



2023

# WOMEN WHO EMPOWER INNOVATORS

Empowering entrepreneurs and inspiring ingenuity

WOMEN *who* EMPOWER  
INNOVATOR AWARDS

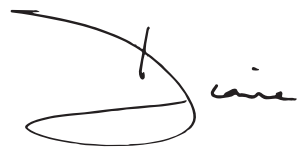
# FOREWORD

The Women Who Empower Innovator Awards launched in 2021 to provide the next generation of entrepreneurial changemakers with financial resources, mentorship, and connections to help elevate their ideas and make a difference in their ventures and ambitions. In 2023, our third annual awards provided a total of \$500,000 to 28 Northeastern students and alumnae with demonstrated leadership, innovation, authenticity, and community-building initiative.

Our 2023 innovators will inspire you with their ingenuity, their global reach, and their passion for making a positive impact on the world. This year we added five specialized awards to align with our campaign to fuel the university's future, **Experience Powered by Northeastern**. Recipients of our "Innovators Powering a Better Future" awards embody Northeastern's values and mission through their commitment to advancing health, diverse and inclusive communities, global change, social impact, and sustainability.

The validation and network of support these awards provide is deeply meaningful to our community of young visionaries as they strive to build a better tomorrow for us all. As you learn more about these dynamic women and read about their ideas and ventures, we encourage you to consider ways you can help power their ambitions.

Together, we can amplify their impact.



**DIANE NISHIGAYA MACGILLIVRAY**  
Senior Vice President for University Advancement  
Northeastern University



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## 2023 INNOVATOR AWARD RECIPIENTS

Our recipients are placed in **four primary categories** based on their affiliation with Northeastern: Students, Experienced Alumnae, Young Undergraduate Alumnae, and Young Graduate Alumnae.

### STUDENTS (UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE)

#### FIRST PLACE:

Rachel Domb, S'24, Rooted Living  
Sajni Vederey, DMSB'23, Shoerzo

#### SECOND PLACE:

Nita Ugbedeajo Akoh, S'23, My Atlas

#### THIRD PLACE:

Chloe Welch, DMSB'23, SOAR  
Hanna Zainab Elzaridi, DMSB'23, SOAR

#### HONORS:

Kristine Aleksandrovica, DMSB'23, SSH'23, Stulitito  
Debpriya Das, DMSB'23, Bioland  
Sima Bou Jawde, BHS'27, Enrich Academia  
Alexis MUSAELYAN-BLACKMON, S'25, Khoury'25, Dephend  
Marine Nimblette, S'23, Businesses United in Diversity

### EXPERIENCED ALUMNAE

#### FIRST PLACE:

Jessica Pogranyi, DMSB'13, Cara a Cara

#### SECOND PLACE:

Melissa Withers, S'02, RevUp Capital

#### THIRD PLACE:

Johanna Davenport Calica, S'12, La Porte

#### FOURTH PLACE:

Massiel Eversley, BHS'06, Nisus Life

#### HONORS:

Shanae Chapman, CPS'12, Nerdy Diva  
Taja Lester, Mills College, MBA'11, Health Equity Capital  
Ammy Lowney, SSH'05, JUICYGREENS  
Helene Servillon, AMD'12, JourneyOne Ventures

### YOUNG UNDERGRADUATE ALUMNAE

#### FIRST PLACE:

Madison Rifkin, DMSB'21, Mount

#### SECOND PLACE:

Dania Alnahdi, Khoury'22, Cora Care

#### THIRD PLACE:

Gina-Maria Garcia, AMD'15, BUYa Beauty

#### FOURTH PLACE:

Lilly Stairs, AMD'15, The Chronic Boss Collective

#### HONORS:

Divya Malpani, DMSB'22, Skinvest  
Chahhat Lakhwani Melwani, DMSB'18, Cleyo Beauty

### YOUNG GRADUATE ALUMNAE

#### FIRST PLACE:

Adebukola Ajao, CPS'21, For All Things Digital

#### SECOND PLACE:

Caroline Klibanoff, SSH'18, Made By Us

#### HONORS:

Laura Kozuszek, CPS'21,'22, Island Sustainability Solutions  
Denisse Esther Mayers Paulino, DMSB'17, DEMP Agency

## 2023 INNOVATORS POWERING A BETTER FUTURE

Recipients of our “Innovators Powering a Better Future” awards are dually recognized for their commitment to advancing health, diverse and inclusive communities, global change, social impact, and sustainability.

### POWERING A SUSTAINABLE, RESILIENT WORLD

#### FIRST PLACE:

Jessica Pogranyi, DMSB'13

#### SECOND PLACE:

Kristine Aleksandrovica, DMSB'23, SSH'23

#### THIRD PLACE:

Rachel Domb, S'24

### POWERING SOCIAL IMPACT

#### FIRST PLACE:

Debpriya Das, DMSB'23

#### SECOND PLACE:

Gina-Maria Garcia, AMD'15

#### THIRD PLACE:

Shanae Chapman, CPS'12

### POWERING GLOBAL CHANGE

#### FIRST PLACE:

Madison Rifkin, DMSB'21

#### SECOND PLACE:

Sajni Vederey, DMSB'23

#### THIRD PLACE:

Melissa Withers, S'02

### POWERING DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING

#### FIRST PLACE:

Alexis MUSAELYAN-BLACKMON, S'25, Khoury'25

#### SECOND PLACE:

Marine Nimblette, S'23

#### THIRD PLACE:

Taja Lester, Mills College, MBA'11

### POWERING A HEALTHY TOMORROW

#### FIRST PLACE:

Nita Ugbedeajo Akoh, S'23

#### SECOND PLACE:

Lilly Stairs, AMD'15

#### THIRD PLACE:

Massiel Eversley, BHS'06



## ABOUT THE WOMEN WHO EMPOWER INNOVATOR AWARDS



For nearly 10 years, the Women Who Empower initiative has been bringing together women from diverse and inclusive communities to better our world. Our network comprises strong, aspiring, and distinguished individuals dedicated to fostering positive environments, building lasting connections, and providing meaningful experiences where all people can thrive equally. The organization empowers individuals and communities through events, scholarships, entrepreneurial initiatives, mentorship programs, and more.

Now in its third year, the Women Who Empower Innovator Awards program has awarded **more than \$820,000 in one-time grants** to exemplary members of the Northeastern community who would benefit from both financial backing and support as they develop and advance their entrepreneurial endeavors.

What truly sets the Innovator Awards apart is that the program recognizes and celebrates the innovators themselves—not just their business idea or venture. Program applicants are first evaluated by a committee to determine semifinalists, and then reviewed by a team of experienced judges on several rubrics including creativity, leadership, entrepreneurship, authenticity, community and inclusion, track record, and the overall potential impact of their idea.

In three years, the program has received nearly 400 applications, with Innovator Awards bestowed upon **69 recipients** representing all Northeastern schools and colleges, 29 countries, and a wide range of industries including health, sustainability, finance, fashion, and technology.





2023 Innovator Award winners Massiel Eversley, BHS'06, and Adebukola Ajao, CPS'21, attend Northeastern's Founders Day reception on October 3, 2023.

## SUPPORT OUR WORK

**Supporting Women Who Empower bolsters Northeastern's mission to help women be agile, creative, and resilient in pursuing their dreams.** A gift to Women Who Empower is an investment in our next generation of leaders and changemakers.

The Innovator Awards would not be possible without the engagement and generosity of members of the Women Who Empower network. Your support allows us to advance the work of more women who reflect the diversity of our society, and promote the inclusion of unique perspectives to solve our world's greatest challenges.

We hope you will join us by making a gift to support our dynamic, women-led entrepreneurial ecosystem and extending even more opportunities to deserving and talented community members.

***"THIS COMMUNITY HAS CHANGED MY LIFE ... AND I'M HAPPY TO CONTINUE TO PUSH FORWARD WITH THE MISSION AND HELP OTHER YOUNG WOMEN."***

—Adebukola Ajao, CPS'21, Founder, For All Things Digital

## INNOVATOR AWARDS JUDGES 2021–2023

These Northeastern alumni, parents, and partners applied their diverse experiences and expertise to evaluate applications and final presentations to select our Women Who Empower Innovator Award winners.



**Jill Bornstein, PNT'22**  
*Founder and Executive Coach, Upnext Leadership Coaching*  
 Founding Judge and Advisor (2021–2023)



**Cristina Csimma, MPH'91**  
*Board of Directors, Palisade Bio*  
 Founding Judge and Advisor (2021–2023)



**Ronaldo Mouchawar, E'88**  
*Chief Executive Officer, souq.com; Vice President, Amazon Middle East and North Africa*  
 Judge and Advisor (2023)



**Henry Nasella, UC'77, H'08**  
*Chair Emeritus, Northeastern Board of Trustees; Co-Founder, LNK Partners*  
 Founding Judge (2021)



**Cathy Papoulias-Sakellaris**  
*Member of the Board of Trustees, Leadership 100*  
 Founding Judge and Advisor (2021–2022)



**Dr. Winslow Sargeant, E'86**  
*Chief Executive Officer, Purple Team Technologies; Immediate Past Chair, The International Council for Small Business; Senior Advisor, Genaesis, LLC; Trustee, Northeastern Board of Trustees*  
 Judge and Advisor (2023)



**Julietta Dexter, PNT'20**  
*Co-Founder and Chief Growth and Purpose Officer, ScienceMagic.Inc*  
 Founding Judge and Advisor (2021–2023)



**Cheryl Kaplan**  
*Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, M.Gemi*  
 Founding Judge and Advisor (2021–2023)



**Leslie Kilgore, PNT'25**  
*Board Member, Netflix*  
 Judge (2022)



**Jean Kovacs, CPS'83**  
*Partner and Co-Founder, Hillsvan*  
 Judge (2022)



**Ann Corcoran, BHS'86**  
*President, AMC Healthcare Solutions, Inc.*



**Lea Anne Dunton, PNT'15**  
*Mentor, Women's Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE) and Mosaic*



**Paige Hendrix-Buckner**  
*Chief Executive Officer, All Raise*



**Jennifer Mugar**  
*Friend of the University*

## 2023 READING COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND ADVISORS



by Molly Callahan

# ‘I am the granola.’ Rooted Living founder Rachel Domb takes healthy snacking to the next level.

**Rachel Domb’s** desire for healthy snacks developed into Rooted Living, her thriving business of eco-friendly, plant-based granola snacks. Since launching, the brand has grown in popularity, significantly expanded their staff, and is available online and in 14 stores across the Greater Boston area.

Fourth-year Northeastern student Rachel Domb was recently standing in line at Anthropologie on Newbury Street in Boston with her Rooted Living tote bag draped over her shoulder when the cashier spoke out.

“Have you tried their granola? It’s so good,” Domb recalled the cashier saying, referring to Rooted Living, a healthy snack company. “And I was like, ‘I have tried their granola.’”

In her head, Domb said, she was thinking, “I am the granola.”

The cashier said she, too, had a Rooted Living tote bag and loved the granola snacks. Excited that the clerk, a Northeastern student, was a fan of Rooted Living, Domb told her she was the founder of the company, and the flattering comments made her day.

“Moments like those happen frequently around campus now, with three people I didn’t know coming up to me on my first day back at classes. It’s a surreal and shocking feeling,” said Domb.

Domb’s desire for healthy snacks developed into a thriving business venture while she has been a student at Northeastern. The ever-growing popularity of eco-friendly, plant-based snacks has turned the brand into marketable merchandise.

“The totes have been a really fun way of connecting me to the Rooted Living community that I don’t get to see every day. But it’s been a fun way of knowing how this brand is slowly spreading around. Or it’s just a really great tote bag,” Domb said with a laugh.

Domb’s startup grew out of her desire for healthy food fuels when she was running track in high school. She wanted a healthier alternative to the refined-sugar-filled snacks in the stores. So, she began to make her own healthy snacks. And she did not want her snacks packaged in environmentally unfriendly plastics, so Rooted Living’s packaging is compostable.

Rooted Living granola snacks have been on the market for a year. The snacks—in peanut butter



**“I HAD SOMETHING THAT I WANTED TO BUILD. I HAD SOMETHING THAT I WAS TRYING TO SOLVE. I DIDN’T KNOW THAT THAT WAS BUSINESS OR ENTREPRENEURSHIP.”**

—Rachel Domb, Founder, Rooted Living

crunch and maple almond flavors—are available online, and with the help of a small distributor, now in about 14 stores in the Greater Boston area. Sales have been “great,” Domb said, but a little chaotic as she juggled a wide range of business obligations with schoolwork and leadership roles in entrepreneurial groups.

Determined to scale Rooted Living, Domb set out in the spring to fundraise to provide the resources for growth. She participated in pitch programs and networked with businesspeople, entrepreneurs, and Northeastern graduates. “I started the initial phases of fundraising with the sole purpose of being able to scale, to have a team so that all the opportunities that were coming to me, I was really able to fulfill. And I was able to bring to life and build a system that could really scale properly,” said Domb, a sustainable economics major.

After a successful summer, Domb made a significant staff expansion in October. She added a head of sales, head of operations, head of marketing, chief of staff, head of growth, and head of ambassador program, all part-time positions.

Five of the six are Northeastern students, she said. “This beautiful team of people coming from the minds of Northeastern,” Domb said. “Getting so big and fast.”

Domb credits much of Rooted Living’s success to the entrepreneurial programs at Northeastern and her many mentors, including former Northeastern professor Mark Bernfeld. Bernfeld, who retired in June as a professor of practice and finance, is an experienced entrepreneur and angel investor. He knows what it takes to develop a startup and considers Domb an exceptional entrepreneur.

“She totally believes in the missions of Rooted Living, which are, one, healthy food, healthy, delicious food, and number two, sustainability. And I invest in lots of sustainable businesses,” Bernfeld said.

“She has a passion for those two missions and a determination to be successful, not just because she wants to be a successful businessperson, but because she wants to accomplish those missions,” he said. “She wants to provide healthy,





delicious food, and she wants to have a company that does well for the environment. Those missions were more important to her than financial success or ego, fame, whatever. And that really impressed me about her.”

One of the new hires is Tyler Farley, a 2019 Northeastern graduate and current Mosaic fellow who is working as head of growth. Farley said developing a product and bringing it to market is a huge feat, and she has accomplished that while sticking to her mission.

“Rachel is incredibly passionate and an inspiration among students at Northeastern. She is a people-first leader who is excited about bringing in experienced people to help her grow Rooted Living,” Farley said.

“She inspires everyone around her and makes them feel valued,” Farley said. “Everyone feels like they are a part of Rachel’s success, and the wins are shared in the community. Students

throughout Northeastern feel like they are a part of Rooted Living, as many have been on teams supporting her.”

Determined to solve this sugary snack issue—and the environmentally unfriendly fact that the snacks stocking store shelves were packaged in plastic—Domb took her efforts to a new level when she arrived at Northeastern.

As a second-year student, Domb grabbed the top prize in the Husky Startup Challenge for her entrepreneurial efforts with Rooted Living. Looking back at the release of her first products a year ago, Domb said the feeling was “surreal.”

“Ridiculous. I have a picture and video of me opening and holding the first bag. It was a weird kind of combination of it being surreal, but also anticlimactic because it was something that I had been preparing for, looking at on a screen, and getting ready for kind of this anticipation for years,” she said. “And so I was like, yes, it was amazing, but it was also kind of like, okay, thank God it’s here. I can finally get into the sales mode. I was at that point just ready to launch, ready to get out there, and eager for that next step.”

Domb joined WISE, Northeastern’s Women’s Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship, and that put her on the startup road. Then she won the Husky Startup Challenge in the fall of 2020, and the \$2,500 prize helped her get Rooted Living rolling. “What WISE did was present business and entrepreneurship as essentially taking something you’re passionate about and growing it while solving a problem. And it is really, truly as simple as that,” she said.

Domb wanted to produce a healthy snack with no refined sugar. She did not want it wrapped in plastic, but rather an environmentally friendly package.

“I had something I wanted to build. I had something that I was trying to solve. I didn’t really know that that was business or entrepreneurship, but they gave me that initial empowerment,” Domb said. “They believed in me before I believed in me and it cut through a lot of personal limiting beliefs that I had about myself and my success, around learning and doing things that I had never done before. It really gave me a lot of confidence and it continues to challenge me because I’m just learning things constantly that I don’t know how to do.”

In addition to WISE, Domb worked with Scout, a student-led design organization at Northeastern, on the initial branding for Rooted Living. And two years later, Domb is working with them again to do a “little brand revamp” and work on the website as the core philosophy of Rooted Living has developed. She further developed her entrepreneurial skills with a venture co-op through the Sherman Center. IDEA, a student-led venture accelerator at Northeastern, and the law school’s Intellectual Property CO-LAB also provided support.

Now, a year after her product launch, Domb continues to pitch Rooted Living and execute her plan for growth.

Farley is excited about joining Domb’s team and the future of Rooted Living. “I could imagine Rooted Living being a household name paving the way for brands reducing plastic consumption. There could be an entire catalog of healthy snacks that you can buy from any grocery store and track your own impact as everyone does their part to protect the planet,” Farley said. ■



# Meet Shoerzo, a company that designs traditional Indian footwear, especially for people with diabetes.



From a young age, **Sajni Vederey** has aspired to foster inclusivity and empowerment in her community. With Shoerzo, she's doing just that by emboldening women to make fashion choices in support of their health.

When Sajni Vederey's aunt complained that diabetes prevented her from wearing traditional embroidered Indian shoes on special occasions, Vederey decided it was time for a shoe makeover.

Before graduating from Northeastern in May with a degree in finance, Vederey launched Shoerzo, a company that creates pearl and gold-threaded jutti-style shoes designed with extra cushioning and support for people with diabetes.

"Shoerzo was a direct outgrowth of my belief that I could—even as a college student—do something to help female patients and give them opportunities to feel beautiful and empowered," Vederey says.

People with diabetes can find it hard to fit into regular shoes because their blood vessels can become inflamed easily and cause swelling in their feet. Vederey's aunt found the shoes currently available for diabetic people unappealing. "She was always uncomfortable in her shoes and did not think her diabetic shoes were stylish enough for her during parties," Vederey says.

Her aunt said she didn't like being photographed in the shoes and felt insecure next to women in more

fashionable heels. Women know that shoes can make or break an outfit, says Vederey, who grew up in northern Virginia.

"I wanted women to feel empowered, secure, beautiful, and included in the most extravagant or most casual parties."

Vederey says she was also inspired by a sixth grade girl she met while volunteering in India. The girl dreamed of becoming a doctor but was on the verge of dropping out of Vivekananda Public School to support her father, who had lost his foot to diabetic neuropathy.

"She told me how discouraged she felt," Vederey says. Even so, the girl's grit was an inspiration to Vederey.

The sixth grader "worked a part-time job and used to study under the street lamps since her home did not have electricity," she says.

"I was so moved by her story that I decided to help sponsor her tuition and serve as a personal mentor. Her story and friendship helped me learn to stay positive and persevere even during the hardest times."

"She also inspired me to learn more about diabetes and how it affects the foot," Vederey says, adding that what she learned also inspired her to start Shoerzo.

Since foot ulcers that can lead to amputation are a common complication of diabetes and can develop from minor injuries to the feet, it's important that Shoerzo shoes have just the right amount of support, cushioning, and protection, Vederey says.

She says in designing the shoes she consulted with podiatrists and general practitioners, as well as female diabetic patients. She also conducted extensive research on the structure and function of the foot and ankle to test materials and prototypes that would best serve the needs of diabetic patients.

Vederey says her biggest mentors at Northeastern were fellow members of the Student Value Fund, a student-run organization focusing on investment that she joined her sophomore year.

"I learned a lot about finance and innovation there," she says. "They helped me while I was developing my idea of Shoerzo, helped me market the brand and also provided me with great feedback."

A graduate of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Virginia, Vederey took classes that "focused on the intersection between entrepreneurship and knowledge." She says she chose Northeastern for its co-op program and the opportunity it provided to study abroad her first semester.

"I knew other colleges would not give me an immersive opportunity to explore my interests," she says.

Her most important co-op was with Goldman Sachs' private wealth management division, Vederey says.

