



WOMEN *who* EMPOWER
INNOVATOR AWARDS

WOMEN WHO EMPOWER INNOVATORS

Empowering entrepreneurs and inspiring ingenuity



2024



WOMEN *who* EMPOWER INNOVATOR AWARDS

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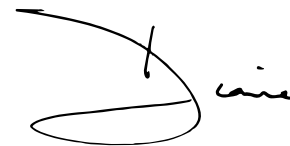
FOREWORD

Courage. Passion. Ingenuity. Grit. These are a few of the many traits that define our 2024 Women Who Empower Innovator Awards recipients. Launched in 2021 to provide entrepreneurial changemakers with capital, resources, and a supportive network, the Innovator Awards have grown into a vital stepping stone for elevating the ideas, products, businesses, and brands of our next generation of problem solvers. This year, our fourth annual awards provided 33 students and alumnae with a total of \$500,000 for their enterprising vision, authenticity, leadership, and community-building initiative.

Our 2024 innovators will impress you with their creativity, their global reach, and their determination to make a positive impact on the world. We have expanded to seven specialized awards to both recognize the breadth of our recipients' entrepreneurialism and to align with our campaign to fuel the university's future, Experience Powered by Northeastern. Awardees in these categories embody Northeastern's values and mission through their commitment to advancing health; global change; social impact; diverse, inclusive, and creative communities; sustainability; and AI-powered innovation. We are also proud for the first time to include inspiring trailblazers from Northeastern's Roux Institute in Portland, Maine.

The validation and community support these awards provide can make all the difference to these visionaries as they pursue their ambitions and strive to build a better future for us all. As you read about our innovators' stories and ventures, we encourage you to consider ways you can help spur their success.

Together, we can amplify their impact.



DIANE NISHIGAYA MACGILLIVRAY
Senior Vice President for University Advancement
Northeastern University



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- /22** **Hayley Oleksiak, SSH'18**
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2024 INNOVATORS POWERING A BETTER FUTURE

Our Innovators Powering a Better Future award recipients are specially recognized for their commitment to uplifting diverse, inclusive, and creative communities, and advancing health, global change, social impact, and sustainability.

EMPOWERING CREATIVE COMMUNITIES LEADERSHIP AWARD

Marissa Mullen, AMD'15

AI POWERING INNOVATION AND IMPACT AWARD

FIRST PLACE:

Calypso Newman, NCH'21

SECOND PLACE:

Rachel Cossar, Roux Institute

THIRD PLACE:

Becky Mashàido, Khoury'22

Mariana Charakopoulou Travlou, S'19

POWERING DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING AWARD

FIRST PLACE:

Ashley Cummings, DMSB'08, AP'09

SECOND PLACE:

AJ Addae, S'20

THIRD PLACE:

Samantha Asprelli, DMSB'26

POWERING GLOBAL CHANGE AWARD

FIRST PLACE:

Cheuk Yan (Kat) Tse, AMD'24

SECOND PLACE:

Violetta Skittidi, NCH'19

THIRD PLACE:

Claudia Tobar, EdD'20

POWERING A HEALTHY TOMORROW AWARD

FIRST PLACE:

Meaghan St Marc, AMD'10

SECOND PLACE:

Muskaan Gill, E'26

THIRD PLACE:

Naomi Rajput, S'26

POWERING SOCIAL IMPACT AWARD

FIRST PLACE:

Kadesh Simms Conroy, DMSB'01, MBA'08

SECOND PLACE:

Michelle DeBlois, Roux Institute

THIRD PLACE:

Hayley Oleksiak, SSH'18

POWERING A SUSTAINABLE, RESILIENT WORLD AWARD

FIRST PLACE:

Melissa LaCasse, Roux Institute

SECOND PLACE:

Debbie Madueke, DMSB'19, SSH'19

THIRD PLACE:

Darrel Schreiner, Khoury'22

Dominique Schreiner, Khoury'22

2024 INNOVATOR AWARDS RECIPIENTS

Our Innovator Awards recipients are placed in categories based on their affiliation with Northeastern: Students (Undergraduate and Graduate), Alumnae (Undergraduate, Graduate, and Experienced), and Roux Institute Founders.

