesses.

"She is a great listener and advice giver," Pogranyi says. "Every time I message her, she is awake somehow."

And Shazana does have a lot to share after the last three years of developing a product and launching her business.

“It’s hard. It’s really hard,” she says. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve done in my life.”

Shazana grew up between Malaysia, Singapore, U.K., Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, while her parents pursued careers in banking. At the age of 17, Shazana came to study at Northeastern’s D’Amore-McKim School of Business in Boston, after her prom date told her about the university and its co-op programs.

She maximized every single opportunity at Northeastern, Shazana says, doing two co-ops, two internships, and a semester abroad in Shanghai, China. She majored in marketing and finance.

Surprisingly, unlike a lot of her classmates, she struggled to secure a job before graduating, despite applying to close to 200 companies. She almost started a food truck business to create her own opportunity, before she landed a foreign exchange broker position and moved to New York City.

“I had five computer screens, and I was getting yelled at all the time on the phone,” she laughs. Next, she spent five years working in institutional sales and private equity at Morgan Stanley, which she left in 2019 to move back to Malaysia to pursue her own entrepreneurial idea.

Shazana was ready to try her own business with the support of her future husband, Chris Evans, who also quit his day job and originally acted as Soko’s co-founder, providing her with big picture, strategic advice.

Although Shazana has not lived in Malaysia for almost two decades of her life, she felt a pull to go

back and try to build a business that would represent real Malaysian women. She ventured into bras because women’s empowerment has not reached this industry in Malaysia yet. The existing brands did not reflect values of modern women or what local millennials and Gen Z’ers wanted from them, Shazana says.

“I wanted to drive change and accelerate change in the broad industry in terms of representation, first and foremost,” Shazana says.

As she says, the industry either offered “grandma” bras or pushed oversexualized images of mostly white women, photoshopped and airbrushed, in the ad campaigns. Very rarely one could see a brown skinned model in the ads.

“For me, that’s not enough. Like, why do we put up with this?” Shazana says.

She knew that in a Muslim country like Malaysia, change could only be brought about in a respectful way and at a pace that people can appreciate there, she says. But Shazana wanted to at least start and have a brand that stood for representation 365 days a year and not just during infrequent token diversity ad campaigns.

Shopping for a bra was an overwhelming experience in itself, with hundreds of items from different brands packed into one store, which made women as uncomfortable as Shazana felt, buying her first bra at a Malaysian mall 20 years ago.

←
Natasha Shazana, Class of 2013, quit her private equity job in New York City to build a new empowering bra brand in Malaysia. Photo Courtesy of Natasha Shazana Courtesy photo.

“I have my personal stories, but I interviewed, spoke at conferences and focus groups and surveyed over 300 women before I even launched my business,” Shazana says. “I needed to see if other people feel the same pain about representation, about the dislike for the bra shopping experience.”

Shazana focused on three things with her bra brand: representation, utmost comfort and great shopping experience. She called her company Soko, from a Malaysian word sokong, which in English means “support.”

To create the bras she would be proud of, Shazana conducted extensive research. She found an experienced technical designer who carefully designed the bras. First manufactured samples were tested by 50 women, who slept, jogged and jumped in them.

Currently, Soko offers three styles of bras—an everyday wireless bra, a lacy bralette and a sports bra-like lounge one—for about \$29 each. With the Innovator Awards prize money, Shazana is planning to expand Soko’s size offering from L to 2XL.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Shazana started building her community on Instagram under the handle “brapreneur.”

In the first three hours after the launch, Soko made five digits in sales, Shazana says. She attributes the launch success to her followers who were posting about the bras on Instagram.

She is growing her business organically, through word of mouth because it is capital intensive and she is using her own limited savings.

“Everything I make goes back into saving for our next purchase order,” Shazana says.

Her main marketing tools are social media, specifically, Instagram, and pop-up events. In Soko’s

first year of operation she only spent \$2,500 on marketing.

There were some major setbacks in her entrepreneurial journey as well. The first factory in China she used to manufacture the bras ghosted her during the pandemic. The second factory in China did not meet the quality standard Shazana hoped for. She found a third factory in Sri Lanka that came highly recommended for their workmanship.