**"SHOERZO WAS A DIRECT OUTGROWTH OF MY BELIEF THAT I COULD—EVEN AS A COLLEGE STUDENT—DO SOMETHING TO HELP FEMALE PATIENTS AND GIVE THEM OPPORTUNITIES TO FEEL BEAUTIFUL AND EMPOWERED."**

—Sajni Vederey, Founder, Shoerzo

"Not only did I learn technical skills, I also got the opportunity to speak to clients and learn about their values throughout their life," she says. "Exploring the priorities of people from a range of net worths was helpful to understand who I could budget my own income and grow in the future."

Currently an investment analyst at Blackstone Alternative Asset Management in New York, Vederey says she will use her share of the Innovator Award money to move Shoerzo forward.

"We are a startup business, and we need financial support to get off the ground and grow," Vederey says. "Currently we have been targeting local diabetic patients and have a small team who handmake the soles."

Winning the award will help her "scale up the business and reach a larger audience," Vederey says.

"We would also like to manufacture breathable socks in combination with the shoes that help the patients, and get better quality memory foam to support the arch of the foot."

Fashion and health need not be exclusive of each other, Vederey says.

"Our goals for the future include expanding internationally and creating a network of women well-versed in fashion and medicine to join our initiative." ■



# My Atlas will make smartphones even smarter—and help humans embrace happier lives.

**Nita Ugbedeajo Akoh** envisions a future where personal health data can flag early signs of changes in mental health. Her app, My Atlas, would harness digital biomarkers from smartphones and wearable tech to suggest science-backed interventions when flags are raised.

What's your resting heart rate? How many hours of sleep did you get last night? How far did you walk today? It wasn't that long ago that finding the answers to those questions might have meant a visit to the doctor's office—or at least some careful notetaking. Now though, millions of people have easy access to their personal health data in their pockets or on their wrists.

But what if that data could do more? What if, instead of a readout of numbers and statistics, you got personalized recommendations based on your own health trends? Could your smartphone detect early signs of depression or anxiety? Take it one step further: Could it suggest treatments and solutions?

This is the future Nita Ugbedeajo Akoh envisions. A not-so-distant future in which personal health data works smarter (and maybe harder, too).

That's the basis of her platform, My Atlas, a software that "harnesses the power of digital biomarkers from our phones or smartwatches to provide a more personalized and proactive path to wellness and behavioral healthcare," she says.

And while My Atlas is still in its infancy, Akoh hopes that her app will one day provide a framework for long-term health—and perhaps even save lives.

Akoh was born and raised in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, Nigeria, a city that Akoh describes jokingly as "the Florida of Nigeria." Growing up, there just wasn't much talk about mental health in her family, or in her larger community. But Akoh has always been a curious, observant person, and says that despite the cultural taboo, she could tell that one of her aunts struggled with mental health issues. Akoh just wished someone would talk about it.

When Akoh was 14, she moved to St. Catherine's, Ontario, to attend Ridley College, a boarding school. There, she says, a classmate died by suicide—another painful reminder of the often-hidden toll that mental health struggles can take.

"It was at that moment that I decided to study behavioral neuroscience," says Akoh, who earned a bachelor's degree in the field. She was looking for a reason why, she says, to questions that plagued her.



"Why would someone end their life?" she remembers wondering. "What pain must they have been in, and was there a way to help?"

Akoh's first co-op experience at Northeastern was at a psychiatric hospital, where she grew steadily frustrated by what she saw as outdated treatment options and modalities. As soon as she resumed her academic courses, she signed up for coding and entrepreneurship classes, determined to find a more elegant and efficient solution to such a thorny problem as mental wellbeing. Akoh buried herself in her studies, forfeiting nights out with friends and other fun events to push forward with her work. That's when My Atlas was born.

Akoh was eager to develop her business, but knew she'd need help. She leaned on her Northeastern community to help her learn how to navigate a complex business ecosystem in the U.S.

"I started with the basics," Akoh says now, laughing. "I mean, like, 'How do taxes work?'" She reached out to student leaders and faculty mentors to start building out her idea.

"I get a lot of emails from students, but hers really stood out," recalls Aarti Sathyanarayana, an assistant professor with joint appointments in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences and the Khoury College of Computer Sciences at Northeastern. "Nita had already developed a business plan and spoke very directly about it."

Akoh's idea—a platform that synthesizes and analyzes individual health data for signs that mental wellbeing may be in decline—aligns neatly with Sathyanarayana's own research at the intersection of health and computer sciences, she says.

"She had a high-level idea, and my lab had been working on algorithm development. When we first spoke about it, I'd already created some algorithms during my PhD and postdoc [research] that could be incorporated into her app," Sathyanarayana says.

The idea is straightforward: create software that scans digital biomarkers (such as heart rate, exercise data, and sleep data) for sudden, unexplained changes that may indicate shifts in an individual's mental state. Then, nudge the app user toward behaviors that might help them.





*“I HOPE MY ATLAS WILL PUSH PEOPLE TO THINK ABOUT MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH... [SO] WE CAN DO WHAT WE’RE MEANT TO DO, WHICH IS LIVE.”*

—Nita Ugbedeajo Akoh, Founder, My Atlas

“Maybe it’s as simple as suggesting they go for a walk with friends, or try a meditation,” Akoh says. “But I believe, if we’re going to be on our phones, closing our rings, checking our exercise data anyway, we should use our data to help us live healthier, happier lives.”

For Akoh and Sathyanarayana (who is working with Akoh on the app), it’s important that these suggestions are based in science—that there is research to back them up.

“Part of my frustration with the field of mental health apps and wellness wearables is that it doesn’t always feel very scientifically backed,” Sathyanarayana says. “Nita is interested in real algorithms I’ve created, and how to develop those in a focused way to make sure everything is scientific; that we’re giving recommendations and empowering the users through scientific research. That’s what’s going to be unique about My Atlas.”

While Akoh is still in the early stages of building out the platform and the software, she says that maintaining data security is paramount—and it’s one of the main things she’s focused on for now. Over the summer, she traveled to San Francisco to meet with other entrepreneurs and colleagues at Northeastern University in Oakland and hopes to launch a beta version of the platform among a small group of college-aged people within the year.

“I hope that My Atlas will be something people have on their watches, their phones, and that they use it as a guide for living a wholesome, mentally well life,” Akoh says. “I hope My Atlas will push people to think about mental and behavioral health. And possibly, eventually, we can get to people in Nigeria—to people globally—so that all humans can be well and get longevity. We can do what we’re meant to do, which is live.” ■



# Bulky, unsustainable sports supplements weighing you down? Chloe Welch and Hanna Zainab Elzaridi built a way to SOAR instead.

**Chloe Welch and Hanna Zainab Elzaridi** founded SOAR, a company whose automated kiosks can dispense customizable pre- and post-workout shakes in a matter of seconds, to make working out better and more sustainable.

Chloe Welch and Hanna Zainab Elzaridi have a vending machine in the living room of their Boston apartment.

It's not a vending machine that came with the building—on moving day, they had to recruit several unwitting delivery people in the area to help them hoist the machine into their first-floor apartment—and it's not even the kind of vending machine you can really find anywhere else.

No, this machine is something else. Custom built to dispense protein powder and other nutritional fitness supplements, it represents everything the Northeastern University students have built over the last several years. "It's also quite the conversation starter," Welch says dryly.

The machine is the physical manifestation of Welch and Elzaridi's joint venture, SOAR, a company that creates automated sports supplement kiosks that can dispense customizable pre- and post-workout shakes in a matter of seconds. Think: touch-screen Coca-Cola soda fountain, but for the gym.

Like many great businesses, SOAR was born out of necessity. Elzaridi, who is a fifth-year business administration student at Northeastern, and Welch, who graduated in May, met as first-year roommates, and became fast friends. They studied together, worked out together, and say that they were constantly bouncing business ideas off one another, waiting to find one that might stick.

Welch and Elzaridi knew quickly that they wanted to start a business together—"We found our co-founders first, then had to figure out the business," says Elzaridi—so they started paying attention to points of friction in their lives, problems they could tackle with an entrepreneurial mindset.

It turns out that their shared love of fitness was the key. The pair found that they didn't have much extra space in their dorm for a huge, multi-serving tub of protein powder—nor did they want to commit to a single flavor for the weeks it would have taken to work through the bulk purchase one scoop at a time. And buying single premixed



**"WE FOUND OUR CO-FOUNDERS FIRST, THEN HAD TO FIGURE OUT THE BUSINESS."**

—Hanna Zainab Elzaridi (near right), Co-Founder, SOAR

protein shakes or smoothies just wasn't financially feasible (at \$3 to \$5 a pop, the daily shakes added up), not to mention they were environmentally unfriendly.

"That kind of just led us into brainstorming about ways that we could make the whole sports supplement experience more sustainable, more accessible, and more affordable," Welch says.

The idea for SOAR came quickly after that. More challenging was the process of building a working vending machine. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the pair were halfway around the world from each other—Welch was in San Francisco while Elzaridi traveled back home to Kuwait. "Our friendship really existed over Zoom at that point," Elzaridi says. When they returned to campus, they hit the ground running.

"Neither of us are engineers, so we had to rely on the whole community at Northeastern for help at that point," Elzaridi says.

The pair worked with the Women's Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE) to hone their venture, and with the university's student-led venture accelerator, IDEA, to move it forward. They won funding from the IDEA GAP Fund and

the IDEA prototype grant, along with acclaim from the Husky Startup Challenge and MassChallenge. They each took part in the Sherman Center co-op, during which time they dedicated six months to SOAR. They teamed up with engineering capstone students to build a prototype, and eventually bought a defunct vending machine (that originally dispensed jellybeans) from a company in Italy to customize with their specifications.

Welch and Elzaridi learned right along with those engineering students about the finicky nature of protein powder. "It's not like sand," Welch says, "it's more like flour." And fine-tuning the exact vibration that would dispense just enough of the often clumpy powder, proved to be a mighty challenge. But together, they figured it out. "We joke that we should've gotten honorary engineering degrees," Welch says.

Finally, in early 2022, Welch and Elzaridi organized a soft-launch of their vending machine in Northeastern's Marino Recreation Center. Their machine offered five different vegan and whey protein powder flavors, and had 250 customers in the first six hours. "We ran out of powder," Welch says. "We completely sold out."





They took their idea to the judges at the Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, where they found similar success. Julietta Dexter, co-founder and chief growth and purpose officer at the creative and strategic agency ScienceMagic.Inc, was one of the judges this year. For her, Welch and Elzaridi's chemistry as partners and as individuals was as impressive as their venture.

"What I find remarkable about these winners is the sense of partnership, because entrepreneurship is very lonely at times," Dexter says. "I think that there is a fallacy of an entrepreneur that you've kind of got a whole stack of cards, or that you think you have to have all the answers. And that is one of the biggest mistakes of entrepreneurs, particularly if the business does grow: You've got nobody to hold a mirror up. It's lonely.

"So I love the collaborative, more holistic way of building a business with two brains rather than one," she says. "And I think that the energy that is created by sparking ideas off one another, or challenging one another, or sometimes we use the word 'sparring' against each other, can be quite generative. It's OK to disagree—if you're always agreeing, the outcome is very vanilla."

Confident in the customers' need for their product after their early success in Northeastern's fitness center, Welch and Elzaridi got back to work building out a more sophisticated vending machine—one with a touch-screen and 12 different types of sports supplements, ranging from protein powder to electrolytes, as well as a choice of three different liquids in which to mix them: milk, water, and plant-based milk. The prototype that had its brief moment in the sun at Marino, meanwhile, is the one in their living room.

The founders had just about finished the improved version of their vending machines when they both went abroad again. Welch and Elzaridi were part



of Northeastern's Global Experience Program, in which students travel and study in a different country each year. Their final year is in Boston.

So, they hit pause on SOAR, studied in Denmark for a year, and, having recently returned to campus, are taking a moment to consider the future of their business. "We're thinking of ways to take our core values, especially sustainability, a step further," Elzaridi says. "We're trying to focus on a bigger vision and mission rather than just solving this particular issue."

Whatever comes next, Elzaridi and Welch will face it together, soaring to new heights. ■



# Her 'IKEA of the future' takes sustainability from accent to statement piece.

**Kristine Aleksandrovica's** vision for the future of furniture includes couches made with mushroom leather and stuffed with recycled cigarette butts. Her idea for a furniture company, Stulitito, would give consumers full transparency into the manufacturing process.

Like many babies, Kristine Aleksandrovica's first word was "mama." Her second word though, wasn't "dada," "yes," or "no."

It was "IKEA."

Indeed, the modular Scandinavian furniture retailer made such a formative impression on a young Aleksandrovica that it shaped not just her linguistic sensibilities—but her entire career path, as well.

"My idea is to revolutionize IKEA [in] the way IKEA revolutionized other furniture stores," says Aleksandrovica, who graduated with bachelor's degrees in business and economics. "I want to make my own furniture house that will become the go-to store for Gen Z shoppers who care about environmental and social causes."

Thus was born Stulitito, a concept furniture manufacturing and retail line that gives consumers insight into how their goods were made—with what, and by whom—from start to finish. Aleksandrovica says the award will help power her vision, enabling her to bring Stulitito to life.

The name is a portmanteau between the German "stuhl," or "chair," and the Spanish suffix "-ito,"

meaning "small"—a nod to Aleksandrovica's global vision and background. She grew up in Moscow, Russia, in what she describes as an "entrepreneurial family." Aleksandrovica's father was always building on ideas, spinning out ventures that involved "lots of people from super diverse backgrounds," she says.

"It was so empowering," Aleksandrovica explains. "To grow up in that environment, surrounded by people who were energetic about their goals and ideas—I absorbed the idea that really everything is possible. It was inspiring."

As a child, Aleksandrovica and her brother would build tiny couches and chairs out of anything they could find, including cigarette butts, bananas, and more. "We were just having fun, but that idea has always stuck with me," she says.

At Northeastern, Aleksandrovica took on challenge after challenge with this same zeal. From 2019 to 2021, she served as a global student mentor, sharing hard-earned wisdom about navigating life in the U.S. as an international student. During that time, Aleksandrovica also found herself looking for a student group with whom she



*"I WANT TO MAKE MY OWN FURNITURE HOUSE THAT WILL BECOME THE GO-TO STORE FOR GEN Z SHOPPERS WHO CARE ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL CAUSES."*

—Kristine Aleksandrovica, Founder, Stulitito

could share her love of painting and fine arts in a more casual setting than a classroom. Finding none, she created one herself. Aleksandrovica founded Art Blanche, a fine arts club on campus, in 2019.

But the vision she and her brother toyed with as children—creating furniture out of recycled and unconventional materials—simmered in the back of her mind. During the latter half of Aleksandrovica's career at Northeastern, she took a deep dive into supply chains, signing up for course after course and engaging in her own research about labor conditions within the furniture industry.

"From a business perspective, Kristine carries with her an ethical obligation to make things better," says Shawn Bhimani, assistant professor of supply chain and information management in the D'Amore-McKim School of Business, who taught Aleksandrovica in two of his courses. "That, combined with her creative side, allows her to come up with novel and innovative ideas."

Case in point: beautifully designed furniture, made with mushroom leather and stuffed with recycled material from cigarette butts, all sold in

a fully transparent system that allows consumers full access to every part of the process.

"In our current commercial infrastructure, we buy things based on how they look and feel, but what's missing is all the touch points along the way; the makers who made these products, the way the materials were sourced," says Bhimani, who is currently working on a short book with Aleksandrovica about forced labor in global supply chains.

And while Stulitito is still in its infancy, Aleksandrovica has big plans for the company.

"So many houses around the world have IKEA pieces," she says. "You can walk into any home and immediately recognize them. That's what I hope for Stulitito, as well. Beautiful, recognizable, environmentally safe furniture." ■

# It wasn't safe for Debpriya Das to open her own biology teaching center. So she made one in her living room.

**Debpriya Das's** coaching enterprise, Bioland, helped students in her home country of Bangladesh learn to love biology. Now, she's exploring a new venture that would help high school students, particularly girls, gain valuable extracurricular experience through internships.

Debpriya Das had a gap year between high school in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, and undergraduate studies at the National University of Singapore. Most young people, presented with a wild and free year off, opt to travel, perhaps backpacking through scenic international throughways.

Das, however, chose to teach biology out of her living room.

Technically, before she moved her popular and successful biology lessons to her family home, she taught biology to high schoolers at her alma mater, the Mastermind School. Some of her students were only one or two years younger than her.

"The school reached out to me, and said they were having a hard time finding teachers for biology, which is a sector that's a bit less developed than engineering, for example, which everyone studies," Das says. It wasn't a random call—Das had assisted teachers in the subject while she herself was still a student. She just had a knack,

and a love, for the field. "I said, 'OK, let's do it!'"

She may not have known it at the time, but those four words shifted the trajectory of Das's life. Her students, many of whom were skeptical of, or downright repelled by, biology, came to love it because of Das's innovative teaching style.

"Most people think of biology, and they think of memorization," Das says. "But to me, it's a beautiful world where everything comes together and makes sense. It's elegant, and I wanted people to see the world that I saw."

Rather than making her students memorize long lists of facts and then regurgitate them on the international exams students are required to take, Das attempts to guide them on a journey through the complex network that makes life possible.

The results of her unconventional method spoke for themselves: Her students were getting top scores on their exams and, Das says, actually enjoyed the subject matter.

"Honestly, I was surprised," she says, laughing.



**"WOMEN CAN'T ALWAYS DO COMMUNITY SERVICE BECAUSE IT'S NOT SAFE. I WANT TO HELP THESE WOMEN AND GIRLS FIND SAFE EXPERIENCES BY PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS AND COMPANIES."**

—Debpriya Das, Founder, Bioland

"But students were doing really well, and some of them were asking for more."

When she was 19, Das moved her teaching enterprise to her home. She opened a coaching center, Bioland, where she taught students two levels of biology and trained those who were especially eager for the International Biology Olympiad, a global competition for students under the age of 20.

Maeesha Tasnim Naomi was one of those students. She was in the class Das taught at the high school, and then, inspired by Das's engaging explanation of biology, continued her lessons with Das for three more years at Bioland.

"To me, her greatest strength is that she believes in her students and would do anything for them when she sees potential in someone," Naomi says of Das. "I feel lucky that I was one of her students. I remember learning so many things outside my then-syllabus, which not only helped me perform well in my school and [at the] Olympiad, but her notes also helped me to this day at university courses. We would simply lose track of time and let our love of biology take over."

A student at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, Naomi is aiming to turn her love of biology into a bona fide career.

"Maybe the motivation behind learning in Grade 9 was only to score good grades in exams, but those small moments of understanding biological concepts are what led me to pursue neuroscience and behavior as my bachelor's degree. Giving biology a chance gave me the opportunity to research cool topics like sexual coevolution and pediatrics in labs at Mount Holyoke College and Boston Children's Hospital. Thanks to Debpriya Miss, I hope that my journey with biological studies doesn't end anytime soon!" Naomi says, using a Bangladeshi naming convention that conveys respect and admiration.

For Das, starting Bioland was a dream. Locating it at home, however, was more of a necessity.

"In Bangladesh, it wasn't always safe for me to be out alone," Das says. When she was in school, her parents would drop her off and pick her up, ensuring that she didn't have to walk to and from her school alone.

The country has made great progress in the last two decades in improving gender equality, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID. But inequalities continue to exist, and gender-based violence is still common. With this in mind, Das and her family realized that





setting up a teaching center on her own was out of the question. So, she rearranged the furniture in her family's living room, added some tables, chairs, and a chalkboard, and, soon enough, she had space for "exactly 17 students," she says.

At the same time she was starting Bioland, Das was also starting college herself. This didn't deter her from teaching though; she taught students during university holidays, often from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., every day.

"Most of my students have done absolutely amazing," Das says. "I think my methods helped them to be more involved in the material, plus they were learning in a home they felt safe in, because it was literally my home."

Eventually, Das had to stop teaching to continue her own educational journey. Her final cohort of students learned at Bioland in 2018, while Das was entering her final year at the University of Melbourne in Australia. After she graduated with a bachelor's degree in neuroscience, Das landed yet another game-changing opportunity.

In 2020, she earned a prestigious Schwarzman Scholarship, making her the first person from Bangladesh to do so. Since then, two more young Bangladeshi people have received the honor, following in Das's footsteps. In 2021, Das enrolled in the D'Amore-McKim School of Business at Northeastern University, and she'll graduate with a master's degree in business administration.