AJ Addae, S'20, SULA LABS

First Place, Undergraduate Alumnae

Samantha Asprelli, DMSB'26, Give n' Glow

First Place, Undergraduate Students

Rachel Cossar, Roux Institute, Virtual Sapiens

Roux Institute Founder

Ashley Cummings, DMSB'08, AP'09, Natural Ash

Honors, Experienced Alumnae

Michelle DeBlois, Roux Institute, ReMo

Roux Institute Founder

Mary DeVega, CPS'22, L'25, MPowered

First Place, Graduate Students

Linh Dinh, CPS'25, ATURE

Honors, Graduate Students

Rama Doddi, CPS'24, RegINTL

Honors, Graduate Students

Muskaan Gill, E'26, ZOR!

Honors, Undergraduate Students

Nicole Guadagno, E'25, Remetra

Honors, Undergraduate Students

Aleena Jacob, BHS'24

Honors, Undergraduate Students

Fatema Janahi, E'22, Palm

Honors, Graduate Alumnae

Kerrian Johnson, MBA'25, Fruit Juice Studio

Third Place, Graduate Students

Hannah Kim, BHS'28, Bok Bok

Second Place, Graduate Students

Manvi Kottakota, Khoury'26, Jot

Honors, Undergraduate Students

Melissa LaCasse, Roux Institute, Tanbark

Roux Institute Founder

Debbie Madueke, DMSB'19, SSH'19, Replast

Third Place, Undergraduate Alumnae

Becky Mashàido, Khoury'22, KiAsili Naturals

First Place, Graduate Alumnae

Kaitlin McCarthy, E'09, Ionic Development Co.

First Place, Experienced Alumnae

Marissa Mullen, AMD'15, That Cheese Plate

Second Place, Experienced Alumnae

Calypso Newman, NCH'21, Rock Badger

Honors, Undergraduate Alumnae

Hayley Oleksiak, SSH'18, Open Space Sandbox

Honors, Undergraduate Alumnae

Naomi Rajput, S'26, CareWallet

Third Place, Undergraduate Students

Darrel Schreiner, Khoury'22, Cake Denim

Third Place, Graduate Alumnae

Dominique Schreiner, Khoury'22, Cake Denim

Third Place, Graduate Alumnae

Kadesh Simms Conroy, DMSB'01, MBA'08, Wishing Well

Honors, Experienced Alumnae

Violetta Skittidi, NCH'19, Formulaw

Second Place, Undergraduate Alumnae

Meaghan St Marc, AMD'10, Rev'd

Third Place, Experienced Alumnae

Claudia Tobar, EdD'20, Kamina

Second Place, Graduate Alumnae

Mariana Charakopoulou Travlou, S'19, Nous Health

Honors, Undergraduate Alumnae

Cheuk Yan (Kat) Tse, AMD'24, Terms and Conditions

Second Place, Undergraduate Students

Sofia Urrutia, DMSB'24, Palmarosa

Honors, Undergraduate Students

Emily Zeledon, DMSB'26, Las Mujercitas

Honors, Undergraduate Students



ABOUT THE WOMEN WHO EMPOWER INNOVATOR AWARDS

For 10 years, Women Who Empower has cultivated an inclusive, dynamic, global community, uniting people through events, mentorship, and entrepreneurial initiatives. Our diverse network is made up of driven and distinguished individuals who create positive environments and foster lasting connections, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Since 2021, the Women Who Empower Innovator Awards program has provided **more than \$1.32 million in one-time grants** to exemplary members of the Northeastern community, supporting their entrepreneurial journeys.

The Innovator Awards celebrate the innovators themselves—not just their business idea or venture. Applicants are initially evaluated by a committee to determine semifinalists, who are then reviewed by a panel of judges based on criteria such as creativity, leadership, entrepreneurship, authenticity, community focus and inclusion, track record, and the potential impact of their idea.