She cherishes the feedback and stories her clients share with her, from a cancer survivor, to a mother who bought the first bra for her 12-year-old daughter, to a transgender person, to a client who was happy to see a model in a hijab that looks like her.

“I have grown the most in these last few years than I have ever in any other chapter in my life,” Shazana says.

That is why she doesn’t regret leaving the corporate job at Morgan Stanley. But she is eager to share practical advice she has learnt the hard way, “Don’t quit your day job immediately is what I wish someone had told me.”





←
Soko, a bra brand that a Northeastern's graduate Natasha Shazana launched in Malaysia in 2021, aims to empower and represent real, everyday and diverse women of this Muslim country. Photos Courtesy of Natasha Shazana

→
Natasha Shazana, center, founder of a Malaysia-based bra brand Soko, focuses her business on three things: representation, utmost comfort and great shopping experience. Photos Courtesy of Natasha Shazana





Aniyah Smith, MBA'22

Honors, Graduate Student, 2021

A desire for representation served as a catalyst for the entrepreneurial journey of Aniyah Smith, a self-described born leader, lifelong learner, and creative thinker. Through her venture, Smith is looking to build her beauty brand, Push Beauty, to be inclusive, representative of a culture she wishes she had in the industry years prior, and a story of confidence and self-expression that everyone can see themselves in.

by Ian Thomsen

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

Aniyah Smith's imminent career was disrupted—happily—by the Husky Startup 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 aniyahsmith.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 make-up 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

by Molly Callahan

THERE'S A NEW BOSS IN TOWN: BLACK OWNED BOS



Jae'da Turner, DMSB'14, MBA'16

Honors, Young Alumnae Graduate, 2022

A creative, a community builder, and an innovator, Jae'da Turner poured her time and energy into elevating her agency, Black Owned Bos, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The fast-growing agency highlights the people moving Black culture forward in the Boston area; advances Black-owned businesses, places, and spaces; and helps close existing gaps in Boston's Black-owned community.

Every few weeks, weather permitting, a section of Boston's seaport is transformed into a lively, bustling marketplace. Vendors selling all-natural soaps, handmade jewelry, decadent baked goods, and more, appear under white tents—an outdoor bazaar that's impossible to walk past without stopping. Their wares are entirely unique, but each vendor has something in common: They're part of Black Owned Bos., a network of Black-owned businesses in the Greater Boston area.

The brainchild of Northeastern alumna Jae'da Turner, Black Owned Bos. is more than just an event company. It also provides business services and consultation to local, Black-owned businesses. In addition to hosting in-person marketplaces, Turner maintains a directory of more than 1,600 businesses in Massachusetts. To date, the services that Black Owned Bos. provides have helped Black-owned businesses realize an additional \$2 million in revenue.

"The goal was to expand the businesses people might consider," she says, "Similar to a White Pages, where you check out the business, and check out the reviews. People can only find the businesses they know to look for. This is a way to expand that knowledge."

As the driving force behind Black Owned Bos., Turner was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern's Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 entries this year.

Turner, a Double Husky who earned her bachelor's from Northeastern University in 2014 and her master's in business administration from the university in 2016, started Black Owned Bos. in March 2019 as a hobby and creative outlet. Turner was a small-business owner herself, and knew what the entrepreneurial landscape looked like for non-

white businesses in the city.

“I just recognized this disconnect—people weren’t always finding out about or getting connected to Black-owned businesses in Boston,” she says. Students who came to colleges and universities in Massachusetts from other states or countries also didn’t always know where to go for familiar services and goods, or even how to search them out.

When she was a student at Northeastern, Turner says she fielded lots of questions along these lines.

“People would ask where to get their hair braided, or where to find the best soul food,” she says.

“They were looking to connect to a home within a home.”

Having grown up in the city—Turner is from Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood—this disconnect was puzzling. The many Black-owned businesses in the area were alive and well, just not on everyone’s radar.

So, Turner started an Instagram account, where she would post photos and information about local businesses.

“I wanted to highlight and amplify those businesses I grew up with,” she says.