Throughout all this, Das never lost her love for helping others. And now, she's exploring a new venture that would help high school students in Bangladesh, particularly girls, gain valuable extracurricular experience through hard-to-find internships.

"For people like my sister, who were trying to go to college, it's extremely difficult to get work experience to show on a college application," Das

says. "Women can't always do community service because it's not safe. I want to help these women and girls find safe experiences by partnering with schools and companies."

Das's new venture is still in its infancy. But as she considers the best way to get it up and running, Das is holding tight to the six-year-old version of herself, who picked up a biology textbook when she ran out of storybooks to read one night.

"I went to bed reading about white blood cells, how they engulf bacteria they don't recognize and release digestive enzymes to dissolve it," she recalls. "It's so simple; so elegant. I just fell in love."

Perhaps it's not so far off to think of Das like those white blood cells: creating elegant solutions to the spiky problems she—and others—face. ■



# Education enriched her life. With her mentorship startup, Sima Bou Jawde wants fellow international students to feel the same.

Education has empowered **Sima Bou Jawde** to reach for more. With Enrich Academia, she hopes she can support and uplift other people who are walking a similar path.

Sima Bou Jawde was just days away from taking her Graduate Record Examinations, or GRE, when revolution erupted in her home city of Beirut, Lebanon. Long-simmering discontent with government corruption, strict austerity measures, and economic recession finally came to the fore in a series of national civil protests.

“People from all different religious, economic—you name it—backgrounds stood hand in hand and chanted for a better Lebanon,” Bou Jawde recalls. It was an awe-inspiring and hopeful sight.

But the young scholar was torn. She was right in the middle of applying to universities in the United States and needed to study for the GRE and write her personal statements. At the same time, she felt pulled to stand side by side with the protesting of her fellow citizens.

She figured out a way to do it all: “I went to classes in the morning, worked on my applications in the afternoons, and joined my people in the evening.”

Bou Jawde got into college—she completed her master’s degree in public health at Boston

University in 2022, and is knee-deep in doctoral research at Northeastern University for a PhD in public health. And the peaceful protests, which went on for several weeks, but were ultimately quashed, did have an effect. At the end of October 2019, the embattled Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned.

Still, all was not well in Bou Jawde’s home country. As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, Lebanon spiraled into an economic crisis, exacerbated by a devastating explosion in the Port of Beirut. Her parents’ life savings, a portion of which was earmarked for Bou Jawde’s tuition in the U.S., were locked up in the bank as inflation rates skyrocketed. It seemed, for a while, that Bou Jawde’s best efforts at navigating the international application process while facing a national uprising would be hamstrung by lack of funding.

Once again, however, she found a way through. Bou Jawde secured a scholarship that covered many of her expenses, and a job to cover the rest.

“There was always this desire that I wanted to



*“IT’S ALL ABOUT WISDOM, AND THAT’S A STORY AS OLD AS TIME. PASSING WISDOM FROM ONE PERSON TO THE NEXT.”*

—Sima Bou Jawde, Founder, Enrich Academia

continue my education, and that I wanted to help my community. That was a drive for me,” she says. “And essentially, I think I was definitely one of the lucky ones, because I made it.”

These are not mere footnotes in Bou Jawde’s story. The harsh reality of the challenges she and many others face in chasing down their educational pursuits are always on Bou Jawde’s mind. The economic, cultural, and social challenges she and many international students grapple with are a steady topic of conversation among her friends as well, Bou Jawde says.

“A lot of people are in similar situations like me, and they simply do not have the mentorship or the means to figure out this system. I was talking to a lot of my friends from similarly developed or developing countries, and we realized that we all had faced the same obstacles at one point or another,” she says. “Things like: How do you talk to professors? How do you email people? How do you write personal statements? And how do you apply for financial help?”

Eventually, the germ of an idea in the back of Bou Jawde’s mind began to take shape. International students face specific challenges, and often come from cultures that value community and

storytelling—two things that can be hard to cultivate, at first, in a new country.

That idea became Enrich Academia, a knowledge-sharing and mentorship program for and by international and underrepresented students.

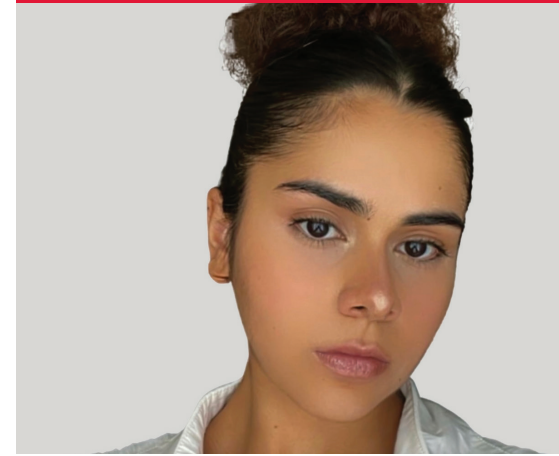
“It’s all about wisdom, and that’s a story as old as time,” Bou Jawde says. “Passing wisdom from one person to the next.”

For now, Enrich Academia exists as a blog on the publishing platform Substack. There, Bou Jawde shares practical advice about topics such as writing personal statements and applying to graduate school. But she envisions it growing into a bona fide community of mentors and mentees, particularly for women, LGBTQIA+ people, people who are Arab, and people from Middle Eastern and North African countries.

Education has empowered Bou Jawde to reach for more. With Enrich Academia, she hopes she can support and uplift other people who are walking a similar path.

“Even if we’re just able to help one other person, that would be worth it,” she says. “Although hopefully it’ll be more than one.” ■

# With Dephend, Alexis Musaelyan-Blackmon goes on the defensive against cyberattacks.



The best offense is a good defense. That's what **Alexis Musaelyan-Blackmon** is creating with Dephend, an AI-powered cybersecurity company—all while occupying the (still) rare space as a woman in tech.

All it takes is one. An email from what looks like your bank, asking you for account information. Or a message about a package delivery, confirming your address. Maybe it's even a Nigerian prince, asking you to wire money in exchange for a royal investment opportunity.

A momentary lapse in attention when you're confronted with any of these phishing messages, and suddenly your money is gone or your identity is stolen. These types of cyberattacks can (and do) happen to anyone, even with failsafes in place. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced people online to work, socialize, learn, and more, became fertile ground for cybercriminals, who ransomed millions of dollars from businesses and individuals alike.

But what if there were a better way to safeguard our valuable information than simply hoping we're paying close enough attention to our email inboxes? What if our computers could continuously scan for unusual behavior, suspicious messages and accounts, data breaches, and unauthorized attempts to access our personal information?

That's Alexis Musaelyan-Blackmon's vision for Dephend, a cybersecurity company powered by artificial intelligence. While the company (pronounced like "defend") is still in the early stages of development, it's already gotten buy-in, literally: Musaelyan-Blackmon raised startup capital from a first-round, friends-and-family funding effort.

Plus, her idea and her passion earned the support of the judges at the Women Who Empower Innovator Awards.

"As more and more people are using apps and programs like Cash App or Facebook Marketplace, I know of friends and family who've had close calls with cyberattacks," says Musaelyan-Blackmon, who is pursuing bachelor's degrees in biology and data science at Northeastern. "The increase in AI, as tech keeps advancing, means that cyber criminals can use it to their advantage to steal people's data. Why shouldn't we use it to protect them, too?"

Dephend is a software program that will detect and—as the name suggests—defend against would-be cyberattacks in real time, by using an

algorithm that continuously monitors an individual's network traffic, Musaelyan-Blackmon says. As the program learns a user's typical online habits, it will flag unusual behavior and activity. The longer someone uses the program, and the more information the software has about an individual's normal behavior, the more accurately it can spot something out of the ordinary, Musaelyan-Blackmon says.

"As a founder, I'm still doing research and developing it, but this will be a continuous process of always making it better," she says.

Though Musaelyan-Blackmon started at Northeastern on a pre-med track, she was also enrolled in a two-year scholarship program called the Virtual Institutes of Cybersecurity and Electromagnetic Spectrum Research and Employ, or VICEROY DECREE. Led by Northeastern's Khoury College of Computer Sciences and in partnership with the United States Department of Defense, the program recruits and trains the next generation of experts to combat cyber warfare.

A cybersecurity pitch competition, hosted within the program, caught Musaelyan-Blackmon's eye in particular. The event encouraged participants to develop an innovative idea related to cybersecurity, but Musaelyan-Blackmon saw even greater

potential in the challenge. It was enough to make her change her major and focus on data science. "I just knew I wanted to take it to the next level," she says. "I saw a social issue it could solve, and I wanted to emphasize in my venture how to uplift other women in tech and cybersecurity."

John F. Griffin is part of the Defense Innovation Unit, a Department of Defense organization focused exclusively on fielding and scaling commercial technology across the U.S. military at commercial speeds. "I think her platform design is on the leading edge of innovation and technology," he says.

Griffin and Musaelyan-Blackmon met during a VICEROY showcase day, and at the time, Griffin worked at the National Security Innovation Network, a different branch within the Defense Department. The pair stayed in touch as Musaelyan-Blackmon honed her idea.

"It is a testament to Alexis and this nation that we have citizens like her that are finding ways to use her talents and passions for the betterment of others and the security of this nation," Griffin says. "Organizations (private and public) tasked with cybersecurity cannot think through every layer, every threat, every exploit. This is a widely complex, multi-layered, multi-domain challenge. Alexis has



identified a vulnerability and an approach to protect networks. Her approach will add depth to the layers of protection modern organizations require to protect against security threats.”

And, he says, her pre-med background is a strength in the multifaceted nature of cybersecurity.

“Cybersecurity requires more than code writers and computer scientists. It requires multi-discipline, creative, system thinkers,” Griffin says. “The human body itself is a complex system. Bringing a pre-med approach to cybersecurity does in fact bring creative solutions to the idea of security. And creativity and speed to solution is what is required in a highly competitive, quickly evolving competition against all levels of nefarious actors.”

For now, with the company less than a year old,

***“I SAW A SOCIAL ISSUE IT COULD SOLVE, AND I WANTED TO EMPHASIZE IN MY VENTURE HOW TO UPLIFT OTHER WOMEN IN TECH AND CYBERSECURITY.”***

—Alexis Musaelyan-Blackmon, Founder, Depend

Musaelyan-Blackmon is working to build and stress-test her prototype—and secure funding to bring Depend to the next level.

In the future, though, the founder envisions working closely with various corporate partners and government agencies to bring her technology onto computers around the world. But even if she can prevent just one person from falling prey to online scammers, the work will be worth it, she says. ■



# BIPOC business owners grow together with BUD. Marine Nimblette tends the garden.

**Marine Nimblette** first asked herself how she could support BIPOC business owners at the height of a pandemic and turmoil from racial injustice. Then, she executed on her solution with Businesses United in Diversity (BUD).

As the COVID-19 pandemic and a nationwide racial reckoning gripped people across the United States in June 2020, Marine Nimblette found herself back at home in the Hudson Valley. Like the rest of the country, her small community of Hurley, New York, faced its own strained social ties—and Nimblette, then a rising third-year student at Northeastern University, was determined to do something about it. Soon, she and her friend Maggie Noe were spitballing ideas as Nimblette’s father, Avery, listened in.

How could they safely bring people together? What did BIPOC business owners need most? Could they create space for joy and connection amid immense loss and trauma?

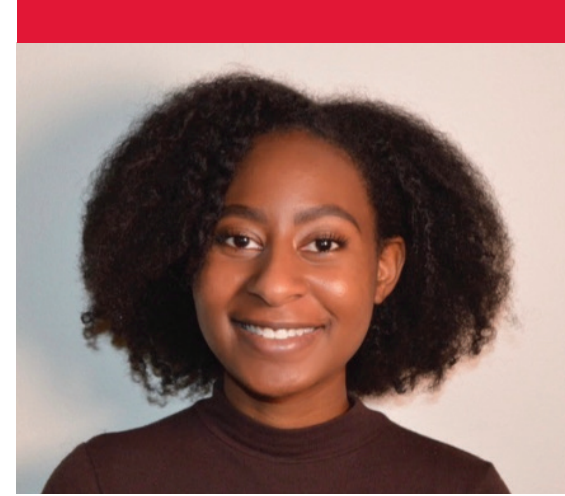
Nimblette and Noe thought so. Together, they imagined an outdoor marketplace for local BIPOC entrepreneurs to engage with their customers and, equally as important, each other. In addition to points of sale, the festival would provide opportunities to share “social capital”—lessons learned, resources gathered, and networks established throughout their careers as small business owners. “This was the first time these businesses were

able to connect with each other and identify businesses in the same position,” says Nimblette, who recently earned her bachelor’s degree in behavioral neuroscience. The concept hinged on Nimblette’s intimate knowledge of the mental health stressors that Black entrepreneurs face in her predominantly white town. Not only do they face outright discrimination, but inadequate representation and systemic barriers to financial stability—most of the business owners on her mind took home less than \$20,000 each year—also tax their entrepreneurial growth and their overall wellness.

Avery Nimblette, the founder and owner of his own Hudson Valley landscaping business, told his daughter and Noe to run with their idea. He knew from the start that, with a little faith and some financial support, their grassroots effort could transform lives.

“[Marine] was hell-bent on uniting people, especially people who are disadvantaged,” says Avery. “She’s like a magnet. She brings people close.”

That’s when the Google searches and phone calls started. Before long, Nimblette and Noe had locked in their location and raised enough funds



to host participating businesses—many of them centered on wellness products, like body and hair care—without charging them tabling fees. Businesses United in Diversity, or BUD, debuted its first festival in August 2020, then ramped up again in 2021.

The Innovator Award recognition extends beyond BUD and to Nimblette’s family life. She says that, from a young age, her parents’ commitment to provide for her and her younger siblings with their small business inspired her to be resourceful herself. Her parents, both immigrants (her father is from Grenada, and her mother is from Zimbabwe), arrived in the U.S. “with not a lot of money,” says Nimblette. As they kickstarted the landscaping business, they leaned into community networks to—in Avery’s words—survive.

“Seeing the level of fortitude that my parents had to have in founding this business, in the area where we live, has inspired me to want to be that way and apply that approach to founding a business and to everything I do now,” Nimblette says. And that fortitude has remained a business requirement. Nimblette remembers when, one

month before she founded BUD with Noe, Avery experienced blatant discrimination and harassment while out on a job. He’d been parked on a public road near a client’s property with his landscaping equipment when a neighbor approached the vehicle. Avery had opted to keep to himself, executing business on his phone while the neighbor accused him of trespassing. Soon, the neighbor was banging on Avery’s window and hurling racial slurs.

“You face discrimination on all ends that you can think of,” Nimblette says of life for minority business owners—from negotiating fair contracts and managing employment to encountering hatred as a workplace hazard.

As the altercation escalated, Avery called a police officer, who was also a known acquaintance. Thankfully, says Nimblette, the officer was well aware of Avery and his reputation in their community. But “that’s a piece of why the story went well,” Nimblette says. When the time came to make his formal complaint at the police station, Avery questioned whether to engage his daughter in the process.



“Initially I was frightened. I was worried because, as a young Black entrepreneur, it’s always been a tough road,” he says. “We want to protect our kids from some of our experiences.” He decided, though, that Nimblette’s involvement in the solution—in standing up for what was right and just—would encourage her future advocacy. So, he brought her to the station with him. The two would later share their experiences with racism at a Black Lives Matter protest in town.

she honed as a business leader helps her make connections with peers and mentors in medicine. “Conversations with people are how you learn things and go from one path of research to a new path of research,” Nimblette says.

For now, as she and Noe embark on new adventures after college, BUD is on hold. The founders are eager to join with young partners (perhaps a local high school student or two) who might carry their mission for “Black business awareness”

forward, says Nimblette. In the meantime, she’ll continue to brainstorm for her next big idea—likely a fusion between business and psychiatry or neurology.

This bud is blooming. ■

**“SEEING THE LEVEL OF FORTITUDE THAT MY PARENTS HAD TO HAVE IN FOUNDING [A] BUSINESS, IN THE AREA WHERE WE LIVE, HAS INSPIRED ME TO WANT TO BE THAT WAY AND APPLY THAT APPROACH TO FOUNDING A BUSINESS AND TO EVERYTHING I DO NOW.”**

—Marine Nimblette, Founder, Businesses United in Diversity (BUD)

Nimblette’s confidence in tackling the “big stuff,” Avery says, continues to energize him. Though his daughter often says he’s her source of inspiration, Avery says it’s the other way around. He believes in her potential to have “a profound impact on humanity,” and considers it an honor to witness her talents as an inventor, convener, and scientist.

“As a parent, I didn’t want her to just survive—I wanted her to thrive. And, boy, she has proven that she understands that concept.”

Advocacy is the link between business and medicine for Nimblette, who is currently pursuing her master’s degree in biomedical sciences at Boston University. She credits her multidisciplinary perspective, in part, for her success. The data mining and if-then thinking she practiced while implementing research at Northeastern help her to solve business challenges; and the networking



by Molly Callahan

# A Northeastern couple started their mezcal business in Mexico after a chance roadside encounter.

**Jessica Pogranyi** and Miguel Albarran are the founders of Cara a Cara, an environmentally and socially conscious artisanal mezcal brand.

For Jessica Pogranyi and Miguel Albarran, mezcal, a Mexican spirit made from agave plant, is a drink best consumed with friends over conversation and food.

That is exactly how the married couple became friends with the Morales Garcia family, whom they met on the side of the road in a small town in the Oaxaca state, Mexico, three years ago.

After getting sandwiches at the family's food stand and tasting their homemade mezcal, Pogranyi and Albarran, both Northeastern graduates in the Class of 2013, took a one-and-a-half-hour ride deep into the mountains to see the operation. Soon thereafter they went into business together.

With the Moraleses and their refined family recipe, Pogranyi and Albarran launched Cara a Cara, an environmentally and socially conscious artisanal small batch mezcal brand in August 2022.

Cara a Cara, which means "face to face" in Spanish, now sells its mezcal to restaurants, stores, and hotels in Mexico City, and plans to expand to the United States.

Pogranyi and Albarran came to Mexico right before the COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed the world in March 2020. A couple of weeks before that they

quit their successful careers in Seattle to take a break.

Pogranyi, 33, was burned out from her job on Amazon's social responsibility team, managing the audit program for all Amazon-made products. Albarran, also 33, led a team focused on expansion programs at a digital freight network startup, Convoy, which grew from 70 employees to 1,000 during his time with the company. Being a Mexican national, he hadn't lived in Mexico for more than 20 years and wanted to spend time with his family.

"I started to feel a certain distance from my culture, from my family," Albarran says. "I needed time to rebuild family bonds."

Stuck in Mexico indefinitely and curious about mezcal, which had been gaining popularity in the U.S., the couple decided to explore Oaxaca, one of the main mezcal-producing states in the country.

Just like tequila, mezcal can only be produced in select regions in Mexico, according to a protected designation of origin that the country secured through the World Intellectual Property Organization. The difference between the two spirits is the distillation process and the type of agave each drink is made from—tequila can only be legally made from blue agave.



*"A LOT OF PEOPLE IN MEXICO CITY HAVE SAID, 'I'VE NEVER SEEN A MEZCAL BRAND OR AN ALCOHOL BRAND REALLY FOCUSING ON IMPACT.' BEING THE FIRST ONES TO DO IT AND HAVING TRANSPARENCY AND OUR LABEL HAVING THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT HAS RESONATED A LOT WITH PEOPLE."*

—Jessica Pogranyi, Co-Founder, Cara a Cara

Pogranyi and Albarran first encountered the Moraleses in the small town of San Dionisio Ocotepec. The 20-something-year-old Isabel Morales Garcia and her mother were selling some sandwiches and a traditional non-alcoholic Oaxacan drink, tejate, from their food stand. They offered the couple their homemade mezcal.

"It was amazing," says Pogranyi.

She and her husband had already tried mezcal in various places, including distilleries popular with tourists.

Isabel told the couple that her father loved making mezcal and had been dreaming of commercializing his product. Since he had passed away several years ago, Isabel's uncle Bacilio Morales Garcia and she continued the family's mezcal-making tradition.

Pogranyi and Albarran asked to see where the spirit had been made. They were driven to a "ranch" in the mountains where the family had been growing agave and making mezcal for generations, an hour and a half away from the town. Pogranyi says they saw all kinds of animals

roaming in the greenery under the perfect blue skies during the ride.