Since its inception, the Innovator Awards program has received more than 500 applications. Northeastern has bestowed awards upon **102 recipients** who represent the university's global reach, all of its schools and colleges, and industries including health, sustainability, finance, consumer goods, and technology.



SUPPORT OUR WORK

Supporting Women Who Empower strengthens Northeastern University's mission to help individuals be agile, creative, and resilient in pursuing their dreams.

When you make a gift to Women Who Empower, you are investing in our next generation of leaders and changemakers.

The success of the Innovator Awards program relies on the engagement and generosity of members of Women Who Empower's global network. Your support enables us to elevate more individuals who embody the rich diversity of our society, and promote the inclusion of unique perspectives essential to addressing our world's greatest challenges.

We invite you to support our vibrant ecosystem, helping to create even more opportunities for our deserving and talented community members. To make a gift, visit giving.northeastern.edu/wwc or scan the QR code to learn more.

Thank you for empowering our future leaders and innovators.



These alumni, parents, and partners applied their diverse experiences and expertise to evaluate applications and final presentations to select winners of the Women Who Empower Innovator Awards.

INNOVATOR AWARDS JUDGES 2021-2024



Jill Bornstein, PNT'22
Founding Judge
 Founder and Executive Coach, Upnext Leadership Coaching



Asha Chandra, PNT'21
Founding Judge
 Founder, The Jazba Collective



Cristina Csimma, MPH'91
Founding Judge
 Biotech Executive, Board Director, and CEO



Julietta Dexter, PNT'20
Founding Judge
 Female Founder, Entrepreneur, and CEO; Chair, Smart Works Charity; Board Member, Northeastern University London



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



Cathy Papoulias-Sakellaris
Founding Judge
 Active Board Member; Former Business Executive; Philanthropist



Sharon Phoong-Wong
PNT'25
 Founder and Chief Executive Officer, motherswork



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

READING COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND ADVISORS 2021-2024



Cheryl Kaplan
Founding Judge
 Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, M.Gemi



Leslie Kilgore, PNT'25
 Board Member, Netflix



Jean Kovacs, CPS'83
 Partner and Co-Founder, Hillsvon



Ronaldo Mouchawar, E'88, ME'90
 Chief Executive Officer, souq.com; Vice President, Amazon Middle East and North Africa



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



LOOKING FOR CHEESE PLATE INSPO AND RECIPES? SHE'LL HELP YOU SERVE UP SUCCESS.

MARISSA MULLEN, AMD'15, creator of the online community **"That Cheese Plate,"** has good news for her nearly one million followers on Instagram and TikTok: Her third cookbook is in the works. And like **"That Cheese Plate Will Change Your Life"** and **"That Cheese Plate Wants to Party,"** it will feature lush photography and plenty of recipes.

As a student at Northeastern, Mullen never imagined that her love of cheese and charcuterie boards would launch a thriving global career.

"For about a year, it was just me sharing inspiration that I'd find and then sharing the cheese plates I'd make myself," Mullen says. That led to her developing tutorials, classes, and a Cheese By Numbers method of filling a board with cheese, meats, vegetables, condiments, and even flowers.

An artist management course Mullen took inspired her to apply what she'd learned in class to her budding cheese plate business. Then a co-op at a creative agency gave her a behind-the-scenes

look at what it takes to produce events and tours, knowledge she still uses.

In 2017, Mullen began to pitch an idea for a book to publishers and received a flurry of "no's," she says. But she caught the attention of Rachael Ray—who invited Mullen to appear on her show—and also an editor at Random House. Fast forward to 2020 when Amazon named Mullen's literary debut, **"That Cheese Plate Will Change Your Life,"** one of the year's top 20 cookbooks.

What are Mullen's key ingredients to her entrepreneurial recipe? She cites passion, authenticity, and a plan—all garnished with a positive mindset.

"I always say, 'Don't be afraid to ask for help.' If you want to grow and scale your business, you need people to help you."