The page had a healthy and steadily growing following. In March 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Turner pivoted to focus on Black Owned Bos. full time, building out a website with more information and more businesses. By then, the Black Owned Bos. Instagram page had about 3,000 followers, she says.

Then, in May 2020, Minneapolis police officers killed George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by kneeling on his neck. The incident sparked protests across the U.S. and around the world, as millions rallied against police violence and for racial and social justice.

It was a turning point in the movement for racial equity—and for Black Owned Bos.

“The catalyst was this awakening around racial justice,” Turner says. “People were looking for an immediate way to help. They were flocking to Black businesses, to amplify them and lift them up.”

Black Owned Bos. gained 14,000 followers over the course of three weeks that summer, Turner says. “It was overwhelming at first, but I appreciated the value of the platform and watching it grow.”

Elaine Ellis-Phillip is one half of the mother-daughter team behind Sweet Glam, a beauty, cosmetics, and self-care business in the city that’s part of Black Owned Bos.’s network of local businesses.

“I don’t know that we would’ve had the same opportunities without Jae’da,” Ellis-Phillip says. Through exclusive Black Owned Bos. programming, Sweet Glam has hosted events in partnership with Puma and State Street, she says.

The business, which turned two at the end of September, has grown exponentially in the year that it has been associated with Black Owned Bos., Ellis-Phillip says.

“It’s really helped a lot.”

Turner has big plans for the future of Black Owned Bos. She just opened the first permanent, brick-and-mortar storefront for the business in Boston’s South End, which features goods from some of the many businesses in the network, as well as Black Owned Bos. branded merchandise.

“As far as the future, it’s really just about breaking down these barriers for small, Black-owned businesses in the Greater Boston area,” Turner says.

“It’s that whole mentality of ‘lift as you climb.’ And it’s been an exciting journey so far.”



Hannah Ung, DMSB'23

Second Place, Undergraduate Student, 2022

A true embodiment of resilience, Hannah Ung took what she learned from growing up with her family of four tucked into a small room and turned it into an opportunity that allows people to make better use of their space. Called Boxy, her venture seeks to provide a platform for people to earn a profit from their unoccupied spaces by allowing others to use these spaces for storage purposes.

by Molly Callahan

MEET THE FOUNDER BEHIND THE AIRBNB OF STORAGE

There's a saying in wrestling: Once you start the sport, everything else in life is easy. For Hannah Ung—whose travels have taken her halfway around the world, and whose startup might take her even further—it's proven true.

Ung's high school and collegiate wrestling career almost got her recruited onto the Cambodian national team while she was a student at Northeastern, but her passion for entrepreneurship led her in a different direction.

Right out of high school, Ung won a \$1,000 scholarship that she could use for "anything that would benefit my college career," she says. "To me, \$1,000 meant plane tickets, and I took a solo trip to Japan, Cambodia, and Singapore that summer."

While the trip ultimately enriched her worldview and her college experience, Ung ran into a problem almost right away. She had packed enough to fill a big, rolling luggage bag as well as a carry-on, and had no place to store them while she was roaming the countries.

"I was only going to be in Japan for two days during that trip, so I wanted to make the most of it," Ung says, which meant packing in as many sites and experiences as possible—and lugging her bags from location to location during the day.

Because she was staying in new locations almost every night, Ung couldn't leave her luggage in her room. And when she tried to find safe places to store it, she encountered unaffordable hourly rates, or just flat-out "Nos" from business owners.

“I remember asking myself as an 18-year-old: ‘What if you could store your stuff in someone’s home, like an Airbnb?’” Ung says.

The more she traveled, the more she saw that this was a problem lots of people encountered, especially people who were trying to pack a lot into a short amount of time. When Ung got to Northeastern, she befriended international students who would store their belongings in U-Haul trucks between lease cycles, or else they scattered boxes among a bunch of other friends.

“It was disorganized and messy,” says Ung, who will graduate this May from the D’Amore-McKim School of Business.

So, when it came time to pitch a venture in one of her marketing classes, Ung pitched Boxy, a short-term rental service for luggage—the “Airbnb of storage” she had envisioned years ago. Her classmates and the faculty in the class were excited about the idea from the get-go.