When they finally arrived at the Morales family property, the farthest parcel on the mountain, there was really nothing to see besides hundreds of agave plants, she says. The Moraleses explained that the family had to dismantle their simple distillation setup because they ran out of water both to produce mezcal and to feed cattle. The family had to move closer to the town built on the San Dionisio River.

Shortage of water is a common problem in Mexico. The Mexican agriculture industry uses 76% of the total annual water consumption in the country. The World Resources Institute ranked Mexico 24th in the world for water stress, which occurs when the demand for water is greater than the available supply. As of 2022, only 58% of the country's population had water at home daily, and approximately six million people, or almost 5%, lacked access to drinking water.

Once the couple got back to their Airbnb, they began brainstorming ways in which they could





help the Morales family produce mezcal in a more sustainable way. “At the end of the day, if everyone’s producing mezcal all the time, and everyone’s taking the water from the river, the same thing is going to happen there that happened on the mountain,” Pogranyi says.

After a couple months of research, they learned of rainwater harvesting systems that a non-governmental organization, Isla Urbana, was installing in urban and rural communities and schools across Mexico. That finding fueled the idea of creating a mezcal product that would drive awareness about the water shortage issue and allow some of the proceeds to go back into installing more rainwater capture systems. After assessing potential rainfall in the area, Isla Urbana agreed to design and build a rainwater harvesting system for the Morales distillery. The installation was completed in June 2021.

From the initial time the couple met the Morales family, Pogranyi says, she and her husband had a gut feeling that they were good-hearted people. But before going into business with the Moraleses, they spent a lot of time building a trustworthy relationship with them. They went back to San Dionisio Ocotepc and spent about a month there, learning anything they could about mezcal production and measuring the amount of water used at every step of the process. They shared meals with the family and spent hours chatting and getting to know one another.

“We also understood that this was a unique opportunity to build something new alongside

them,” Pogranyi says. “We have a really good partnership. They’ve been amazing to work with.”

Producing mezcal takes a lot of work. About 10 members of the Morales family now work for the distillery on their property in the mountains.

They distill mezcal using rainwater captured by the rain harvesting system to offset the lack of other freshwater resources given. It takes one month to make one batch of the spirit, which translates into 200 to 400 bottles, depending on the agave type.

Each bottle of mezcal of about 25 ounces (750 milliliters) requires more than five gallons of water (20 liters) to produce. The distillery currently has a 1,320-gallon (5,000 liters) storage tank that collects rainwater for drier seasons. Depending on the season, an environmental nutrition label on each mezcal bottle shows how much rainwater was used for that batch.

It is also very important to consistently replant agave, Pogranyi says, to have a reliable supply of the raw material as plants are harvested as a whole (but only the heart of the plant—piña—is used to make mezcal). The Morales family replanted 6,000 agaves last year, and Cara a Cara is looking for a way to utilize agave leaves that currently go to waste.

Pogranyi and Albarran pay the family by the batch. The distillers set a price per liter themselves, depending on the type of agave.

“We want to make sure it’s fair [to them],” Pogranyi says.

The brand has four expressions of the spirit made of four different types of agaves, giving mezcal different flavor profiles.

“I really like to have mezcal with friends over some cheese and jam on crackers,” Pogranyi says. “It’s not your typical mezcal pairing that people are

used to, but we found that it works really well.”

Desserts also highlight the light sweetness of the spirit, she says, and due to its smokiness, the Cara a Cara mezcal comes through nicely in cocktails. But since it takes somewhere from seven to 25 years to grow different types of agaves, Pogranyi believes it is more special to drink some of the expressions neat.

The Cara a Cara mezcal has been received really well at trade shows and tastings, she says, and by business-to-business clients they have been approaching personally. Pogranyi and Albarran want to make sure that their products are sold by businesses that care about Cara a Cara’s story and their business ethics correspond to the brand’s ethos and values.

“A lot of people here [in Mexico City] have said, ‘I’ve never seen a mezcal brand or an alcohol brand really focusing on impact,’” Pogranyi says. “Being the first ones to do it and having transparency and our label having the environmental impact, I think, has resonated a lot with people.”

In August, the brand is going to enter the market in Los Cabos, a resort area located at the southern tip of Mexico’s Baja California Peninsula, popular with American tourists. Cara a Cara is also in the process of obtaining necessary paperwork to export its mezcal to the U.S.

When they embarked on this project, neither spouse had experience in the alcohol beverage industry. They have been utilizing the skills they had from their previous jobs, Albarran says, but they also had to find ways to accelerate their industry and entrepreneurship knowledge. He, for example, was able to get a job and works as a general manager at a wine distribution company in Mexico City where they continue to live.

“That’s given me a tremendous insight, whether it is permits, bank accounts or lawyers,” he says.

The couple also turned to Northeastern’s IDEA student-led venture accelerator. This structured program helped them get clear on their business model, financials, and marketing approach, Pogranyi says, and get direct feedback from professors at the D’Amore-McKim School of Business. In addition, they secured a \$10,000 grant from the program.

So far, Cara a Cara has been a bootstrapped project—the couple has invested about \$100,000 of their own savings into the business. Pogranyi estimates that they will need about \$350,000 for the next year and a half to two years and will probably need to raise capital soon to support their cash flow.

But passion for their “why” and focus on the quality of the product keeps them going, Albarran says.

“The actual beverage is the byproduct of why we do what we do,” he says. “Our ‘why’ is we want to do it better—better for people, better for the planet.”

As for being in business with one’s spouse, Albarran believes that their mutual respect for each other professionally and personally helps them deal with any challenges. “As long as you are able to lean into each other’s strengths,” he says, “I think there’s no better co-founder that you could find.” ■

# With venture capital investing as a hammer, every startup looks like a nail. RevUp offers a new way to build.



After years working in professional investing, **Melissa Withers** was frustrated by the gender and racial inequity she encountered. So, she created RevUp Capital to support companies run by women and people of color.

When Melissa Withers began her career in professional investing, she didn't have any role models. Sure, she had mentors and advisors—men who offered advice and guidance—but there was no one in whom Withers saw herself, no mirror in which she could see her own future. Almost a decade later, there still isn't, really. But now, she's in a position to do something about it.

The field of professional investing is infamously male-dominated, and the founders who win funding from such firms even more so. Women comprise less than 20 percent of C-suite positions in private equity and alternative investment companies, and companies founded by women receive less than three percent of venture capital funding spent in the U.S. (While venture capital isn't the only form of investment funding available to startups, it represents a significant portion of the financing poured into new companies in the country.)

"When I went into professional investing, there were not many women at all—and that's only just begun to change," says Withers, who graduated

from Northeastern University's College of Science in 2002. "As a consequence, I've always been able to use that as a motivator."

By 2016, Withers says she was fed up "with the ways that the field was reinforcing gender and racial inequity."

Withers created RevUp Capital, a revenue-based investing firm, to change all that. And, since 2016 when it launched, RevUp has funded more than 50 companies, close to three-quarters of which are ventures led by women or people of color.

RevUp was groundbreaking for its time, among the world's first revenue-based venture companies, says Withers, who serves as one of its managing partners. Rather than offering one lump sum in exchange for shares of the company, as most venture capital funds operate, Withers designed RevUp to be a partner for the long haul.

The model works like this: RevUp invests in business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) companies that are ready to scale up. RevUp invests cash and capacity to take a

company from its first million dollars in revenue to \$10, \$20, or \$30 million—a period of growth that often requires different skills and strategies from the road to the first million. In exchange, RevUp investors receive a small percentage of the venture's revenue over time until it reaches a predetermined cap.

This means that small- and medium-sized business owners get an infusion of cash and strategic support without giving up ownership of their companies. It also means that RevUp investors are truly invested in the health of the company because its wins are their wins.

It's a drastically different model than the reigning venture capital structure, which favors fast-growing, so-called "unicorn" companies that can be sold off quickly to make a fortune above all else. Venture capital investors get their returns when the companies in which they invested sell to the highest bidder—and the value of their shares skyrockets. Withers describes this as the "exit-or-bust constraints of equity."

**"WHEN I WENT INTO PROFESSIONAL INVESTING, THERE WERE NOT MANY WOMEN AT ALL—AND THAT'S ONLY JUST BEGUN TO CHANGE. AS A CONSEQUENCE, I'VE ALWAYS BEEN ABLE TO USE THAT AS A MOTIVATOR."**

—Melissa Withers, Founder, RevUp Capital

"The venture system is pretty notorious for benefitting investors over owners," she says. "We started RevUp to do it differently."

For other female founders, Withers's guidance, and indeed her mere presence, is a source of support. Amy Jackson, CEO and co-founder of the healthcare provider compensation platform Statera, counts herself among those whom Withers has impacted.

"Without her, I don't know if our company would be around today," Jackson says. The women met during the two years that Withers was mentor-in-residence at TechStars Boston—a role she held while running RevUp. Jackson says Withers (who now sits on Statera's board of directors) offered hard-earned advice and guidance from day one, more than once helping Jackson avoid pitfalls she might never have otherwise seen coming.

"You don't know what you don't know," Jackson says. "I knew that starting a company would be a lot of work, and that I would have to be gritty and determined, but there's so much more that goes into it. And Melissa offers tough love—she's not going to tell you the easiest things to do, but what she says is going to get you over those potholes and onto the right path. Every step of the way, I would've been lost without her."

For Withers, who admittedly stumbled over many of those early potholes herself, helping to guide other women in the startup and investment fields has been worth the struggle.

"I've lived long enough to see that change, and I do get a special kind of gratification and fulfillment from helping to fill in the gaps where I spent a lot of time flopping around," she says. "It's nice to be able to point out a pothole to another female entrepreneur before she runs into it. Because otherwise, you're just faking it until you make it, and as someone who's had to do that, I really can't overstate the effect it has on a person over time." ■



# Every body is a beach body, and other lessons from Johanna Davenport Calica.

On beaches across the world, vacationers and locals alike sport La Porte swimwear. **Johanna Davenport Calica's** luxury brand has earned widespread recognition for its inclusive, sustainable, and ethically produced garments.

For four years, Johanna Davenport Calica applied to exhibit at the Cabana trade show for swimwear brands and retailers in Miami Beach. And for four years, she was rejected. But that didn't stop her from swimming upstream. She applied for a fifth time and, in July 2023, her luxury resortwear brand La Porte finally made its debut.

"It's like participating in the Super Bowl for swimwear," says Davenport Calica, who pitched new and returning wholesale accounts with her team at the trade show. Among the partners she scored at Cabana: Free People, Nuuly, Baha Mar hotels, Nikki Beach resorts, Ritz-Carlton locations in Miami and Puerto Rico, and all Tracy Anderson boutiques—which will carry Davenport Calica's swimwear starting this spring.

La Porte's expansion would have impressed Davenport Calica's younger self, who grew up with a "bathing suit addiction" at home on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. She remembers, though, the supermodel personas of those days—the "nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" of Kate Moss and the unattainable figures of Victoria's Secret Angels. When she launched La Porte in 2018,

Davenport Calica resolved to be the antithesis of exclusionary and conformist beauty standards.

Her philosophy starts with the La Porte name, meaning "the door" in French. Davenport Calica's open door to swimwear features extended sizes (XS through XXL, with more to come) and gender-inclusive styles (in addition to conventional women's and men's options, La Porte features tops, bottoms, and one pieces for nonbinary and gender-fluid wearers). The approach applies to the brand's overall design aesthetic, too. Customers will only see real bodies, sans Photoshop, in La Porte garments—which are made from exclusively recycled fabrics.

"At the end of the day, we just want to make people feel great," says Davenport Calica, who majored in psychology and business as an undergraduate student at Northeastern University. "Clothes shouldn't be something that you stress yourself out about."

The same goes for her price point. La Porte customers, most of whom are between the ages of 25 and 34, want the quiet luxury and high quality of brands such as The Row, says Davenport Calica,



**“THE NUMBER ONE THING WE WANT FOR THE BRAND IS FOR PEOPLE TO REACH FOR IT KNOWING THAT THEY FEEL LIKE THEIR BEST, MOST AUTHENTIC SELF IN OUR SWIM[WEAR].”**

—Johanna Davenport Calica, Founder, La Porte

but they want them “at a price that [they] can’t say no to.” She positioned La Porte between two bridge clothing markets—at the high end of contemporary and the low end of luxury—to free her garments and customers from the financial strains of other luxury swimwear brands.

Davenport Calica’s commitment to accessible fashion inspired Women Who Empower judges at this year’s Innovator Awards. “Johanna’s innovative spirit is helping to reshape the future of the fashion industry and create a more sustainable and inclusive world,” says Diane N. MacGillivray, senior vice president of university advancement, of the La Porte founder’s transformative influence. “With a diverse range of size options and eco-friendly fabrics, La Porte is a brand that is having a real impact.”

For Davenport Calica, who also earned her master’s degree in counseling at Northwestern University, Northeastern has always been a place where ideas and dreams thrive. She values her experience as an inaugural member of the university’s venture accelerator, where she first

envisioned a future for a clothing line such as La Porte in the IDEA Lab on Friday nights. In her second year, she also juggled a co-op at the clothing boutique company Rue La La and evening classes on clothing construction at the School of Fashion Design.

“If I knew the process and how to make a garment, I could figure out how to find the people to plug into those roles,” says Davenport Calica, who now leads a team of three full-time employees based in New York and four consultants from across the globe while operating remotely from Chicago.

Today, her investment in the process and the people starts at the very beginning of the production line. Davenport Calica partners only with previously vetted, fair wage factories in China, where workers—many of them single mothers, she says—are well respected for their craftsmanship. It’s a stark contrast to Davenport Calica’s early visits to factories in the U.S. Though she’d expected the gloss and glamour of the fashion industry, she was shocked to witness toxic and unsafe conditions close to home.

“You’d be amazed at how many sweatshops are actually in New York or LA,” Davenport Calica says. “Just because something is made in America, doesn’t mean that it isn’t a sweatshop.”

Her commitment to worker safety persisted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, when factories closed to prevent the spread of disease. Though she says that she’s aware of some brands that produced illegally during mandated shutdowns, Davenport Calica and the La Porte team embraced the opportunity to pause and recalibrate. Soon, she’d decide to run a sale and donate the proceeds to the production of hospital masks for New York frontline workers. Then, she’d release an inaugural brand scent, Monte Carlo. The candle quickly sold out and helped the brand to grow significantly, despite great uncertainty at the time.

“Every good entrepreneur had to say, ‘What can I do to survive and get through this period—and help pay the bills?’” says Adam Calica, Davenport Calica’s husband and founder of Built In, an online community for startups and technology companies. He remembers when, as the pandemic took hold and customers traded their vacation swimsuits for sweatpants, the sales of home goods soared. For La Porte, already a lifestyle brand, the candle was a natural extension that would also generate revenue.

This year, La Porte will produce upwards of 12,000 garments. Each year, says Davenport Calica, the brand has doubled its revenue. Though its celebrity sightings are certainly “spikes on the heart monitor” (Kourtney Kardashian and Hilary Duff are among notable La Porte wearers), Davenport Calica says all of her customers—who regularly reach out to share positive feedback about their purchases and La Porte customer service—feel like celebrities every day.

“No one wants to connect with people as much as I do,” says Davenport Calica, who fosters community with collaborations such as La Porte’s recent one-to-one sale to benefit Chicago’s Girls in the Game. Each time a customer purchased their own swimsuit, Davenport Calica explains, she donated one to the sports-based development organization for girls of all backgrounds and identities.

“How can I help?” It’s a constant refrain for his wife as she scales her business, Calica says. “How can my team and I help do some good in this world?” Jo is always thinking about [that].”

Davenport Calica and her La Porte team have a new place to connect: the brand’s very own showroom in New York, which opened its doors in September. There, business-to-business clients browse and provide feedback on the latest releases—which will include the Resort 2024 collection in November.

Whether she’s in the New York showroom, at home in Chicago, or on Harbor Island in the Bahamas (her favorite getaway), Davenport Calica has the same goal for La Porte.

“The number one thing we want for the brand is for people to reach for it knowing that they feel like their best, most authentic self in our swim[wear]. ■



# Mothers need to nurture their own bodies after childbirth. Massiel Eversley has the scoop.

What do you get when you combine a nurse and an entrepreneur? That “nursepreneur” is **Massiel Eversley**. The founder of supplement company Nisus Life strives to make nutrition simple and healing accessible for new mothers.

On her busiest days, when afternoon slumps hit and Massiel Eversley realizes she needs fuel for the rest of her meetings, she breaks out her all-in-one protein powder. She’ll combine a scoop with frozen banana, peanut butter, and a splash of oat milk—or other ingredients she’s got on hand—to transform the supplement into a “whippy” concoction her family craves.

“My toddler will grab my straw and have a few sips,” Eversley says of her smoothies, which have become staples in her kitchen. Not only do they keep the mother of three full for meetings and workouts, Eversley’s blends of plant-based ingredients also brought her “peace of mind” after her third pregnancy.

As she researched and experimented with formulations back in 2019, Eversley—a Northeastern nursing graduate—realized she was her own test subject to fill a gap in the supplement market. Her vegan, low-sugar, and gluten-free product, Nisus Life, is specifically designed to meet the nutritional needs of childbearing people.

Because, Eversley says, healing is hard when parents are preoccupied with raising an infant. Concerns about gestational diabetes beget worries about low milk supply, and then layer with signs of an upset stomach from ingredients such as fenugreek (an herb similar to clover). All this consumes parents’ minds as they’re just trying to get to know their new baby.

“There’s no way a mom can figure this out,” Eversley, director of nursing at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, remembers thinking as she traded foods in and out of her diet. Despite her medical background, she still faced struggles in her postpartum journeys.

While in recovery mode after her first child was born, Eversley grappled with her own and her daughter’s food intolerances. Options that were safe for both mother and child as Eversley breastfed were severely limited—she jokes that, at the time, she often subsisted on handfuls of almonds. Two pregnancies later, Eversley found herself frustrated again. She suffered from headaches



*“I’VE HAD A LOT OF DOORS SLAMMED IN MY FACE. BUT YOU JUST HAVE TO KEEP ON KNOCKING.”*

—Massiel Eversley, Founder, Nisus Life

and stomach pains as she struggled to make sense of the many supplement bottles in her kitchen. Soon, she was in a hospital bed.

Her diagnosis: preeclampsia, a high blood pressure disorder that emerges during or following pregnancy. The health scare encouraged Eversley to “go back to basics” and focus on the three areas where she needed support: lactation, mood, and healing. Luckily for her, she had a background in medicine to guide her. But not everyone does.

“There needs to be more empathy for moms,” says Eversley. “There’s not enough.” She describes the decision fatigue faced by new parents who strive, while short on sleep and restoration, to make the best choices for their little ones. Add their own health concerns to the equation, she says, and the task at hand can feel nearly impossible.

In 2021, Eversley’s solution to the problem expanded from her kitchen to the digital marketplace. While the health advocate and self-proclaimed “nursepreneur” juggled family life and unprecedented responsibility on the front lines

of the COVID-19 pandemic, she launched Nisus Life—a product that’s safe for all genders and ages.

Her mission in business, to make nutrition simple and accessible for parents and their children, felt for Eversley like a direct extension of her commitment to care in her day-to-day job. The strength of Eversley’s multidisciplinary perspective is even clearer today.

Eversley remembers approaching her husband, Eric, with her tentative game plan to birth Nisus Life into the world. It meant walking away from her position as regional nurse director at Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

“I’m going to give myself six months,” she remembers telling herself as she prepared for earlier mornings and even later nights. “I was thinking of all the moms that I could help—moms who didn’t even know that they needed me yet.”

To Eversley’s relief, Eric was in her corner.

“The worst thing would be to not try it, then live life with a lot of regrets,” he reflects now. As a fellow



Northeastern graduate who studied business administration, Eric says he understands the entrepreneurial mindset and the many investments—time, energy, money—required to succeed. It's the same dedication, he adds, that fueled Eversley as she thrived in Northeastern's competitive nursing program.

Her blend of ambition, balance, and proactivity has helped Eversley stay resolute as she pivots. "When a patient is admitted, you already start to plan the discharge," she explains, relying upon what she calls her "nurse brain." She approached her immersion in the launch of Nisus Life the same

way. If she established a lean business model from the start, partnering early with her formulation expert, contracting her manufacturer, and streamlining consumer testing, she anticipated that she'd return to her nursing position in short order. And she did.