—Marissa Mullen





**THIS
ENTREPRENEUR
IS TRANSFORMING
BUSINESS
STORYTELLING
WITH ART AND
TECHNOLOGY.**

CALYPSO NEWMAN, NCH'21, knows what it is like to pour everything into a new business venture; to ask for help from those in her industry and to have the door shut on her. It is because of her own experiences when starting out that, when any young person contacts her for business advice, her default position is to make every effort to oblige. “I have a rule that anyone young who ever emails, I will help no matter what,” says Newman. “We’ve all got half an hour to spare.”

Newman’s startup **Rock Badger** partners with clients to tell their stories through artistic mediums and technology. Part of what the agency does is use real data and art to explore the positive impact businesses are having on the environment through a product called VisuAlise Sustainability (AI plays a part in some of the work her artists produce).

For example, if a client records in its annual report that it has helped plant 10,000 trees that year,

artwork arranged by Rock Badger can bring that to life for consumers and employees, Newman explains.

Less than two years on, and she can be found giving talks at Facebook-owner Meta, chairing panel discussions at the U.K. Creative Festival, and organizing industry events at London’s Saatchi Gallery.

But the early days were not always glamorous, and Newman sometimes found herself being “ignored” when reaching out to people in the industry as she looked to gain a foothold. Today, she harnesses her own experiences to help other founders have the best start to their careers.

“Art provides an entryway into what appears abstract and hard to engage with, and uses technology really creatively to tell stories.”

–Calypso Newman



**NO STRANGER TO
CENTER STAGE, THIS
FOUNDER HAS TURNED
TO EMPOWERING
OTHERS.**

A former rhythmic gymnast and professional dancer, **RACHEL COSSAR**, is fluent in the language of physical expression and communication. After retiring from the Boston Ballet in 2016, she realized that her skills in body language were in high demand in the remote business world.

Fascinated by how people communicate nonverbally in professional environments, Cossar launched **Virtual Sapiens** to help individuals understand their own body language and achieve a stronger online presence. Her consulting practice offers AI solutions to empower teams to uplevel their poise and assuredness, while also providing personalized feedback and coaching.

The result? Cossar’s clients communicate more effectively, and show up to work with confidence.



**SHE’S
REVOLUTIONIZING
THE BEAUTY
INDUSTRY WITH
AI-POWERED
SOLUTIONS FOR
WOMEN OF COLOR.**

BECKY MASHÀIDO, KHOURY'22, is on a mission to disrupt the beauty industry and help consumers save money.

“The beauty industry is a multi-billion dollar industry, yet a majority of the consumers, especially women of color, still struggle to find what works best for them,” she says. “I care about this end user, her experience with finding the right product, and the value of her spending power.”

Drawing on her expertise in software engineering, deep learning, and computer vision, Mashàido is developing **KiAsili Naturals**. The line uses an AI-driven tool to eliminate the guesswork in choosing hair and skincare products, helping to reimagine the future of an inclusive beauty industry.



AI POWERING INNOVATION AND IMPACT AWARD



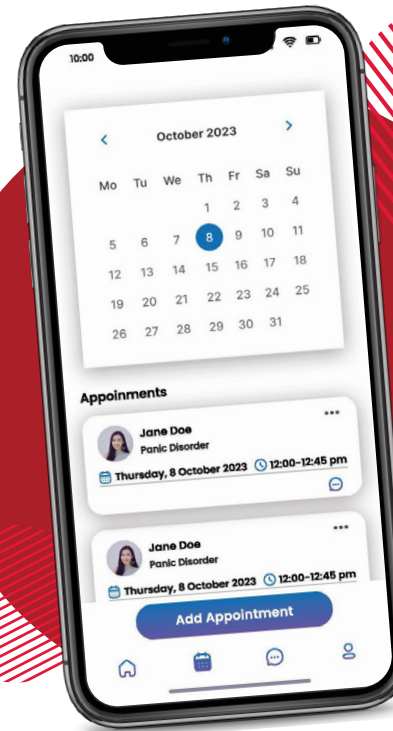
Third Place

AFTER RISING FROM A FALL, AN ALUMNA NOW HELPS OTHERS REALIZE WELLNESS.