“I started thinking that this could actually go somewhere,” Ung says, “and I knew that Northeastern was the place for me to try it out. The entrepreneurship ecosystem that we have here made me feel comfortable to explore Boxy a little further.”

Ung worked with the Women’s Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE), the Husky Startup Challenge, and IDEA—three of Northeastern’s student-led entrepreneurship programs—to develop Boxy beyond a pitch for a class assignment.

Working with WISE gave Ung the confidence to consider herself an entrepreneur for the first time, she says.

Valerie Robert and Stacy Pablo, co-directors of the group, say that’s exactly their goal.

“Our programs empower women-builders to create and ideate on startups confidently, all while exchanging ideas among community members, while receiving and providing feedback and support as well,” they say in a joint statement. “Through community, members know when they graduate from our programs they will still have people they can reach out to bounce ideas off, which empowers them to continue working on their projects or startups.”

Ung then joined the Sherman Venture co-op at the university, a paid, six-month development opportunity for student-founders. It was during that co-op that she realized she had something special on her hands.

“For the first time in my life, I finally felt like I knew exactly what I wanted out of college,” she says. Before that co-op, she felt like she had two options: “Either become a professional wrestler for Team Cambodia, or be a digital nomad and travel the world on a budget,” Ung says. “I didn’t realize Boxy was a third option.”

Indeed, it’s become more than that. Ung was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern University’s Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 applicants this year.

She’s raised more than \$30,000 in funding and is launching a pilot version of Boxy to test it out on an early group of hosts and stashers. For now, Ung and her co-founder are matching hosts and stashers by hand. Soon, they hope to expand and automate the platform so that the next time Ung travels, she’ll have a hand storing her luggage.



Shital Waters, Khoury'23

Second Place, Graduate Student, 2021

When Shital Waters went off to college, she saw so many women were changing the world, and she wanted to be one of them. Inspired by stories, guidance, and advice provided by these women, and her belief that looking after oceans needed to be a priority, she founded BluePlanetAI. Her company focuses on tackling the challenges of harmful algae blooms using a drone. Today, Waters aspires to involve women in tech entrepreneurship and to create systems like hers that positively effect the environment.

by Ian Thomsen

HER STARTUP DEPLOYS UNDERWATER DRONES TO SAVE OCEANS FROM BACTERIA

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 inclusion 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.”



Kathryn Weiler, MS'13

Honors, Experienced Alumnae, 2022

Kate Weiler has harnessed the natural power of trees to create a nutritious and delicious maple water made of more than 40 plant-powered nutrients. Although this sounds complex, Weiler's beverage is called Drink Simple—and it's good for the planet and for people, empowering healthy minds, bodies, and souls.

by Molly Callahan

FOR ALL-NATURAL HYDRATION, SHE LOOKS TO THE TREES

Picture this: You've just completed an Ironman triathlon—a race consisting of a 2.4-mile swim, then a 112-mile bicycle ride, then a marathon foot race. You need to hydrate and replenish important nutrients and electrolytes your body lost during the grueling athletic contest. What do you reach for? Sugary sports drinks? Bland bottled water?

When Kate Weiler found herself in this exact situation, she turned toward an unexpected source: maple trees.

The trees' sap, typically boiled down to make maple syrup, can be pasteurized instead to make a nutrient-rich, electrolyte-filled drink that's perfect for pre- and post-workout. Enter maple water.

"The first time I tried it, I felt so much better; almost uplifted," she says. "I couldn't believe how hydrating it was."

Weiler was introduced to maple water at the Ironman Mont-Tremblant triathlon a decade ago. Not long after, she and her husband, Jeff, founded Drink Simple, a maple water company that taps hydration straight from the source.

Weiler was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern's Women Who Empower, that drew more than 100 entries this year.

"Kate is one of the original pioneering women in Northeastern's entrepreneurial ecosystem, persevering and excelling at a time when we didn't talk about the need for diversity in the innovation economy," says Betsy

Ludwig, executive director of women's empowerment at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

"Even with the increased societal narrative about helping women, women still only receive 2.4 percent of venture capital funding in the U.S. The Women Who Empower Innovator Awards are positioned to help bridge this gap," she says. "Many women don't qualify for angel investments or venture capital funding because they don't have access to a friends-and-family round. Entrepreneurship is still a very privileged place that requires early access to people with checkbooks. We offer grants to validate a woman's venture so she might obtain further funding."