"When she came back, Massiel saw what was possible on a larger level, for the good of more," says Danika Medina, former associate chief nurse at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Eversley's renewed knowledge of complex systems and their interdependencies, Medina adds, helped her to thrive both inside and outside of the hospital setting and put her on parallel tracks bound for the same destination.

"I see it as my main job funding my dream," explains Eversley—now a full-time director of nursing and full-time CEO. But the mission isn't hers alone.

Community and access have always hummed at the center of Eversley's life. She remembers her early days in the Dominican Republic, where family dinners meant shared plates of rice, beans, and chicken; where she once added condensed milk to her Malta and savored a slower paced life; where today, after discovering her own food intolerances, she shares about her protein powder and other compliant foods.

Eversley says that democratization of information is key to breaking down barriers to nutrition and medicine. She knows through personal experience about the difficulties of seeking care in a new country. But she's also witnessed the disparities exposed by COVID-19 and treated asthma patients who, because they live in "certain area codes," cope with poor air quality. It's heavy "baggage" that even a simple and nutritious smoothie can help to lighten, she says.

"Having somebody like me bringing out a product like Nisus Life can expose a whole other

community of folks that never thought about it to the health benefits of a smoothie."

The future line of Nisus Life offerings, some of which are already in the works, may include prenatal formulations for expectant parents and supplements for children. Though product development and the consumer testing to follow is time-consuming and expensive, Eversley knows she can stay the course.

"I've had a lot of doors slammed in my face," Eversley says. "But you just have to keep on knocking." ■





by Molly Callahan

# Move over, Diana Ross. This ‘Nerdy Diva’ is turning the tech field upside down—and making it more equitable.

**Shanae Chapman’s** company, Nerdy Diva, helps businesses develop equitable and inclusive tech practices and platforms. But it’s just one of the ways Chapman shares knowledge, opens doors, and builds ladders for other people.

Go far enough inside any industry’s shoptalk, and it can start to feel like a different language. Journalists use words such as “deck” and “orphan” to talk about parts of an article as they’re laid out in newspapers. Architects bandy about “apron” or “boss” to describe specific structural elements.

But it’s perhaps tech developers who use the most bewildering terminology. In this field, “cookies” aren’t just delicious treats; they’re pieces of information sent from internet servers to browsers. A “firewall” isn’t a protective natural phenomenon; it’s a system to keep a secure network safe.

Some of these terms, such as “cookies” or “firewall,” are fairly benign (if confounding to the lay listener). Others, however, have more complex histories. “Master/slave” is one such term. Used to describe an asymmetric relationship between devices or processes, the pair of words have been applied to technological systems since the early 1900s. More recently, the harmful terminology is being replaced with pairs such as “primary/secondary” or even “parent/child.”

This, says Shanae Chapman, whose company, Nerdy Diva, helps businesses develop equitable and inclusive tech practices and platforms, is a step in the right direction.

“This kind of language comes up a lot though, because it’s embedded in the structure of tech companies,” says Chapman. “So, we’ve made resources for teams to learn about more equitable terminology, which helps to make the relationship clear so that people have that understanding moving forward.”

Nerdy Diva does more than that, though. In addition to e-learning modules designed around conscious and anti-racist tech (and more), Chapman’s company provides clients with graphic design help, web support, and expert analysis of ways to improve the user experience of digital products. It’s a full-service suite for budding or growing businesses, all through the lens of inclusive tech. So far, the company has worked with two dozen vendors and partners, including LinkedIn, Camelback Ventures, Lesbians Who Tech, Missouri



*“I THOUGHT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO HAVE A REPRESENTATIVE SHOWING OF BLACK WOMEN IN TECH TO SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO CREATE INCLUSIVE PRODUCTS.”*

—Shanae Chapman, Founder, Nerdy Diva

Environmental Education, Collaborative.ly, and more.

Cheryl Kaplan, CEO of M.Gemi, found that Chapman’s emphasis on the importance of continual learning, and prioritizing quality over quantity, echoed her own core values.

“I firmly believe that these values are indispensable for achieving long-term success, whether you’re building a business or fostering a strong team,” Kaplan says. “They encourage adaptability, the pursuit of excellence, alignment with one’s personal principles, and ethical decision-making—all of which are fundamental for ensuring sustained prosperity. Whether you’re an individual seeking personal growth or a business striving for enduring success, embracing these values is a prudent decision.”

For Chapman, who started the business in 2018 after a decade working at other tech companies, Nerdy Diva was an opportunity to right some of the wrongs in the field.

“I wanted to continue to share information about design and tech and inclusive ways to create tech that works for everyone—and I thought it was important to have a representative showing of Black women in tech,” she says, “to share information about how to create inclusive products.”

Part of that work is creating new pathways for people who are often overlooked in tech fields. During the summer of 2022, Chapman hired the company’s first group of interns—all three of whom were enrolled in the STL Youth Jobs program in St. Louis, Missouri, where Nerdy Diva is based.

“I’m so proud of being able to create jobs and opportunities for underrepresented people in tech,” Chapman says. “In four years, we’ve been able to have summer interns and contractors, and have given them opportunities to grow. After this, I can be a reference for them for other opportunities and jobs they have, to continue opening doors.”





It's this—sharing knowledge and experience, opening doors, and building ladders for the people behind her—that is Chapman's true mission. And Nerdy Diva is just one way of expressing it.

Chapman's been featured in *The New York Times* and on "Good Morning America," in each case sharing advice for jobseekers on negotiating their salaries and asking for raises. She's taught user experience design and web development courses at Northeastern University, Lesley University, Maryville University of Saint Louis, and Fisher College. Most recently (and in addition to running

Nerdy Diva), she's serving as an instructor for LinkedIn Learning, leading curriculum development for the online learning platform.

This is what it's all about for Chapman, and she's not even close to being done. Asked what the future looks like, she rattled off a long—and growing—list of goals:

"Being part of technology and policy discussions about how we use tech in ways that reduce harm and alleviate biases, continuing to work with partners in the community on the city, state, and national level, working with partners in civic

education, building a workforce of conscientious tech leaders, creating equitable systems," she says. "I could keep going."

And she will. ■



by Molly Callahan

# Healthcare has an equity problem. Health Equity Capital invests in its solutions.

**Taja Lester** has seen firsthand how a patient’s race, age, and socioeconomic status can affect the quality of medical care they receive. She founded Health Equity Capital to uplift new companies aiming to do something about it.

Taja Lester was serving on the board of directors for the Women’s Cancer Resource Center, or WCRC, when she knew something had to change.

The nonprofit organization was doing good work—helping people with cancer, often with low incomes or from otherwise marginalized groups, improve their quality of life. And Lester was proud of the many changes the group made in people’s lives. But society’s thumb was tipping the scale against them.

“I observed firsthand that prevention of the disease, diagnosis, progression, access to treatment—all of these were directly affected by race and gender,” Lester says. “And there were very few evidence-based market interventions that were addressing this.”

This, she says, wasn’t the first time she became aware of the way a person’s economic, racial, and gender statuses shape the quality of health care they receive. Nor was her tenure on the WCRC board—from 2019 to 2022—the first time anyone was made aware of the discrepancy among health care and health outcomes based on race.

The National Institutes of Health has been tracking the issue since at least 1990, when it created the

Office of Minority Programs. In the intervening 30 years, that office has expanded to become the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, an organization that “addresses the reality that, in the United States, many racial and ethnic minority populations experience poorer health and greater disparities in health outcomes,” according to its mission statement.

For Lester, her observations at the WCRC were more like the final straw, urging her to act.

In 2020, Lester founded Health Equity Capital, a venture capital fund based in the Bay Area with a mission to help underserved patients benefit from cutting-edge advances in health. In particular, the fund invests in health ventures that are driving more equitable health outcomes for women, underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and people over 65. The goal, Lester says, is to help eradicate health disparities in the U.S. altogether.

As it would turn out, Lester’s timing was prescient.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in earnest in the U.S. in March 2020, exposed and exacerbated existing health disparities. The Kaiser Family Foundation, using data collected by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,



reports that “Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN), and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI) people have experienced higher rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths compared to white people when data are adjusted to account for differences in age by race and ethnicity,” according to a recent report.

“This problem isn’t new by any stretch of the imagination, but when COVID happened and people were seeing, live, what was happening in terms of efficacy and access, the issue really came to life,” Lester says. “We’re in a new age, I think, of moving from describing the problem to actually working toward trying to solve it, and I believe that Health Equity Capital is poised to take a lead role in helping to address that.”

Lester’s vision and her commitment to creating a more equitable health environment for all won acclaim from a panel of judges at this year’s Women Who Empower Innovator Awards.

“Taja has dedicated her career to combating racial, economic, social, and gendered disparities in healthcare,” says Diane N. MacGillivray, senior

vice president for university advancement at Northeastern. “Her work will improve society and the lives of individuals. We are exceedingly proud to count her as a Women Who Empower Innovator and an inspiring leader in our community.”

Lester was “professionally raised in the Bay Area and in Silicon Valley,” she says, and Health Equity Capital is built upon her 30 years of experience in life sciences and technology. Most of her background so far has been outside the venture capital field, and it’s that very experience, she says, that makes her suited for this particular challenge.

Prior to founding Health Equity Capital, Lester spearheaded commercial strategy efforts in oncology for Avastin, a chemotherapy and targeted therapeutic drug, and one of Roche Genentech’s largest brands.

She was also a strategy consultant at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Health Industries, where she advised clients at global, Fortune 10 organizations. Additionally, she took a lead role at Bay Bio (now California Life Science Association) where she successfully sourced deals for global



*“WE’RE IN A NEW AGE, I THINK, OF MOVING FROM DESCRIBING THE PROBLEM TO ACTUALLY WORKING TOWARD TRYING TO SOLVE IT, AND I BELIEVE THAT HEALTH EQUITY CAPITAL IS POISED TO TAKE A LEAD ROLE IN HELPING TO ADDRESS THAT.”*

–Taja Lester, Founder, Healthy Equity Capital

pharmaceutical companies, across multiple markets and indications.

It wasn’t until Lester was knee-deep in her master’s degree program at Mills College at Northeastern University that she pivoted to venture capital-oriented organizations. Lester launched her venture capital career at Bay City Capital, a life science venture capital firm based in San Francisco.

“Everyone who knows me knows I’m a scientist at heart,” she says. “During my time at WCRC, I saw an opportunity to invest in a significant, unmet need. And then I fell in love with the collaborative nature of the life sciences industry. This kind of work requires a significant degree of cross-collaboration, and I get to work with a ton of people who are passionate about what they’re doing. That drives a collaborative spirit, and I literally can’t imagine doing anything else.”

For now, Lester continues to grow Health Equity Capital, and looks for new companies pushing the envelope on quality health care. But in the future, she hopes that her organization will have had a tangible impact on the field.

“I want to have some amazing companies that transform the market from a health equity perspective, and that are clearly great investments, and that are really moving the needle,” Lester says. “I work in a space that is an emerging field, and I believe there’s an opportunity for the life science industry to step up and be a leader.” ■





# At JUICYGREENS, a healthy taste of the world, without leaving the neighborhood.

JUICYGREENS, Ammy Lowney's wellness cafe and juice bar, serves up plant-based, health-conscious juices, smoothies, power bowls, and more—all in the name of food justice and access.

To walk into JUICYGREENS Wellness Cafe and Juice Bar is to be transported to an urban oasis. No longer are you in the bustling business center of Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood, surrounded by whizzing cars and the popping sounds of pickleball players.

Instead, walking through the door of the mint green building is like a warm embrace. Lush, verdant plants hang from the ceiling and climb the walls; wholesome, nutritious (and local) snacks and drinks pepper shelves throughout the gleaming cafe; and floor-to-ceiling windows let in vibrant, natural light—and a view of those pickleball courts, if you're so inclined to watch.

Behind the counter, knowledgeable employees whip up cold-pressed juices, superfood smoothies, power bowls, salads, signature plant-based arepas, and more. The magic ingredients—those namesake juicy greens—are in the kitchen.

Indeed, the idea for JUICYGREENS itself started in a kitchen, says owner and founder Ammy Lowney. For years before she ever started a business, the Boston Public Schools teacher made juices and smoothies for friends and family from her own kitchen—to rave reviews.

"I'm not even kidding, my friends were effusive," she says with a laugh.

At the time, Lowney was a civics teacher, leading her class in a yearly project that always yielded powerful results. She challenged her 11th and 12th grade students to consider a social problem in their communities, then come up with an idea to solve it. Lowney paired groups of students with local organizations and the groups worked together to build out real solutions that could be implemented in the community.

In her sixth year assigning the project, Lowney and her class focused on food access and poverty. Her students organized around issues such as food scarcity, food justice, and food poverty—inequalities that hit close to home in the commonwealth's historically segregated cities and towns.

Take Lawrence, Massachusetts, for example. Home to predominantly Black and Latinx populations, Lawrence also qualifies as a food desert, an area defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as one in which "at least 100 households are located more than one-half mile from the nearest supermarket and have no vehicle access; or at least 500 people, or 33 percent of the population,



*"I WANTED TO KNOW WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO RUN A BUSINESS, TO BE AN ENTREPRENEUR, AND FOOD WAS A PASSION; I WANTED TO FEEL THAT I WAS HAVING AN IMPACT."*

—Ammy Lowney, Founder, JUICYGREENS

live more than 20 miles from the nearest supermarket, regardless of vehicle availability."

These areas of food inequality exist within Boston city limits, as well. A study from Harvard University found that "Dorchester and Roxbury have significant food access disparities," while neighboring "West Roxbury is officially classified as a food desert."

Lowney's students were invested in these issues, and so was she.

"At the end of the project, we realized everything was connected: food justice, climate change, how to solve issues of obesity and sustainability: It all came back to eating more plant-based foods, and eating more locally," she recalls.

The realization piqued Lowney's interest. She was already invested in making highly nutritious juices, smoothies, and bowls for her family and friends. And her family had always been in the business of food: Growing up in Barranquilla, in the northern part of Colombia, Lowney remembers her grandmother selling fruit at the local plaza. "We knew how to hustle," she says. Lowney, too, started to feel an inkling to run a business.

"I wanted to know what it was like to run a business, to be an entrepreneur," Lowney says. "And food was a passion; I wanted to feel that I was having an impact, and this was easy to get into."

Lowney enrolled in a program at Commonwealth Kitchen, a nonprofit food-business incubator in Dorchester, to experiment with her health food concept. Her recipe for success turned into JUICYGREENS, which opened in 2017.

In the years since, the business has grown, and now has four locations: In addition to Jamaica Plain, Lowney has storefronts in Somerville's Assembly Row, Hub Hall in Boston's West End, and, most recently, Westwood, a town south of Boston. Lowney introduced English language and business leadership courses for her employees, and constantly shuffles the menu to reduce food waste. JUICYGREENS has also gained acclaim in news outlets including Eater Boston, Boston Magazine, and WCVB, as well as local outlets such as the Bay State Banner and Jamaica Plain News. In 2022, she was named to the Boston Business Journal's Power 50 Movement Makers—an annual list of "Boston-area business people who are making the biggest impact on the region."





Lowney, who moved to Massachusetts in 2002 as a transfer student at Northeastern won praise from her alma mater for her innovative, and thriving, business in this year's Women Who Empower Innovator Awards. Betsy Ludwig, executive director for women's entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of the Innovator Award organizers, noted Lowney's commitment to pay it forward, as well as her natural business instincts.

"Ammy exemplifies the core values of Women Who Empower, embodying a profound commitment to uplifting and supporting the next generation of women entrepreneurs," Ludwig says. "She is generous with her time, resources, and mentorship—as well as her delicious, sustainably sourced food. We are proud to support the advancement

of Ammy's innovative, eco-friendly, and socially impactful venture."

As Lowney's business has grown, her palate has, too. The menu at JUICYGREENS is a canvas, colored with Lowney's travels and experiences. There's her Colombian culture, represented by the cafe's plant-based arepas (a must-try). There's her commitment to food justice and health, as expressed through the myriad juice, smoothie, and bowl options featuring nutrient-dense local foods. Recently, Lowney visited France and Iceland, and she's already considering new menu items to highlight her culinary adventure.

From Paris, she gained inspiration to use fresh herbs, she says. "We already use cilantro, dill, and parsley, and now I'm looking to incorporate more."

In Iceland, she had "the best overnight oats I've ever had," an experience that may soon translate into a JUICYGREENS menu item.

While the menu is ever-changing, Lowney's passion—for serving up healthy food with a global influence, for uplifting her community, and for solving problems big and small—remains constant. ■



# Cannabis and capital? Life's green (and growing) for Helene Servillon.

Cannabis is an unconventional industry with significant barriers to growth—but **Helene Servillon** is clearing the way. For the founding partner of JourneyOne Ventures, a capital fund that invests in fast-growing cannabis companies, success starts at the roots.

“Most people have a default, negative natural sentiment around cannabis,” says Helene Servillon. But for her—a native of California, the first state to legalize marijuana for medical purposes in the United States—cannabis was less a vice and more a vehicle of social connection while growing up. In San Francisco, she says, “it was just weed.”

Today, another definition seeds Servillon’s current pursuits in venture capital.

“When I talk about cannabis, I like to talk about a plant,” says Servillon, founding partner at JourneyOne Ventures, an early stage venture capital fund that invests in what she calls “misunderstood” markets. And, as access to medicinal and recreational cannabis expands in states across the U.S., that eccentric plant is in need of a rebrand.

The industry is, in a word, complicated. Though some research estimates that the legal cannabis sector will reach between \$50 and \$70 billion in annual sales by the end of the decade—making it, in Servillon’s words, a “high-value crop”—regulatory blockades to business still exist at the federal level.

Cannabis is currently classified by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, or FDA, as a “Schedule 1” substance, defined as a drug “with no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse.” It’s the same designation attributed to heroin and ecstasy, and that bad rap can have serious implications for cannabis entrepreneurs. First, the federal tax code prohibits them from “writ[ing] off of their business expenses.” Second, banks can currently be penalized for providing services to cannabis businesses—which means they often have to rely on all-cash models.

These modern manifestations of the decades-long War on Drugs, which began when President Richard Nixon declared substance abuse America’s “public enemy number one,” have tested Servillon’s ambition to heal and connect people with cannabis—though she’s stayed the course as the national conversation around the plant shifts.

“There are a lot of people who would have given up and gone home,” says Sarah Stewart, venture partner at JourneyOne, which has raised millions in investments so far. “But I don’t think it’s ever once crossed Helene’s mind to stop trying to build.”



**“[JOURNEY IS] A WORD THAT HELPS GROUND ME IN WHAT I’M DOING. YOU MAY NEVER GET TO THE END GOAL. BUT IF THE JOURNEY TO THAT END GOAL ISN’T ENJOYABLE OR FULFILLING, WHY WOULD YOU EVER TAKE THAT JOURNEY?”**

—Helene Servillon, Founder, JourneyOne Ventures

Early in her venture capital career, Servillon discovered little “diversity” among investors. Women, people of color, and members of the queer community weren’t writing the checks, she says. Industries such as cannabis were on the outs, too. Servillon resolved to ditch the status quo of traditional markets and their investors—men, who continue to represent upwards of 80 percent of senior investment professionals—and bring budding businesses and partners together.

At JourneyOne, Servillon pairs fast-growing cannabis companies with investors who have backgrounds in different fields. Because they raise in more established markets, she says, those investors often have more green to give (along with lessons from other industries in their portfolios). In turn, the investors have the opportunity to expand their networks to include people from unexpected and underestimated backgrounds. Those partnerships are what really turn high risk into high reward, says Servillon.

“We’re not just living in the cannabis world,” she says of JourneyOne. “I’ve built relationships and bridges to traditional venture capitalists. Part

of my job as an industry leader is to help them understand our industry.”

The startup scene first intrigued Servillon as she reflected on her co-op experiences at Northeastern, where she studied media communication and business. She’d leaned into her curiosities and tested different roles on co-op, but she yearned for greater challenges than the traditional corporate world could offer her. Her “spirit of being entrepreneurial” would be fully realized, she thought, when she had the chance to build from the ground up.