While pursuing a doctorate in clinical psychology, **MARIANA CHARAKOPOULOU TRAVLOU, S'19**, bore serious injuries in a horseback riding accident—which halted plans to start her own professional practice.

“The period spent in recovery helped me realize that I didn’t need a PhD to help people,” says Travlou. “All I need is my passion, motivation, and people who believe in me.”

Travlou’s recovery led her to reimagine how she could make a positive impact in her community, and she launched **Nous Health**. Her women-led digital health platform uses AI-enhanced processes to connect patients with mental health professionals, bridging the gap between services and accessibility, reducing stigmas, and enhancing therapy outcomes.



“I have always been passionate about meaningful change and impactful projects. It is a trait I get from my grandmother, who played a pivotal role in my upbringing.”

“I cherish this Innovator Award because it supports women, supports ‘us,’ while also giving me another way to support others.”

—Mariana Charakopoulou Travlou



WHILE CARING FOR ONCOLOGY PATIENTS, SHE WAS INSPIRED TO LAUNCH A NATURAL SKINCARE LINE.

When **ASHLEY CUMMINGS, DMSB'08, AP'09**, worked as a nurse in the bone marrow transplant unit at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, she noticed that her patients receiving radiation and chemotherapy struggled to care for their skin.

Dry skin is more than just irritating for patients—it can pose a risk for infections—so Cummings made sure to apply lotion to her patients when working with them.

“I would always make it a point to make sure that their skin was taken care of,” she shares.

Then Cummings noticed that a lot of skincare products in the hospital had chemicals in them that were linked to cancer. From this, the idea for **Natural Ash** was born: a line of body butters handmade with natural ingredients that are safe for all to use.

“I already had the background of how to assess skin and what to look for as far as skin issues,” Cummings says. “I have cared for so many

different people. It’s just really understanding what the skin needs and also what happens to the skin if you’re not taking care of it.”

Cummings now works in biotech, using her nursing background to monitor participants in clinical trials. She works on Natural Ash on the side.

“This is something that I’ve been wanting to do for a long time. I just didn’t know how to do it,” says Cummings. “If it wasn’t for Northeastern and starting there, then none of this would be possible.”

“I wanted to make a skincare product that could be available in hospitals for patients. They could have better choices than the products that they’re using.”

—Ashley Cummings



THIS CHEMIST AND CLINICAL RESEARCHER IS CLOSING INCLUSIVITY GAPS IN SKINCARE R&D.

As a consumer of skincare and beauty products, **AJ ADDAE, S'20**, knows firsthand the limited selection of brands that cater to women with melanin-rich skin.

There are inclusivity gaps, she says, caused by too few people of color recruited for the research and development process, a shortage of data on dark skin, and not nearly enough clinical testing with diverse skin tones.

At **SULA LABS**, Addae’s B2B beauty R&D lab, she’s closing these gaps, creating and analyzing skincare products and ingredients for brands serving consumers with a range of skin tones. The lab’s products are sold in Sephora, Ulta, and Target.

“We’ve definitely cemented our expertise in the industry as product developers,” Addae says.



SHE’S GIVING BEAUTY PRODUCTS A SECOND LIFE—AND EMPOWERING WOMEN IN HER COMMUNITY.

SAMANTHA ASPRELLI, DMSB'26, loves makeup—and believes all women should have access to it, if they wish. But women in need often forego beauty products, just when they may want the confidence boost that using cosmetics can ignite.

However, distributing makeup isn’t a priority for care providers like homeless shelters or food pantries. Enter **Give n’ Glow**. Asprelli’s nonprofit accepts donations of unexpired makeup from influencers who test it for reviews and don’t need it afterward, and brand partners that contribute their unsold inventory. Products are then cataloged, sanitized, and distributed in the Boston area.

“Let’s redirect these secondhand beauty products into the hands of women who need them, who can truly benefit,” says Asprelli.