"We're so honored to win this award," Weiler says, adding that the funding associated with the award will help Drink Simple expand to include bulk-ingredient offerings in addition to the ready-to-drink boxed water the company already sells.

Weiler, who earned a master's degree in nutrition from Northeastern University in 2013, says that the beverage industry "isn't for the faint of heart" (neither, for that matter, are Ironman triathlons), but is dedicated to the sustainable mission of Drink Simple.

According to the Cleveland Clinic, maple water is loaded with electrolytes—essential minerals that give your body the charge it needs to power through a tough workout, or just a long day. The drink can also help reduce muscle inflammation thanks to the presence of antioxidants such as manganese. It can also stabilize blood sugar due to naturally occurring abscisic acid.

"Maple water is still unknown to a lot of people, but when they discover it, we get emails that say things like, 'This product changed my life,'" Weiler

"My goal is to make Drink Simple a household name."

— Kate Weiler, co-founder, Drink Simple

says. "Maple water provides a natural energy that feels uplifting, but not in the same jittery way that you might get from caffeine. My goal is to make Drink Simple a household name."

Weiler has completed 12 full-distance Ironman races, and finds parallels between the mental effort required of a triathlete to get over the finish line and that required of an entrepreneur to realize their vision.

"In Ironman and in entrepreneurship, there are going to be dark times," she says. "You have to find a way to get yourself out of them, and know that you can."

For example, Weiler says she might feel miserable at mile 75 of the bike ride, but "you just keep going because you might feel great again by mile 112." Or, Weiler has encountered unexpected obstacles when it came to getting Drink Simple on grocery store shelves, describing the beverage world as something of an old boys' club.

"I use that mental fortitude a lot in entrepreneurship," she says. "It can sometimes be difficult to break through, but you just have to keep going."



Emily White, AS'05

First Place, Experienced Alumnae, 2021

Emily White revolutionized voter turnout in an unprecedented fashion. What started with the #ivoted hashtag and showing polling place selfies to enter concert venues has turned into the iVoted Festival, one of the biggest digital music festivals ever, with hundreds of artists performing via webcast throughout the country. This undertaking, which changed the game for voter participation, would not be possible without White and her 200-volunteer team, comprised of 92-percent female, non-binary, POC, and/or LGBTQ+ individuals.

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

by Ian Thomsen

THE WINNER OF THIS INNOVATOR AWARD IS INSPIRING PEOPLE TO VOTE

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.

“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.”

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

– Melanie Shark, chief operating officer, #iVoted

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.”



Gabrielle Whittle, E'21

First Place, Undergraduate Student, 2021

Gabrielle Whittle sees engineering as a perfect outlet for combining her curiosity for math and science with her passion for the arts and creative expression to effect positive change. Her knowledge and interests laid the groundwork for founding Relevé, a brand that centers on the empowerment of women through comfortable and fashionable shoes. With Relevé, Whittle is becoming the woman she aspired to be in her college admissions essay, someone who feeds her artistic spirit, but also solves real-world problems, like the infamously painful women's high heel.

by Ian Thomsen

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

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 women's 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 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.”



Wenjun Zhang, PhD'16, MBA'21

Second Place, Young Alumnae Graduate, 2022

As an engineer and entrepreneur, Wenjun Zhang envisions a future where everyone has access to fast, accurate, and real-time healthcare diagnostic testing anywhere, anytime. With her expertise, Zhang's venture, UniWise, will help her identify societal issues, analyze their root causes, and develop solutions to resolve unmet needs through effective and affordable access to saliva-based diabetes testing.

by Molly Callahan

HER SALIVA-BASED TESTING DEVICE COULD PUT AN END TO PAINFUL FINGER PRICKS FOR PEOPLE WITH DIABETES

Wenjun Zhang envisions a future in which blood-glucose testing for people with diabetes will be as simple, painless, and familiar as at-home COVID-19 tests have come to be. Thanks to her innovative idea, UniWise, that future might not be far off.