She spent a few years spearheading distribution and development for electric bicycle companies, then transitioned to voice analytics. The artificial intelligence and machine learning central to her job may have been built for detecting patterns, but Servillon became most interested in breaking them—especially in her own life.

“I didn’t feel it,” says Servillon of her role at the time. “And I wanted to feel [deeply connected to] my work. I wanted to be in a culture that really inspires me, and work with products that really

inspire me.” Before long, she’d given up her office in downtown Los Angeles and embarked on the defining (albeit ongoing) search for a purpose that led her to JourneyOne.

Servillon is a lifelong learner at heart. As the youngest of four siblings who moved around a lot as children, she grew to embrace change as part of her DNA. When her personal and professional foundations inevitably shift, Servillon finds her footing by absorbing what’s new (she’s known for “shotgunning podcasts”), reconsidering what’s known, and accelerating what’s to come. Because, for her, life is an experiment to be tested and questioned.

“I get the sense with Helene that she really enjoys the process,” says Stewart, who started out as an investor with JourneyOne. She’d caught on to Servillon’s tenacious energy from their first call, admiring how she balanced the agility required of her startup mindset and the cannabis industry with her unwavering, long-term vision to change markets and minds.

The journey has been winding, and that’s the whole point. Upon founding the fund, Servillon was conscious that—if it were to be anything like her or the cannabis industry itself—JourneyOne would need to evolve to meet the moment. Its moniker, then, would communicate the growth and momentum to come.

“[Journey is] a word that helps ground me in what I’m doing,” says Servillon. “You may never get to the end goal. But if the journey to that end goal isn’t enjoyable or fulfilling, why would you ever take that journey?”

It’s been a literal trip, too. Servillon recently charted a European tour from Stockholm and Berlin to Amsterdam and London to assess potential international opportunities for JourneyOne. Though legalization and operation are a “whole different

ball game” outside the U.S., she says, the potential to augment our lives is the same. And she’s not just talking about cannabis.

Take, for example, Servillon’s mindfulness retreat in the countryside of Holland. There, she embarked on her first facilitated psychedelic experience among a “room full of healers.” Her mind? Blown.

“I gained so much from this,” she says of the retreat. “How can I create more opportunities for people of all classes and wealth demographics to get this same kind of help [in] their lives?”

Servillon’s ability to bring people and resources together is her hallmark, says Stewart. The “village” at the center of JourneyOne—rich with social capital—is what makes progress in an industry as challenging as cannabis possible, she says. That’s why, as new markets emerge across the U.S. and internationally, Servillon remains committed to learning about the people she encounters beyond what they do professionally.

“Your work will always change,” says Servillon. “I’d rather learn about your life journey and where you want to be on it.” ■



# On vacation and need to rent a scooter? How this award-winning startup is connecting tourists with equipment, adventures, and local knowledge.

**Madison Rifkin's** platform Mount connects travelers and allows them to rent equipment, book curated experiences, and gather knowledge of the local communities they visit.

Locked down at her home in Denver during the pandemic, Madison Rifkin couldn't sit still. Rolling around in her head was an idea to help her startup company evolve.

So, she drove around the state putting electric scooters at Airbnb properties looking to answer the question—would people rent them?

Three years later, the Northeastern graduate is now the CEO of Mount, a growing recreational rental company. It connects tourists through a software platform that allows them to rent equipment, as well as purchase experiences and gain knowledge of the local communities they visit.

The biggest secret of the micro-mobility industry, Rifkin says, is knowing that people who use scooters are not always commuters. So, she put a bunch outside rental properties to test the tourist market.

It wasn't that Airbnb hosts needed scooters, Rifkin says. They needed a software platform that could turn anything into a rentable amenity. That's what Mount is providing.

Headquartered in New York, the company now has 10 employees and a marketplace of more than 40,000 experiences that include rentable equip-

ment, tours, and local knowledge that elevates a vacation. There are over 230,000 travelers in the ecosystem, and the company is working on growing short-term rental accommodations.

"In five years, the goal is to get everyone traveling with just a backpack and then renting everything at that destination," Rifkin says. "That's where we're going."

Mark Bernfeld, a Northeastern faculty mentor and investor in Mount, first met Rifkin when she was a first-year student. During an event on the Boston campus, Bernfeld remembers Rifkin pitching her initial idea for the company to a room full of mostly older men.

"I thought she was amazing," Bernfeld says. "She was so brave, strong, powerful."

When Bernfeld is deciding to invest in companies, he said he always looks for passionate entrepreneurs. And Rifkin was "wonderfully passionate since day one."

During Rifkin's time at Northeastern from 2016 to 2021, she studied entrepreneurship and quickly became involved in everything from clubs to innovator groups.



*"IN FIVE YEARS, THE GOAL IS TO GET EVERYONE TRAVELING WITH JUST A BACKPACK AND THEN RENTING EVERYTHING AT THAT DESTINATION. THAT'S WHERE WE'RE GOING."*

—Madison Rifkin, CEO, Mount

However, the entrepreneurial bug hit her before she set foot on campus. Living in Colorado, an outdoorsy state, Rifkin used to bike to school all the time. But she'd often leave home without her bike lock.

"My memory is so bad that I would forget the lock," Rifkin says.

So, she set out to find a solution—one that didn't include being less forgetful.

"To me, I was always a problem solver," she says. Rifkin began to question why someone had never built a lock into the bike's frame. This prompted her to create her own design, which she entered into her middle school's invention contest. The prototype earned her a fully funded patent.

When deciding where to attend college, Rifkin considered schools closer to home. When she asked her high school guidance counselor about Northeastern, the counselor said it probably wouldn't be a good fit because that's where people go to become CEOs.

"I was like, 'Hi, that's what I want to do.' You don't know my ambitions," Rifkin says. "I was sold."

Throughout her time at Northeastern, her idea for a company evolved as she learned more about entrepreneurship and the market.

"There's a ton of bike locks out there, and trying to force someone to use a new one was trying very hard to do something that no one had a real problem for," Rifkin says. "So, I became a scooter

lock company."

Rifkin began to work with Bird and Lime, both electric bike and scooter companies, when they were still in their infancy.

"Then COVID hit, and everything came crashing down," Rifkin says. It also gave her the time to reinvent her company to focus on recreational rentals.

But, Mount still didn't have a product-market fit and was having difficulty finding funding. Rifkin says she probably pitched about 200 venture capitalists and everyone turned her down.

"I was like, that's fine. I'll just keep coming back, and you will one day say yes," Rifkin says.

Instead, she self-funded the company with money she earned during her Northeastern co-ops and prize money she won at competitions.

Right after Rifkin graduated in 2021, she attended a startup accelerator in Hawaii. At the end of the program, she returned to Northeastern and pitched it at the university's RISE Expo.

In a few weeks after that pitch, the company had raised over a million dollars.

"Northeastern has been very helpful to me," Rifkin says.

Bernfeld says Rifkin is an example of how women can be successful in business.

"I encourage young women to look up to Maddie as living what they could live," he shares. ■

# Cat person or dog person? Dania Alnahdi embraces another category: pet health advocate.



Early signs of disease in animals can go undetected by pet parents. By the time visible symptoms emerge, the wellbeing of feline or canine patients may already be compromised. **Dania Alnahdi** founded biotech startup Cora Care to change that.

Moonie had always been a playful kitten. She was the first Alnahdi family pet, and proved for eldest sister Dania that love at first sight was possible and palpable. Before long, says Alnahdi, she'd morphed into an "anxious pet parent" with her eye and mind on all things Moonie. So, when the feline—already a picky eater—became lethargic, Alnahdi's caretaking senses heightened.

Then came the "big surprise," she says. There was blood in Moonie's urine.

One misdiagnosis, three months, and countless veterinary visits later, clinicians had finally pinpointed the culprit: late-stage kidney disease. By then, Moonie had lost a kidney and was prescribed medication to stabilize her symptoms.

"It was a huge shock for us to know that, this whole time, she was developing a chronic disease and was probably in pain," says Alnahdi, a graduate of Northeastern's Khoury College of Computer Sciences. Though Moonie eventually healed, Alnahdi anticipates that long-term impacts from her illness could limit the cat's life expectancy.

The outcome for Moonie may have been different—if Alnahdi and her family had access to her biotech startup, Cora Care, back then.

The company's at-home diagnostics tool, still in development, aims to detect early signs of disease in pets. It's a rapid, noninvasive test that owners will administer on their own time and turf. The simple process starts with a smart strip, swabbed on a pet's cheek to gather key biomarkers such as cortisol, glucose, and CRP (or C-reactive protein, high levels of which can indicate inflammation or infection). The strip is then inserted into an accompanying device which, within one minute, will send a health report to the pet parent's mobile phone with a Bluetooth signal.

The Cora Care system is intended to collect data about a pet over time, using machine learning and information provided by the owner (such as breed, weight, and height) to make ongoing assessments and recommendations for preventative care. It's "technology with purpose," says Alnahdi.

Alnahdi, who acts as engineer and user design whiz at Cora Care, attributes her startup mindset

to the agility and resourcefulness required at hackathons. The summits encourage participants to think holistically and leverage their unique technical skills as they develop products to improve or augment life as they know it. While at Hack for the People, for example, Alnahdi coded a rating system to assign sustainability scores to restaurants. All the while, she was focused on her end users; those diners who would be empowered to visit eateries which fulfilled Alnahdi's sustainability criteria.

It's as if life itself is a sandbox for Alnahdi, who expertly measures risks, assembles teams, and transforms motivation into execution at every stage of the journey. After graduating in 2021, she prepared for her next opportunity to do exactly that: the Master of Science in Innovation and Management program at Tufts University's Gordon Institute.

The program is a lot like Shark Tank, says Alnahdi's former classmate and Cora Care co-founder Hadley Haselmann. Complete with a pitching marathon to determine viable ideas and establish startup teams, the end goal of the experience is to launch and fund student ventures. While some groups and pursuits shifted after the end of their

first semester, Cora Care—both the team and the venture—endured for the full year.

"We set the tone for the work and effort we wanted to put in, and our team decided to give it our all," says Alnahdi. She remembers balancing midterm exams with pet health expos where she networked and conducted market research with pet owners. Her schedule was also stacked with hours spent tinkering in the lab with Tufts researchers on the Cora Care prototype. The company's namesake, dog of fellow co-founder Jaime, even snuggled up with them as they prepared for their final presentation.

An accelerated track toward launch could splinter any team. But open communication and skillful matching of team members' different, yet complementary, abilities helped them survive the "organized chaos" that defines most startups, says Haselmann.

"Dania was celebrating my strengths because she knew they helped her. And I was celebrating hers because I knew I needed them." While Alnahdi thrives with user design and organization, Haselmann embraces her role as networker and idea generator, she says.



Cora Care arrived on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, when at-home swabs were commonplace and pet adoptions were on the rise. One year later, the prototype is progressing through the development and market validation phases. Alnahdi considers future market testing the first of major milestones to come for her team members. Until then, they're pursuing accelerator programs like MassChallenge, in which Cora Care was a recent finalist.

It's an achievement that may not have seemed possible for Alnahdi while growing up in Bahrain.

"The one thing that I didn't really experience [in Bahrain] was computer science or technology education," she reflects now. But she made her way, and made it her mission to help aspiring technology leaders from all backgrounds do the same.

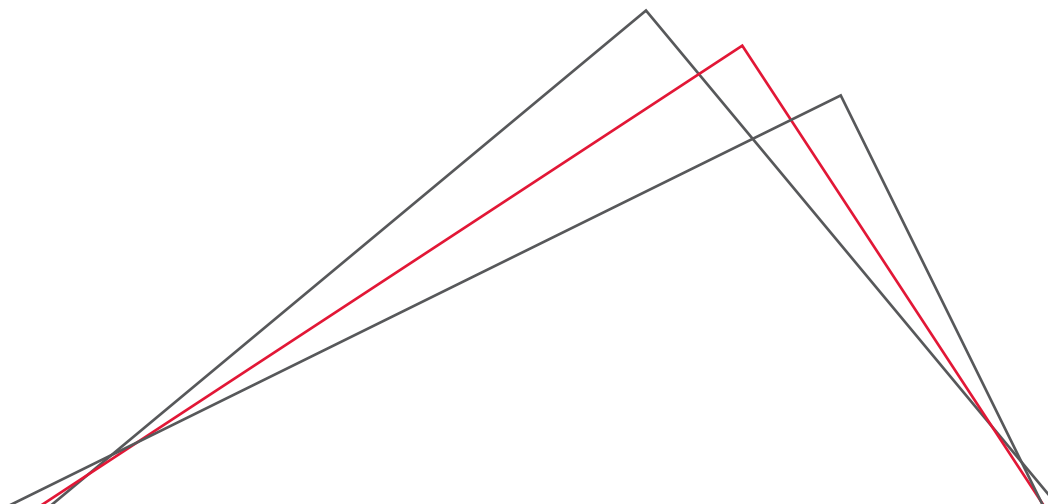
Alnahdi earned recognition among Northeastern's 2021 Huntington 100 for founding NU MULTI, which fosters diversity and inclusion among her Khoury College peers. She's also encouraged her sisters, Jumana, currently a Northeastern student, and Mayar, in high school, to dabble in computer science. At her first hackathon, though, Mayar did more than dabble—she won.

It's an "honor," says Alnahdi, to witness not just representation but also undeniable success. "Just to see [my sisters] being encouraged to explore these fields, and having the courage to do so, makes me really happy." ■



**"WE SET THE TONE FOR THE WORK AND EFFORT WE WANTED TO PUT IN, AND OUR TEAM DECIDED TO GIVE IT OUR ALL."**

—Dania Alnahdi, Founder, Cora Care



# Long hair, do care. Sustainability is more than an accessory for Gina-Maria Garcia—it's a lifestyle.

Spirit Clips turn university sports stands into sustainability cheer sections. The colorful, clip-in extensions are founder **Gina-Maria Garcia's** latest BUYa Beauty product with a purpose.

Blue and gold curls blend with Gina-Maria Garcia's natural brown tresses. The colorful extensions, or Spirit Clips, complement her University of California, Los Angeles T-shirt. Though it isn't game day at UCLA, it is game on for Garcia. Football season is near, and the BUYa Beauty founder's got the winning accessories. On this August afternoon, she's nearby campus to share her hair extensions with salons and sports stores who'll soon welcome Bruins fans.

Sure, the extensions look great, but they feel even better, says Garcia. Curl them, crimp them, and wash them to style all over again. Made from real human hair (as opposed to synthetic fibers), her extensions inspire confidence in wearers—but that's just the start. BUYa Beauty's sustainability mission also encourages wearers to be mindful consumers. A portion of Spirit Clips proceeds contributes to BUYa Beauty's partnership with Matter of Trust, a San Francisco-based ecological nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting sustainable interventions.

"What better way to empower women than to give them a product that could help them solve real problems in this world," says Garcia, who studied

journalism while an undergraduate student at Northeastern University's College of Arts, Media and Design. Relationships with sustainability-minded organizations such as the UCLA Store and Matter of Trust, she says, are a "huge deal" for BUYa Beauty. Though she officially launched in 2021, Garcia's market research has been more than a decade in the making.

Back in high school, Garcia says, she had the "longest, thickest, most beautiful hair ever." But she remembers when, at 16, undiagnosed depression and untreated infectious mononucleosis, or mono, left her without an appetite. Before long, she started losing her hair. As she recovered, her mom took her shopping for extensions to bolster her locks and her confidence.

"I was so excited that I put them all in," says Garcia, who was soon teasing and styling her many layers. As she perfected her look, she decided to take her favorite accessory to the next level—more full, more discreet—and developed her very own prototype. The first step was, of course, sourcing the human hair itself. So, Garcia placed an order online for samples. She remembers opening the box to find "the worst quality hair that I had seen in my

whole life." She couldn't help but ask: Whose hair is that? And where did it come from?

Garcia set out to investigate the source, just as she did in her classes and on Dialogue of Civilizations reporting trips to Jordan and Spain with Carlene Hempel, teaching professor in Northeastern's journalism department.

"That is the reporter mindset," says Hempel of Garcia's commitment to understand the full picture of the human hair extensions industry. "She was on a fact-finding mission."

The years-long investigation brought Garcia up and down the hair supply chain—from collecting samples to processing and manufacturing them. She discovered that landfills and labor camps around the world were often the suppliers at the root of products sold in the United States.

"It's a very secretive business with a lot of dark and unethical practices that I wasn't comfortable with," Garcia reflects.

Beyond sourcing, the actual production of hair extensions also confounded Garcia. Overprocessing with chemicals means that a sizable portion of hair is often damaged and lost along the way. To

**"WHAT BETTER WAY TO EMPOWER WOMEN THAN TO GIVE THEM A PRODUCT THAT COULD HELP THEM SOLVE REAL PROBLEMS IN THIS WORLD."**

—Gina-Maria Garcia, Founder, BUYa Beauty







and injustices from a “different angle.”

“You have to know what you don’t know, and then go after the answers to those questions,” agrees Hempel. She calls Garcia a true “global citizen,” striving to make a difference in whichever corner of the world she finds herself.

The journey to market—and a saturated one at that—has been challenging for Garcia. That’s because education has been both an opportunity and an obstacle for her company. In the early days, as Garcia embarked on a salon roadshow to promote her first extensions, she felt as if she carried a metaphorical bullhorn. She was the voice for an underexplored and overwhelming problem that stylists and customers were new to confront. Though they’re catching up with Spirit Clips, that gap in knowledge has delayed, and transformed, Garcia’s hair extensions movement.

Remember her first prototype? Garcia was her

own customer for the handwoven, easy-to-conceal product intended to fill out a wearer’s hair. She spent two years marketing that initial design to celebrity stylists before realizing that it wasn’t, contrary to her mission, sustainable to maintain. The business-to-business model came with a higher price point; that, combined with minimal awareness about the complex industry, Garcia says, were barriers to widespread adoption by new customers.

“I had to make the hard decision as an entrepreneur to completely pivot my business by offering a different product,” she says. At first, it felt like an “identity crisis” for the founder—though her previous experience in luxury marketing with brands such as Magellan Jets and Mercedes-Benz helped her to embrace her next move.

She realized that, because her initial concept was designed to go unnoticed, it’d always come with an inherent “problem for going viral.” Around

that time, Garcia shopped around sports stores for gear to support the Los Angeles Rams in the Super Bowl. When she found limited options in the women’s section, she dyed her BUYa Beauty pieces blue and gold. She clipped them in for a Super Bowl party, and the compliments rolled in.

Garcia had inadvertently created the Christian Louboutin of human hair extensions, she says now. (Think about those can’t-miss red soles.) Her bright accessories would be a way for the wearer to express themselves through style, she says, but they’d also act as a visual cue for the quality of the hair they’re sourced from.

The “why” of BUYa Beauty—empowerment, ethicality, environment—emerged in conversation with Garcia’s late business mentor Michael S. Saddik, she says. She remembers arriving at the Cubano Room, his favorite cigar lounge in Newport Beach, with her tentative business plan in hand. He encouraged her, even if just for a moment, to think less about the plan and more about her purpose. Her holistic solution for problematic extensions emerged.

“He really set me on this path for caring deeply about what I’m doing,” Garcia says. And breakthroughs followed. Saddik was a sounding board and a patient test audience before big pitches, and he was an established voice that landed Garcia in rooms she may not have entered otherwise, she says. Saddik passed shortly before her Spirit Clips launch, but Garcia believes he’s witness to her success just the same.

“It’s kind of cool to think that I have a business mentor on the other side,” she says. “He can see things that I can’t see.”

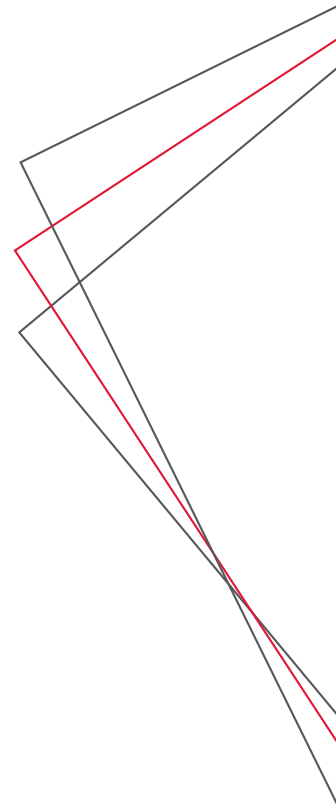
Garcia has set her sights on an expanding list of university clients as Spirit Clips gain traction. If she has her way, extensions to celebrate her Red and Black pack may be on the horizon. Northeastern

pride runs in her family, after all. Her parents met on campus, and her sister followed in their footsteps when she enrolled. Garcia joined the Northeastern family soon after.