A FIRST-TIME PUBLISHER CREATED A FASHION WELLNESS MAGAZINE—ON HER OWN TERMS.

In 2022, **CHEUK YAN (KAT) TSE, AMD'24**, was studying at Northeastern's London campus when she decided to meld her passion for wellness and fashion into a publication. She'd already started establishing herself as a lifestyle blogger, so the roots for what became her magazine, **Terms and Conditions**, had taken hold.

To execute her creative vision, Tse recruited a team whose contributors imbued the publication with their own perspectives. For the magazine's inaugural issue, Tse chose to explore emotions she felt as a teenager going through the breakup of a relationship, an experience she knew many readers would relate to.

"I wanted to use the power of makeup, the power of fashion, and the power of words to capture those raw feelings that I felt," says Tse. **Terms and Conditions** debuted in 2023.

The next issue dropped in January 2024 with a theme of embracing cultures—a focus Tse was

herself well versed in. She was born in Toronto but raised in Hong Kong, where she attended an international school that followed an American curriculum.

What's on tap for the third edition? It will be centered on self acceptance, a topic inspired by Tse's own life experiences and how she felt while living as a student in London.

"Finding a sense of identity while studying abroad and becoming more independent was hard," Tse says. "I wanted to document how I could find my sense of belonging more through fashion as an outlet."

"Meeting a group of empowering women has turned my life around. It's inspired me to innovate and believe in myself."

—Cheuk Yan (Kat) Tse



SMALL BUSINESSES CAN GET BURIED UNDER LEGAL DOCUMENTS. SHE'S USING AI TO DIG THEM OUT.

When **VIOLETTA SKITTIDI, NCH'19**, was in law school, she held various internships as a paralegal. Each employer had long—and growing—backlogs of legal documents that needed to be organized, processed, and filed. This, of course, became Skittidi's job.

Documents "kept piling up, piling up, piling up," she recalls with a faraway gaze, and the idea for **Formulaw** was born. Skittidi's venture assists businesses in managing contractual affairs from start to finish, offering an affordable, efficient, and hassle-free experience.

Formulaw "alleviates the burden from the companies that don't have the time or the budget to hire lawyers," she says. Instead, the platform "acts as a legal companion," walking them through the creation and execution of legal documents.



WITH HER STARTUP, THIS ENTREPRENEUR IS BOOSTING PEOPLE'S FINANCIAL LITERACY AND HEALTH.

After observing inequalities and gender gaps in the financial industry, **CLAUDIA TOBAR, EDD'20**, decided to create innovative personalized products to assist women and non-banked individuals in managing their economic wellbeing.

So Tobar co-founded **Kamina**, teaming up with financial institutions to develop an inclusive financial wellness platform that delivers transparent, honest solutions to help people manage their money and boost their financial health.

"Our vision is to create a positive impact by providing real solutions for those who need them most," she says. In addition to her role at Kamina, Tobar is a social activist and contributes articles on education, innovation, technology, and entrepreneurship to international media outlets.





SHE INSPIRES THOSE AROUND HER WITH HER PASSION, TEAMWORK, AND A LITTLE SWEAT.

Despite the fact that **MEAGHAN ST MARC, AMD'10**, co-founder of cycling studio business, **Rev'd**, has committed her life to fitness, she'll be the first to admit that she was never the top athlete.

"I was never the best player on the team, but I was captain all the time," St Marc says. "I have spirit, and I have passion for what's going on, and I know how to identify talent and set it up in a way where we're all going to benefit."

St Marc's ability as a natural leader, someone who drives others to push themselves physically and mentally, led her to turn Rev'd from a pipe dream into reality in 2014. Today, the inclusive studio business has women-owned franchises, 50 trainers, and more than 10,000 active customers. St Marc views her work not just as a trainer and business owner, but as a motivator. Her goal isn't just to make sure her clients succeed on the bike. She wants to see them inspired to push themselves outside the Rev'd studio, too.

"What I love to see outside of the gym is people feeling empowered because they know, 'Well I can push the hill in the 6:30 class that seemed insurmountable to me a week or two ago when I first started, so what's stopping me from writing the email that's been sitting in my brain for weeks?'" St Marc says.