Zhang, who graduated from Northeastern University in 2016 with a doctorate degree in engineering, is developing a device that will be able to detect trace amounts of glucose found in saliva. This would mean the end of painful finger pricks for people with diabetes who need to regularly monitor their body's glucose levels, she says.

Her innovation stands to help millions of people. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 37.3 million people have diabetes in the U.S. alone. An additional 96 million people in the country have prediabetes, a serious health condition in which a person's blood sugar levels are higher than normal but not high enough to be diagnosed as Type 2 diabetes. Finally, gestational diabetes—which can develop during pregnancy in people who don't already have diabetes—occurs in 2 to 10 percent of pregnancies each year in the U.S.

The maintenance and diagnostic tests for each of these are slightly different, but all of them require a blood test to measure the level of sugar in a patient's blood. People with Type 2 diabetes need to test their blood sugar levels throughout the

day, a process that requires them to draw a small amount of blood, usually from their fingertips.

Here's where UniWise would change the game. Zhang's device utilizes nanosensing technology to measure trace amounts of glucose (sugar) found in a patient's saliva. This means that people with Type 2 diabetes could simply place the device into their mouths to collect saliva, rather than bruising their fingers.

"Saliva," Zhang says, "is a window to your overall health."

For her groundbreaking work, Zhang was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern's Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 entries this year.

"I saw a need for a pain-free, noninvasive detection mechanism for Type 2 diabetes," says Zhang, who studied chemistry and nanomaterials as an undergraduate, and sensing technology during her PhD work at Northeastern. Beyond her credentials, Zhang says she felt called to help—the maternal and gestational diabetes statistics shocked her into action.

"As a female myself, I feel like I have this duty to better the health of moms and parents," she says.

While Zhang had the science and engineering knowledge to explore the problem, she was less certain at first about designing a solution. For that, she needed business acumen. So, Zhang went back to school and in 2021, earned a Masters in Business Administration from the D'Amore-McKim School of Business at Northeastern.

"Wenjun started out as a great scientist, doing her Ph.D. and then working in labs at Northeastern, but she was always thinking of the market potential and human impact of her research," says John

Friar, executive professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of Zhang's mentors.

Zhang came up with several ideas for technology that could help people with diabetes, Friar says, but had little experience bringing those ideas to the market. "What she did that was exceptional is that she started asking people who had experience in entrepreneurship for their advice—she learned by asking. Eventually, she got her MBA so she has a stronger background in business, but she still is constantly learning through her networks of contacts and is expanding that network constantly."

"I've been pushing this project for almost 10 years, but it will all be worth it if this technology can help even one person..."

— Wenjun Zhang

UniWise is still in its very earliest stages of development. Zhang holds a patent for the technology, and her team was just beginning to conduct preliminary clinical trials at a hospital in Taiwan when COVID-19 shut the whole thing down. Now, she's looking for a hospital in the U.S.—hopefully Boston—to partner with for a new round of clinical testing. Zhang is also working with a consultant from the federal Food and Drug Administration to guide her through the regulatory process, she says.

"For me, this is personal," Zhang says. "I've been pushing this project for almost 10 years, but it will all be worth it if this technology can help even one person. Being able to help someone will give me a sense that I did something meaningful with this life."





DONATE TODAY

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 hundreds of applications we received, but even more impressed by the innovators themselves. This piece encompasses the passions, personal stories, and insights of the over 40 award winners who, with the support of the Innovator Awards, are positively impacting their communities, our world, and future generations.

These awards would not be possible without the engagement and generosity of members of the Women Who Empower network. We hope you will join us in advancing this work by making a gift to support our Women's Entrepreneurship Fund or by becoming a mentor to stay connected to the university and the Women Who Empower network.

To learn more about our Innovator Awards and the Women's Entrepreneurship Initiative, please visit: advancement.northeastern.edu/womenwhoempower or contact Executive Director Betsy Ludwig at b.ludwig@northeastern.edu.



WOMEN *who* EMPOWER
INNOVATOR AWARDS