“I want to be wearing my Huskies T-shirt, and my Huskies hair!”

The physical manifestation of Garcia’s tenacity and experiential attitude, honed inside and outside of Northeastern classrooms, would make total sense for Hempel.

“She’s doing it,” she says of Garcia’s startup mindset. “And she’s doing it on her terms.” ■



# She conquered chronic disease like a boss. Now she'll help others do it, too.

**Lilly Stairs** was diagnosed with two chronic illnesses at just 19 years old. She is determined to have a booming career and manage her conditions—and she wants other women to have it all, too.

In the United States, six in 10 people are living with a chronic disease. In the summer after her first year at Northeastern University, Lilly Stairs became one of them. The then 19-year-old was diagnosed with two chronic illnesses in a six-month timespan—events that would lead her to become a staunch advocate for herself and others facing similar diagnoses.

For Stairs, it began as knee pain. But it progressed quickly and spread throughout her body—until one morning she simply couldn't get up, Stairs recalls. Her mother helped her get dressed and eat, and after a number of different medical appointments, Stairs was diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis.

"I was devastated and confused," Stairs remembers of those first few weeks. "It was really a shock. I had come off my freshman year at Northeastern on cloud nine, now here I was bedridden with total-body arthritis. I had to fight just to get back to school."

Six months later, Stairs was hospitalized again, this time with new symptoms. Doctors found bleeding ulcers in her small intestine, and soon, she had another diagnosis: Crohn's disease.

"Within six months, I was given diagnoses of two

chronic illnesses that I will live with for the rest of my life," Stairs says. So, she did what anyone would do when presented with a mysterious challenge and an internet connection: She Googled it.

Stairs found that millions of Americans are living with autoimmune disorders. The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences puts the figure at 24 million, while the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association (for which Stairs currently chairs the Board of Directors) estimates that it's closer to 50 million.

"Autoimmune disorder" is an umbrella term for more than 100 diseases, many of which occur in clusters. The list includes relatively well-known disorders such as Stairs's diagnoses of psoriatic arthritis and Crohn's disease, as well as lupus, fibromyalgia, and chronic Lyme disease, in addition to many disorders that only affect a small percentage of people. In each case, immune cells, designed to attack invading viruses or bacteria, instead mistakenly attack the body—damaging the very cells they're meant to protect.

"Most people know someone who has an autoimmune disorder," Stairs says she realized from her hospital bed. "At that moment, I became an advocate."



*"I WANT AS MANY WOMEN AS POSSIBLE TO FEEL EMPOWERED AND CONFIDENT THAT THEY CAN HAVE AN INCREDIBLE CAREER WHILE LIVING WITH THEIR CHRONIC CONDITION. I WANT THEM TO SEE OTHER WOMEN WHO ARE THRIVING, MAKING MONEY, AND CRUSHING IT."*

—Lilly Stairs, Founder, Chronic Boss Collective

Now 31, Stairs has been in medically controlled remission for eight years, a fact which only means more time to advocate for others. Chief among these efforts is a new organization, the Chronic Boss Collective, that Stairs created to bring together other ambitious, driven women living with chronic illnesses.

"Having been in this advocacy space for a decade now, I've always felt like there wasn't a space for me. I'm an ambitious career woman who is also living with multiple chronic conditions, and there's never been a space that holds both of those things to be true," Stairs says.

The Chronic Boss Collective is designed to fill that space. The group, which will launch in early 2024, is emphatically not a support group, Stairs says. Rather, it's a membership-based networking organization for business-minded women with chronic conditions.

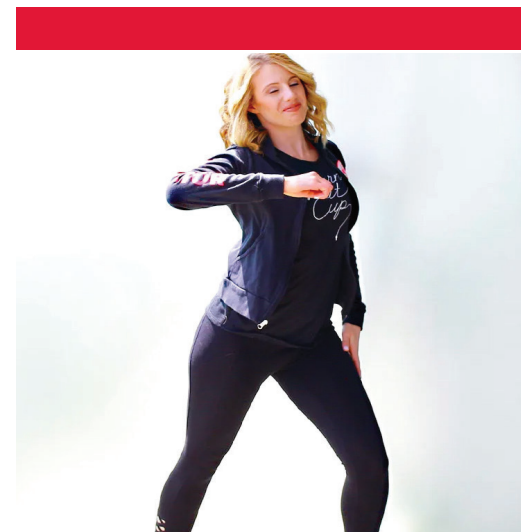
"There's this magic when you take somebody who has been diagnosed with a chronic condition, or many chronic conditions, and let them lead. These are women who have gone through hell, but they're choosing ambition; they want to make an impact, and they're driven in their career. It's a

special type of person," Stairs says. "It's my belief that, if I can create a space for these women to connect, collaborate, and grow together, we can really move mountains."

Long before Northeastern and Stairs's network of like-minded women, and before she became a sought-after speaker and advocate, she was just a teenager who had to radically reorganize her life. Stairs fought for her own care, and, as she slowly regained her strength, fought just as hard for others.

She returned to campus and, in 2014, organized a campaign called "50 Cents for 50 Million" to raise money for the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association. Within two years—while finishing up her studies—Stairs raised \$20,000 for the organization. She graduated in 2015 with a bachelor's degree in communications, and the following year joined the board of the autoimmune association. She served as its interim CEO for a period in 2021, and eventually rose to chair of the board, a position she's held since early 2022. Around that time, Stairs also created a thriving patient advocacy consultancy business called Patient Authentic.





That Stairs's advocacy work has been so impactful is no surprise to Greg Goodale, a former lawyer, lobbyist, and Congressional aide who taught Stairs while she was at Northeastern.

"I used to work in Washington, D.C., and I was a lawyer, so I know advocacy. Lilly just has the talent for it," says Goodale, who retired in 2022 from his position as associate professor in communication studies at Northeastern. "She understands when something's not right, and she fights like the dickens to make sure it is right."

Stairs took, aced, and in short order was hired as a teaching assistant for an advocacy writing class Goodale taught. "She's still, to this day, the young-

est TA I ever had—and the only person to TA for me twice—because she's just that good," he says.

Stairs sees her work as all the more necessary now, as thousands of people with long-haul COVID-19 symptoms join the growing community of people with chronic conditions.

"These are people who are experiencing living with a chronic condition for the first time in their lives," she says. "They're going to need support, and they're going to need people to advocate for them."

For those people, many of whom will likely follow in her footsteps and turn to Google for answers, Stairs's goal is that the Chronic Boss Collective

becomes one of the many results that come up. "I want as many women as possible to feel empowered and confident that they can have an incredible career while living with their chronic condition," she says. "You go through so many questions in those first days, and when women are diagnosed, I want them to see other women who are thriving, making money, and crushing it, in addition to everything else they'll find." ■



# Skincare can be more than skin deep. Divya Malpani wants that to sink in.

Frustrated by the dearth of skincare products for people with brown skin, **Divya Malpani** founded **Skinvest**: an Indian skincare brand dedicated to the physical and mental health of Indian customers.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the world as she knew it fell still, Divya Malpani got moving on her first big venture. Her gap semester in India wasn't a "gap" in learning at all. Instead, it was a way to start building bridges with the future manufacturers and consumers of Skininvest—her skincare brand with offerings formulated to pamper and protect brown skin.

Malpani's calling to skincare first emerged in childhood, when she sampled products from her grandmother's own regimen. Though her experimentation was initially a source of joy and confidence, Malpani's teenage years brought new stressors. Hormonal acne eventually landed her in dermatology offices, and what was once a hobby soon morphed into a "chore."

Yet Skininvest is anything but a drudgery; it returns Malpani—and, she hopes, many others—to a feeling of excitement about skincare.

It's also a direct response to frustrations experienced by her friends with different skin types. Malpani remembers her spring break at Northeastern, when the same bottle of sunscreen was passed among and applied by all members of her group. As Malpani and her friends would learn later, the formula's efficacy varied widely because it hadn't been made for nor tested on their range of skin colors.

"We need certain ingredients, and in certain percentages," says Malpani. Her solution—an Indian skincare brand dedicated to Indian customers—combines products backed by science with an overall wellness mission to serve a more diverse customer base. Malpani's brand is broad: In addition to consumers with different complexions, Skininvest invites those of all gender identities and expressions to participate in what's often considered a stereotypically feminine experience. For her, the act of nourishing our largest organ is an inclusive opportunity for self-care.

"Everyone has skin, so skincare is for everyone," says Malpani, who studied business administration at Northeastern. Her line of products, now stocked by international retailers such as Amazon, encourages users to prioritize both their physical and mental health with each layer and lather.

With her 2020 experience as a catalyst, Malpani powered through time differences and worked late into the evenings on Skininvest once she'd returned to Northeastern's Boston campus. Just after her 2021 graduation, she officially launched the brand in February and set her sights on a successful expansion to the U.S. market.

Malpani came to Northeastern with purpose. The opportunity to walk "in the shoes of an employee"



**"EVERYONE HAS SKIN, SO SKINCARE IS FOR EVERYONE."**

—Divya Malpani, Founder, Skininvest

and immerse herself in U.S. business practices while on co-op certainly drew her to the university. After all, her family's endeavors in real estate, entertainment, and chewing tobacco back home in India meant that entrepreneurship was already in her DNA. But Malpani credits her success with Skininvest in large part to Cheryl Mitteness.

"She changed the whole game plan for me," Malpani says of the associate teaching professor of entrepreneurship and innovation at Northeastern's D'Amore-McKim School of Business. The pair first connected for a Dialogue of Civilizations program that brought them to Sicily, where students like Malpani acted as consultants for local entrepreneurs eager to expand across the world. Soon after, Malpani enrolled in Mitteness's course on marketing strategies for startups.

When Mitteness asked her students to reflect on what makes them passionate, what makes them get up in the morning, Malpani had her answer. She shared her vision for Skininvest, and her classmates decided to pursue it as one of their projects that semester.

"They were a dream group," remembers Mitteness. "And I think that's because Divya was the leader." As she explored the Skininvest voice and developed brand guidelines with her group members,

Malpani began to shed her own expectations of her entrepreneurial path—that she'd follow her family into real estate. As it happened, she had that in common with Mitteness. And though it's not off the table as a future venture, real estate took a back seat so that Skininvest could soar.

Malpani has combined her skincare passion with her strong family network and now operates out of their headquarters in India. She's grown her team from a "one-woman army" to include colleagues tasked with everything from orders and operations to graphic design and performance marketing. The warehouse that stores her products—like the memorable "Bomb Bum" cream Mitteness once heard about in class—is just a 10-minute drive away.

Charisma and professionalism, far more than familial ties, have propelled Malpani and her business, says Mitteness.

"Without those family connections, she'd still be wildly successful. She's one of those people that you meet and you think, 'She's going to go places.'"

Skininvest's topical solutions are just the start. Dietary factors, environmental conditions, and stress levels all contribute to skin health, explains Malpani. Her latest brand extension, SkinVision, is a service that connects customers with a certified cosmetologist for personalized lifestyle recommendations. It empowers customers to reduce toxins and boost their "good dopamine" endorphins, Malpani says.

From clinical to calm, cool, and collected. Just like Skininvest. ■



# Want your beauty product stocked by Sephora? Ask Chahhat Lakhwani Melwani how it's done.

**Chahhat Lakhwani Melwani** built her beauty brand, Cleyo Beauty, on a foundation of minimal steps, quality ingredients, and effective formulas to treat all skin types.

Cleanse. Exfoliate. Tone. Oil. Moisturize. And then some.

“So many beauty brands tell you that you should use 10 beauty routine steps every day,” says Chahhat Lakhwani Melwani, founder of Cleyo Beauty. But often, she explains, the chemistry of those many products and their unique ingredients doesn’t quite gel. In fact, competing formulations can react poorly and damage your skin, Melwani says. Not to mention the daily time investment required of a multi-step routine.

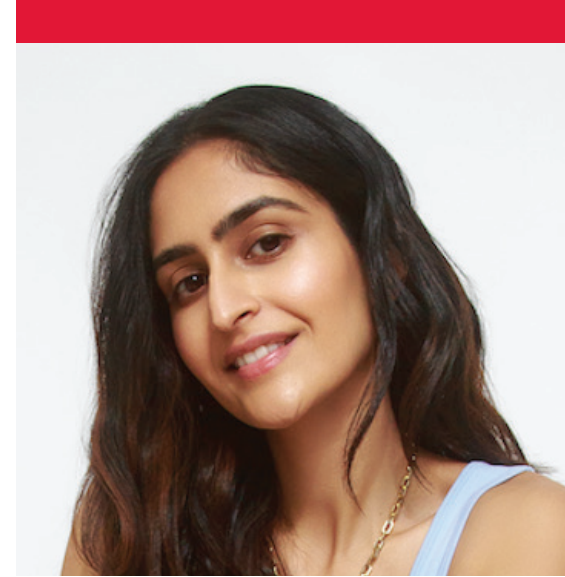
Cleyo is Melwani’s antidote to complexity. The super minimal skincare brand is all about quality ingredients, rather than steps, she says. Currently on the shelf: rose cream cleanser, milky toner, and banana softy moisturizer, which contains turmeric and squalane (both anti-inflammatory agents that soothe and nourish skin).

“I try to be as purposeful as possible with the formulas, using ingredients that are really effective for sensitive skin,” says Melwani, who earned her bachelor’s degree in business administration from Northeastern University. Those ingredi-

ents, inspired by Melwani’s travels to farms and vineyards across the globe, are the foundation for her collaborations with chemists in South Korea, where Cleyo products are developed and manufactured. Once she’s got samples in hand, Melwani tests them with real clients—young people between 23 and 38 whom she hopes will relish both a streamlined routine and the “natural glow that [they] deserve” with Cleyo.

Melwani first launched Cleyo in her home country of Chile in 2021, and in just two years, she’s already experienced a major “pinch me” moment as she expands: her products are now available for purchase online at Sephora U.K. In the saturated beauty market—often dominated by the incessant rollout of celebrity- and influencer-backed products—such expansion and scale are particularly impressive, says Melwani, who currently lives in the United Kingdom. She considers her ingredient-forward brand and affordable price point among the factors that make Cleyo stand out.

Business runs in the Lakhwani family. It all started with Melwani’s father, she says, who left school in India and embarked for Chile when he was just



16 years old. Before long, he’d found a fresh start in textiles and began distributing clothing around Latin America. His entrepreneurial mindset likely inspired his son, Jiten Lakhwani, on what would become a transformative trip to South Korea.

There, Jiten Lakhwani discovered that K-Beauty, a category of skincare products derived from South Korea, was an “untapped market segment” in Chile, says Melwani. Research on Chilean clientele to match their needs with K-Beauty offerings came next, then the first Sokobox beauty shop opened its doors.

Now, the family business—which imports, represents, and distributes more than 20 K-Beauty brands, including Cleyo, at 10 locations—is “dominating” the beauty market in Chile, Melwani says. In six years of business, the Lakhwanis have continued to prioritize and collect customer research as Sokobox grows. The same is true for Cleyo, the family’s first skincare product of its own. “Our approach is to create a community,” says Melwani. “[We] ask what they’re looking for and create what they want.” The titular ingredient in

her banana softy moisturizer, for example, may not be common in skincare—but it’s something Chilean clients were eager to experience in Cleyo formulations, Melwani says. It’s also a tribute to India, she adds, where bananas are among “the most famous fruits.”

Melwani’s ongoing dialogue with customers manifests in transparent and informative marketing campaigns. She embraces digital content creation, primarily video tutorials, as tools for both selling products and raising awareness about her quality ingredients and their related health benefits. As the only full-time employee at Cleyo, Melwani spearheads both her organic and paid strategies, supplementing her efforts with help from freelance creators who contribute to Cleyo’s design aesthetic and website presence.

Melwani’s ambition and perseverance have fueled her mission to add value to beauty consumers’ lives, says Lakhwani, who doubles as brother and industry mentor. The CEO of Sokobox says he’s encouraged Melwani to “believe it before you see it,” a mantra that keeps them both going in a competitive international market.

“I see the constant hard work and passion,” Lakhwani says of Melwani. “[It’s] something I really look up to.”

Melwani’s ability to balance skills and passions simultaneously, shifting as beauty trends and life circumstances change, is perhaps most apparent in her major career pivot from hospitality to skin-care. In 2019, she decided to pursue her master’s degree in hospitality administration and management, honing her customer service skills while she and her family considered opening their own hotel. Her studies brought her to Europe, where, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

“If COVID hadn’t happened, maybe I would’ve had a different career,” Melwani says now. She’d decided to return home to Chile as people around the globe reckoned with the rapidly spreading disease, and she began working for Sokobox. She says a notable side effect of constant mask-wearing was the spark for Cleyo: dry lips. She met the needs of the moment and launched her brand with a lip care line for the Chilean market.



**“OUR APPROACH IS TO CREATE A COMMUNITY. [WE] ASK WHAT THEY’RE LOOKING FOR AND CREATE WHAT THEY WANT.”**

—Chahhat Lakhwani Melwani, Founder, Cleyo Beauty

“[Chahhat] managed to create a brand from zero,” says Lakhwani. “She [also] created wonderful products with excellent active ingredients which have our customers extremely engaged and passionate about her brand.”

With Sephora U.K. shoppers now among them, Melwani is as focused as ever on her global expansion. Her new relationship with Beauty and the Boutique, which offers curated beauty recommendations, will allow Melwani to reach buyers

in the U.K., U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.

Among her offerings for them will be the second generation of the Cleyo lip product that started it all. Her all-in-one solution to exfoliate and hydrate launches in 2024. ■





by Beth Treffeisen

# She's giving underserved small-business owners the marketing tools they need to succeed.

**Adebukola Ajao** combines her passions for social justice and for marketing to help elevate underserved Black-owned businesses. She's also a mentor, a professor, and a role model for small-business owners from disadvantaged communities.

Adebukola Ajao is an online digital marketing guru equipped to help small businesses with the tools to compete.

A 2021 graduate of Northeastern, Ajao was recently honored with a Women Who Empower Innovator Award in the young graduate alumnae category for her creation of For All Things Digital.

Born and raised in Boston, Ajao grew up across the street from Northeastern's campus. As an undergraduate student, she worked with the university's John D. O'Bryant African American Institute to start a social justice activist coalition.

During that time, she also started BDY Consult, an online marketing company. But she quickly realized she needed to further her education if she wanted to grow her business. So she applied to Northeastern's graduate program in digital marketing. She was accepted and received a scholarship.

That program allowed Ajao to combine her passion for marketing and helping underserved Black-owned businesses. "During my time as a business owner, as a student, I also wanted to leverage

my digital marketing knowledge to impact Black lives," Ajao says.

Ajao is currently balancing three jobs. During the day, she works at Brookline High School as a project manager, helping students explore their entrepreneurial opportunities and secure college scholarships. At night, she works as an adjunct professor at Northeastern, teaching in the same program she earned a degree from.

In between, Ajao works on her business. She has a team of six people located all over the country. BDY Consult works to help small business owners see themselves as marketers. "My slogan is, 'if you're in business, marketing is your business,'" Ajao says. "It's essential for every small business owner to have a working, walking knowledge of marketing at all times."

The internet provides boundless opportunities to grow a business, Ajao says. Even brick-and-mortar businesses are digital. What a business does online shadows what it does in person, she says. Having an online presence allows people from around the world to touch a business.



*"DURING MY TIME AS A BUSINESS OWNER, AS A STUDENT, I ALSO WANTED TO LEVERAGE MY DIGITAL MARKETING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPACT BLACK LIVES."*

—Adebukola Ajao, Founder, For All Things Digital

BDY Consult, unlike larger online companies, helps clients build a business concept from the ground up—from brainstorming a name to registering the company to even legal paperwork.

Once the foundations are in place, BDY Consult helps build a marketing campaign, social media, and personal relationships.

In seven years, Ajao has had about 150 clients. Her projects range from one-offs to regular work for long-term clients. The Women Who Empower grant will help Ajao expand her business and take her marketing campaigns to the next level.