The cycle of empowerment has come full circle, St Marc says, because she herself feels energized by the very people she motivates each day.

"We're watching people achieve things—and watching people do things—that they probably didn't think they could do without that additional layer of motivation."

—Meaghan St Marc



INSPIRED BY HER BROTHER, AN ENGINEERING STUDENT IS DEVELOPING A DEVICE THAT PREDICTS SEIZURES.

Since childhood, **MUSKAAN "MUKKI" GILL, E'26**, has watched her younger brother, Zor, struggle with prolonged epileptic seizures triggered by Dravet syndrome, a genetic disorder.

"It's a really difficult thing to witness as an older sister," Gill says. Zor's seizures "are sudden, so out of nowhere, he just drops," often injuring himself if he's standing when a seizure strikes.

She's developing a wearable device, named **ZOR!** for her brother, that detects shifts in a patient's biomarkers, like their sweat or breath. Her hope is that those measurable changes will alert the device's wearer or caregivers to an impending seizure and give them time to respond, leading to a safer outcome.



IS THERE A BETTER WAY TO MANAGE HEALTHCARE? THIS PRE-MED STUDENT HAS AN IDEA.

Scheduling medical appointments can be arduous. To ease the process, **NAOMI RAJPUT, S'26**, created **CareWallet**, a digital health solution that connects patients with providers—and connects providers with their patients' health information.

Rajput is working to alleviate administrative burdens in healthcare, such as "scheduling operations; automating insurance checks; [and] helping people check into their appointments." She compares CareWallet to the existing digital wallets that come with various smartphones.

"Imagine checking into a doctor's appointment with just the tap of your phone," Rajput says. CareWallet could hold a patient's medical history, medication and allergy lists, and pharmacy preferences—the possibilities, as Rajput sees them, are endless.





A DOUBLE HUSKY IS DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY-CENTRIC FINANCE APP FOR SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT.

One night about seven years ago, **KADESH SIMMS CONROY, DMSB'01, MBA'08**, had a dream.

“It showed me this visual of a time that would come when we would need to really pool our resources and communities, and it showed this app,” Simms Conroy says. The dream was “a blueprint for something to come in the future.”

With her **Wishing Well** community finance app, she’s turned her dream into a reality.

Wishing Well, a peer-to-peer digital payment wallet, allows users to hold and save their money together as a group in individual “wells,” and to use that money to support community goals, individual expenses, and purchases.

“It’s a tool for those that won’t have access to large sums of capital to utilize the community to access that capital together,” explains Simms Conroy.

The app allows users to raise capital without the processes and sometimes onerous credit or collateral requirements of a traditional bank. It’s

also socially empowering because it can be used by individuals in communities underserved by financial institutions.

“Women’s ventures tend to get the least amount of financing and the least amount of capital, and people of color tend to get the least amount of financing and the least amount of capital,” says Simms Conroy. Wishing Well is creating “a more financially inclusive world by using the communities that we live in to bank with. We decide, the banks don’t decide.”

Already, users with a beta version of the app have been able to pay for homes, emergency bills, and college costs, shares Simms Conroy.

“Money and the access to finances and resources are directly linked to how people live their lives, and their ability to experience financial freedom.”

–Kadesh Simms Conroy



AFTER TWO DECADES AS AN EDUCATOR, THIS NOW-FOUNDER INSPIRES STUDENTS TO READ MORE.

During her career in the classroom, **MICHELLE DEBLOIS** observed the myriad ways students were being failed by school systems that reduced them to a series of test scores.

“I had a problem with that,” says DeBlois. “I wouldn’t want to be represented by my achievement score alone.” So, she took action to encourage students to read more.

DeBlois created **ReMo**, a web-based platform for independent reading that enables young people to set reading goals, track their progress, and, based on data they provide, connect them with books they’ll love—while allowing educators to better understand reading habits and growth.

“I want students to have agency over their own reading journeys,” DeBlois says.