Working with small business owners can be limiting, but very rewarding, Ajao says. Small businesses often can't afford a marketing team. That is why she started a platform with free tips to help them find grants to support their efforts.

"I fundamentally believe that to create an equitable, accessible world, small-business owners, especially from disadvantaged communities, need the tools, capital, funding, and support to even be able to compete," Ajao says. "It's not a good level playing field if people don't have that." ■



# She makes history education look like the ‘hottest Instagram channel out there.’



Past, present, and future. It’s all Made By Us. That’s why **Caroline Klibanoff** launched a nationwide coalition of museums and other cultural institutions to crowdsource the American story for young people across the U.S.

The yellow flag on Caroline Klibanoff’s home office wall commands space in the room, as if joining her in conversation. Its capitalized font harkens back to the bold women who fueled the American suffragist movement more than a century ago. And today, its message conveys another turning point.

The young are at the gates.

Or, as Klibanoff describes it, the young are at the proverbial table. As executive director of Made By Us, a national network of history organizations and civic leaders committed to serving the next generation, Klibanoff strives to crack the code for an engaged public. The winning combination? Museum resources in accessible formats. (Yes, that means Instagram.)

Klibanoff, who’d previously examined digital news literacy as part of her undergraduate thesis, studied commemoration while a graduate student at Northeastern University. She earned her master’s degree in public history and completed a certificate in digital humanities in 2018.

Back then, Klibanoff says, with the 250th anni-

versary of the United States in view, museum leaders around the country realized they needed a convener—some force to bring their abundant, but siloed, information together at such a pivotal moment. Enter Klibanoff. Her pitch to build a coalition of institutions to combine and distribute their trusted resources began to take shape. But not without some lumps and bumps in the clay.

“There aren’t collaborative projects in the museum world,” explains Klibanoff, who has prior experience at museums and historical societies. “Museums just typically don’t work that way.”

It didn’t take them long, though, to appreciate strength in numbers. Kate Doak-Keszler, partnerships and communications director at Made By Us, remembers the early days—when many museum leaders began to rethink their roles not just as keepers of collections, but as guardians of shared civic spaces.

“We all have limited resources,” she says, recalling conversations with cultural institutions affiliated with Made By Us. “We’re stronger when we’re

sharing our resources and working together.”

Since Doak-Keszler joined Made By Us as its second employee in 2020, the nonprofit organization has grown its network of partners from 47 to more than 400.

While a graduate student at Northeastern, Klibanoff remembers, she was encouraged to “try a job and not just write a paper.” That hybrid of experiential and academic growth, often achieved through the co-op program and once explored by Klibanoff in her 2018 Commencement address at Northeastern, laid the foundation for all Made By Us is today.

“Northeastern brought us these opportunities to go out into the community and work on different projects that make a difference,” says Megan Barney, Klibanoff’s former Northeastern classmate and now digital operations manager at Facing History & Ourselves. Barney remembers working with Klibanoff at the university’s Our Marathon archive of the Boston Marathon bombings. From the start, Barney says, her friend’s thought leadership was evident.

“What sets leaders apart generally is that they’re willing to invest in people,” says Barney. “[Caroline] not only invests in the people that she works

directly with, but she’s investing in an entire generation right now.”

That’s because Klibanoff and her team don’t believe in history for history’s sake. They believe in history that’s relevant and actionable for the inheritors of the country. For the new voter who’s reading the latest in a partner series from Made By Us and Teen Vogue; for the social media scroller who’ll stop for a timely, 60-second history; for the librarian who’s eager to bridge the gap between Juneteenth and July Fourth, but isn’t sure how to get started. At the heart of it all is the often untapped potential of 18- to 30-year-olds across the U.S., says Doak-Keszler.

“There’s always an assumption that young people are uninterested, unengaged, uninformed,” she explains. “And it’s really never true.”

Instead, the work is about tapping that potential and getting real about how to do it. Because what a curator, donor, or board member looks out for isn’t necessarily what an audience member wants, Klibanoff says. She knows, because she and the Made By Us team ask them.

Above all, Klibanoff says, these curious citizens want credible material that they can bring to their next conversation or next big decision.



**“YOU START TO SEE THAT THE ROOM IS ACTUALLY FULL OF TORCHES. IT’S LIGHTING THE WAY, AND YOU’RE NOT ALONE.”**

—Caroline Klibanoff, Executive Director, Made By Us

Because many of them have long since left their history classrooms and civics courses, they crave renewed access to information that reflects and informs their realities. And their digital lives are certainly a part of that.

“We’re trying to get history education to look like the hottest Instagram channel out there,” Klibanoff chuckles. “It’s very hard to do that!”

As they gear up to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the U.S. in 2026, Klibanoff and the Made By Us team acknowledge it as a massive opportunity to prioritize the young adult experience and present an honest retelling of the American story. It’s one step toward a more perfect union and, Klibanoff says, a more informed public.

With its four full-time staff members, dozens of fellows, and combined reach of around 20 million, Made By Us is growing. But in the ideal scenario for Klibanoff, it won’t be for long.

“I hope that Made By Us will be out of business,” she says. “Our hope is that history museums are the go-to resource for younger generations who are out of school and finding their way in the world.”

She’s gone from a team of one to “out of many, one”—the Made By Us motto that’s helped it grow. “You start to see that the room is actually full of torches,” Klibanoff says. “It’s lighting the way, and you’re not alone.” ■



# She may live on an island. But isolation is the farthest thing from Laura Kozuszek's mind.

Coastal communities are the front lines of climate change—and **Laura Kozuszek** knows that firsthand. That's why she co-founded Island Sustainability Solutions to ensure island inhabitants have a say in how to rebuild.

Tall evergreen trees frame Laura Kozuszek as she sits behind her computer. Out of view are Anderson Island's general store, vibrant wildlife in the surrounding Puget Sound, and Kozuszek's spread of tomato seedlings—overzealous as harvest time nears. The surplus won't be a bother, though. Kozuszek and her husband, Greg Suddeth, intend to gather up their freshly grown vegetables and make the rounds to share with their neighbors.

"Everybody leans on everybody," says Kozuszek of life on Anderson Island, which sits off the coast of Washington. Its roughly seven square miles are quiet, peaceful, and idyllic—making it a fitting home office for Kozuszek and Suddeth, co-founders of Island Sustainability Solutions (or ISS).

The pair's shared experience in disaster management has played a key role in the inception of ISS, an early-stage environmental consultancy. Through ISS, Kozuszek and Suddeth serve as partners to coastal communities that are uniquely susceptible to climate change. They aim to amplify inhabitants' needs and boost their access to subject-matter experts from near or far.

Too often, say Kozuszek and Suddeth, relief

recipients are just that—recipients of, but not advocates in, their own fates.

"The whole premise [of ISS] is to make everyone feel empowered and part of the solution," says Kozuszek, who earned her master's degree in global studies and international relations at Northeastern University.

Autonomy is foundational to the ISS model. First, Kozuszek and Suddeth secure human and financial resources. Then, they work alongside specialists and locals as (in Suddeth's words) "stewards of the Earth"—implementing agreed-upon solutions fit for both the place and the people. In the end, the ISS co-founders entrust their clients to carry the mission forward wherever they call home.

It's a cycle that continuously builds momentum and pays reverence to community resilience. That's because sustainability is as much about the workforce and its practices as it is about the environments they maintain, says Suddeth, a disaster response manager at the American Red Cross.

"We all need to own this solution together," he says. When she's not tending her garden or beautifying



her island home, Kozuszek spends much of her time behind the computer in search of fellowships, grants, and connections to support ISS as it grows. And she's got her sights set on an important client. (Hint: She won't have to go far.)

"If you don't start where you are, how are you going to get anywhere else?" asks Kozuszek, who says she and Suddeth are already planning projects for their home on Anderson Island.

Suddeth says he knew from the start that Kozuszek was "somebody who wants to make an impact on the world."

Some might think of it as stiff competition. But Kozuszek considers the Women Who Empower initiative an opportunity to validate her concept, build her confidence, and—this will come as no surprise—lean into community. She describes the benefits that come from the generosity of mentors who pay it forward for newcomers and industry peers alike. In just 15 minutes, she says, founders can take in 15 years of lessons learned and pitfalls to be avoided. That ability to overcome gaps and expedite processes is something to be embraced by women entrepreneurs, says

Kozuszek, who was also recognized among Northeastern's 2022 Huntington 100.

"Women don't talk about this enough, but we have to put ourselves in those types of rooms and not feel bad about it."

In those rooms and around those tables, says Suddeth, Kozuszek's leadership style shines through. She's a "sponge," absorbing the perspectives and needs of all ages, backgrounds, and cultures present or reflected in her work. But far more than an empathetic listener, he adds, Kozuszek is an action-oriented "convener" of people and ideas for change. He's not the only one who admires that kinetic energy.

"[Laura is] the type of leader that gets down in the trenches with you," says Courtney Kilway, who studied biology with Kozuszek while they were undergraduate students at Walsh University. "She's not afraid to do the dirty work."

In fact, Kozuszek considers dirty work to be the most important of all. She, of course, acquires new skills when she mobilizes with her colleagues and clients. But she also becomes keenly aware of the specializations she may lack. It takes humil-



ity to acknowledge those empty spaces and ask partners to fill them, says Kozuszek.

To illustrate, she raises her hands and brings them together, palms facing in. Like the smooth locking of zipper teeth, her fingers weave together as one. That movement inspires all Kozuszek does—so much so that she’s got a theory named after it.

While she was global research coordinator at Northeastern’s Global Resilience Institute, Kozuszek sought to establish a framework for collaboration between economists and disaster response managers before, during, and after crises. To the detriment of their collective efforts, she explains now, these responders operated in silos. Instead, by coming together early and often, says Kozuszek, preparedness for all people and all potential disasters increases. Her extensive research at the institute culminated in the Zipper Philosophy, a call for, above all, connection.

“That’s just how I see the world,” says Kozuszek. “Everything is connected to everything.”

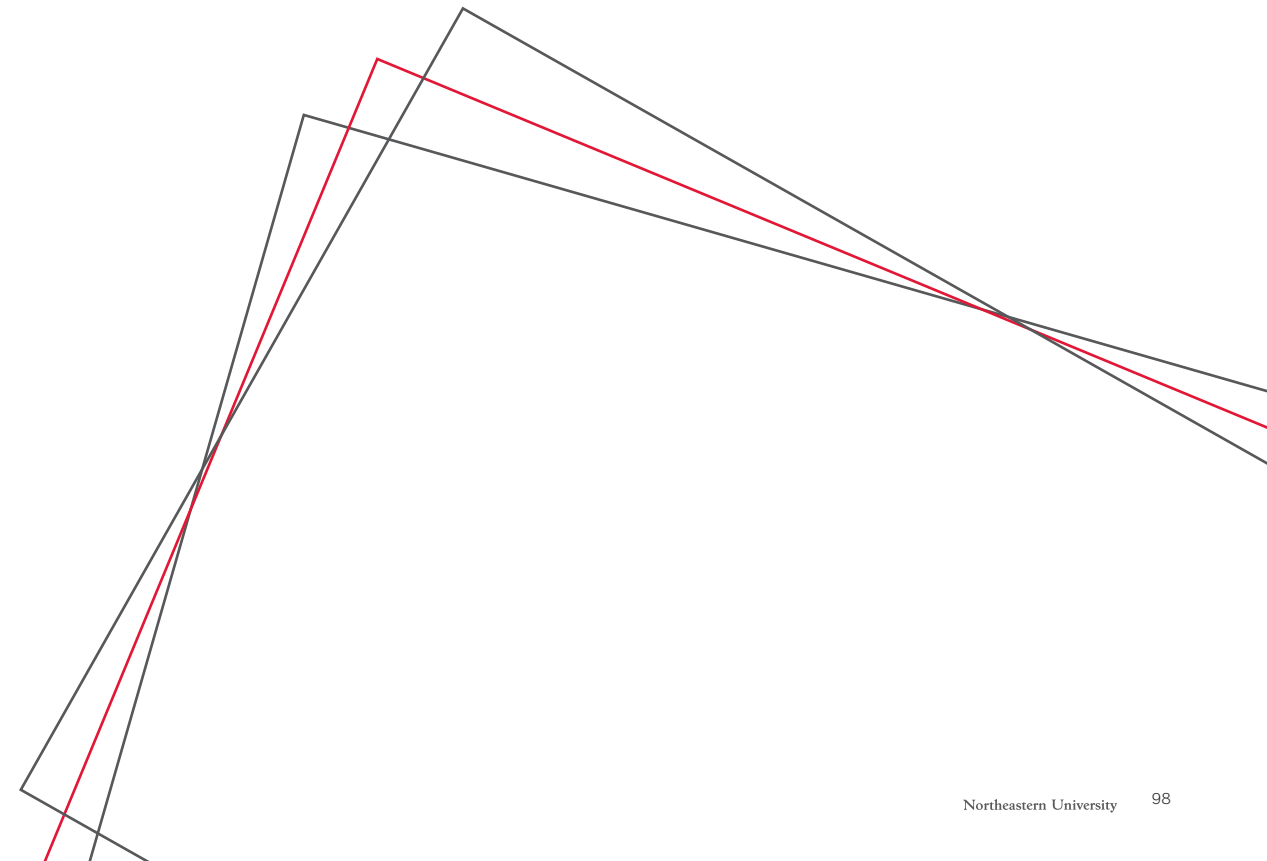
Though her vocation often brings her face-to-face with calamity and uncertainty, Kozuszek’s outlook is far from negative. Progress is progress, she says, even if “little by little.” It’s a galvanizing stance that inspires people in all of her circles, says Kilway, now among Kozuszek’s dearest friends.

“[Laura] changes minds, changes opinions. It’s been very incredible to watch.” ■



**“THE WHOLE PREMISE [OF ISS] IS TO MAKE EVERYONE FEEL EMPOWERED AND PART OF THE SOLUTION.”**

—Laura Kozuszek, Co-Founder, Island Sustainability Solutions



# There's an art to the bottom line, says Denisse Esther Mayers Paulino. That's by design.



**Artist. Entrepreneur. Autoimmune warrior.** The roads that led **Denisse Esther Mayers Paulino** to DEMP, her brand strategy and design consultancy, were paved with determination.

She didn't know how to develop an app. She didn't "speak tech." And she didn't—according to tired stereotypes—look the part of a coder. But despite all of those didn'ts, Denisse Esther Mayers Paulino pushed forward and did.

Mayers Paulino had joined Commonwealth Corporation, an agency dedicated to workforce equity in Massachusetts, as an art consultant while an MBA student at Northeastern University in 2014. The agency's annual youth art auction with the Department of Youth Services was on the horizon again. As she planned for and branded the event, Mayers Paulino confronted what could have been a repeated setback for the fundraiser: an archaic bidding and selling system that too often resulted in limited sales. She grew determined to upgrade that manual process and streamline sales for agency staff members.

She brought her concept to Northeastern's IDEA, where Mayers Paulino taught herself how to code and eventually developed her prototype. Before long, the app helped Commonwealth Corporation sell thousands of dollars of art in just hours.

But that's the short version of the story. Because behind the computer screen, Mayers Paulino did more than balance new technological skills and

her Northeastern assignments. She also endured chemotherapy treatments for lupus. For Mayers Paulino, the autoimmune disease caused fatigue, inflammation, and extreme pain—symptoms her doctors addressed with immunosuppressants.

Mayers Paulino remembers her first Demo Day as a participant in the Husky Startup Challenge, a venture incubator and pitch competition hosted by Northeastern's Entrepreneurs Club. While she presented her auction app, Trunkbook, the effects of her medications took hold. She grew increasingly disoriented and struggled to read the note cards she'd prepared for her presentation.

So many emotional and physical stressors culminated in that moment, extinguishing Mayers Paulino's first chance at funds. But her ambition persisted. One year later, the self-proclaimed autoimmune warrior returned to Demo Day for her second pitch. And she won.

Mayers Paulino consistently turns headwinds into rising tides, says Tiye Cort Odima. The high school friend-turned-trusted colleague describes the entrepreneur's lifelong commitment to "do more" and "do better."

"She's someone who has been through the lowest lows, but can definitely attest to the fact that the

highest highs are possible, regardless of what's going on in different areas of your life."

Mayers Paulino, founder of and chief creative officer at the marketing and design agency DEMP, would go on to embrace her resilience and determination as a solopreneur—taking on the risks and rewards of business when she first launched as a one-woman enterprise while enrolled in the D'Amore-McKim School of Business. Since 2016, Mayers Paulino has scaled the DEMP portfolio to include more than 50 clients. Her mission to empower companies dedicated to uplifting under-represented communities across industries, from education to health, is fueled by her network of over 25 consultants from around the globe and five full-time creative strategists.

Mayers Paulino, who also earned her bachelor's degree from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, or MassArt, exemplifies the "business of art." Because design, she says, always impacts the bottom line.

Solidarity among peers is what Mayers Paulino strives for as she steers her clients and strengthens her own professional connections. She describes the illusion of competition that can loom over women and BIPOC business owners, but says that shared experiences can fuel shared progress.

"I have a really solid group of entrepreneurs that I've built over the years," says Mayers Paulino, who includes fellow 2023 Innovator Award honoree Adebukola Ajao—also an advocate for marketing as a tool to transform business—among her treasured contacts. "I love the years that I've spent building that community."

Those relationships are proof of Mayers Paulino's expert communication skills and emotional intelligence, says Odima, high school teacher and DEMP consultant for clients such as The Teacher's Lounge. Mayers Paulino, Odima says, invests time

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—Denisse Esther Mayers Paulino, Founder, DEMP

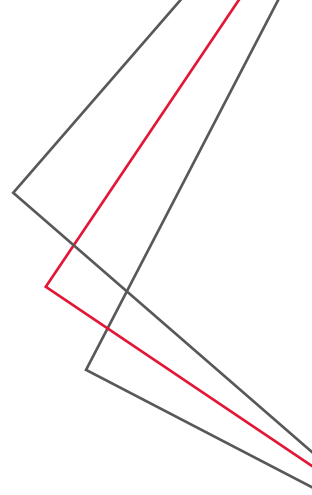
in authentic relationships with her clients and brings cultural sensitivity to all projects. "Not every marketing or business strategist does that."

Odima was once a DEMP client when she launched Feminessay, an online community for Black women who share their own narratives through fiction, memoir, poetry, or other modes of storytelling. The initiative partnered with InnoPsych, a directory for therapists of color and fellow DEMP client, to celebrate Women's History Month through a mental health lens in 2020. Mayers Paulino, says Odima, helped to create a safe space to speak openly and honestly about a topic that often feels out of reach. The InnoPsych team is among DEMP partners who presented at this year's NAACP convention in Boston. As the founder spoke about health for people of color on a national scale, the organization also announced the launch of its new tool for employers to provide workplace racial wellness.

The opportunity to establish and fortify diverse brands like InnoPsych with "everlasting" missions is what drives Mayers Paulino, whose initials comprise the DEMP name. The choice was intentionally agnostic of industry, she says. Though she, at the time, "didn't want to be boxed in," Mayers Paulino has embraced her gravitational pull for businesses in the social impact space. She continues to hone her client criteria and discovery process, ever willing to shift her vision and yield to the creative process.

She is a lifelong learner from Northeastern, after all. ■





“ I saw a social issue it could solve, and I wanted to emphasize in my venture how to uplift other women in tech and cybersecurity.”

–Alexis Musaekyan-Blackmon, S’25, Khoury’25,  
Founder, Dephend

“ What better way to empower women than to give them a product that could help them solve real problems in this world.”

–Gina-Maria Garcia, AMD’15, Founder, BUYa Beauty

“ Shoerzo was a direct outgrowth of my belief that I could—even as a college student—do something to help female patients and give them opportunities to feel beautiful and empowered.”

–Sajni Vederey, DMSB’23, Founder, Shoerzo

“ We’re in a new age, I think, of moving from describing the problem to actually working toward trying to solve it, and I believe that Health Equity Capital is poised to take a lead role in helping to address that.”

–Taja Lester, Mills College, MBA’11, Founder,  
Healthy Equity Capital



To support Women Who Empower and invest in future innovators, visit [giving.northeastern.edu/ww](https://giving.northeastern.edu/ww) or scan the QR code to learn more.

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