SHE BUILT A REAL-LIFE SIMCITY TO BETTER ENGAGE CITIZENS IN PUBLIC PARK PLANNING.

Mention the computer game SimCity to millennials of a certain age, and you’re sure to get a response.

“I was a big SimCity kid,” laughs **HAYLEY OLEKSIK, SSH'18**, who today in her urban planning career helps agencies figure out how to generate revenue for programming in public parks.

In her spare time, Oleksiak created **Open Space Sandbox**. The accessible, gamified public design program empowers citizens to build out their own vision for green spaces in their communities, and provide feedback to a planned space’s urban designers.

“Public parks and open spaces—places you can relax, decompress, or explore new interests—are just so crucial to our society,” says Oleksiak.





THIS FOUNDER IS USING A HERITAGE INDUSTRY TO TACKLE A MODERN PROBLEM.

With **Tanbark**, **MELISSA LACASSE** is leveraging Maine’s legacy industry of pulp and paper to take aim at the modern problem of single-use plastic waste. Based out of the city of Saco—long a center of lumber manufacturing—Tanbark designs and fabricates elegant packaging using molded fiber, a biodegradable wood-based material sourced from Maine timber.

“We’re trying to be very circular,” says LaCasse. “We’re extracting resources from our local economy. We’re utilizing them, and when we’re done, they go back to the earth in a non-toxic manner.”

LaCasse is a 2022 graduate of Northeastern’s Roux Institute Founder Residency Program, a startup incubator of sorts designed to support Maine companies run by women, people of color, LGBTQ+, and other historically marginalized people.

Within the first four months of LaCasse joining the Founder Residency, Tanbark secured about \$1.8

million in seed funding. The company has since garnered another \$1.5 million, bringing its total amount raised to more than \$3 million so far.

Tanbark is on a steady growth track, with two production lines up and running and six more planned for 2025. Its customer base comprises well-known brands such as Luke’s Lobster, a family-owned Maine seafood business with lobster shacks worldwide.

Next up? LaCasse says Tanbark will pursue a Series A funding round, hire additional staff, and explore expanding its production facilities to rural Maine near the pulp supply, infrastructure, and labor force of the legacy mill sites.

“From there, I don’t know,” says LaCasse, “but we’re having a lot of fun.”

“I hope to uplift aspiring entrepreneurs, while also amplifying diverse voices and perspectives within the community.”

—Melissa LaCasse



HER LIVED EXPERIENCE IS PROPELLING A CRISIS-SOLVING INNOVATION FORWARD.

DEBBIE MADUEKE, DMSB’19, SSH’19, is an experienced financial analyst and problem solver with a dual mission to inspire both economic and environmental impact in her home country of Nigeria.

Madueke launched **Replast**, her recycling venture, to decrease pollution in Nigeria by providing high-quality material for reuse and creating income opportunities for citizens.

“The plastic waste crisis isn’t just a problem I studied,” she says. “It’s the reality I have lived.”

Madueke is harnessing the adaptability and resilience she’s honed since coming to the U.S. at age 17 to contribute to a sustainable, prosperous future for Nigeria—and to encourage other women to launch and lead businesses that tackle global challenges.



BUYING JEANS CAN BE A DRAG. THESE SISTERS MAKE IT A PIECE OF CAKE INSTEAD.

To ask almost any woman about the experience of buying jeans is to invite a rebuke of the state of shopping—and clothing. Sizing is inconsistent, trends change, and styles aren’t inclusive of all body types, say **DOMINIQUE SCHREINER, KHOURY’22**, and her sister, **DARREL, KHOURY’22**.

“I felt like the clothing never really fit into my lifestyle; it was always me trying to fit into clothes,” shares Dominique.

With **Cake Denim**, the Schreiners deliver a better jean and shopping experience by offering environmentally friendly, ethically conscious denim and utilizing fabric that moves with the person wearing it. What’s more? The brand uses a variety of fit models to ensure it celebrates all bodies.



2024 INNOVATOR AWARDS RECIPIENTS



HER STAFFING AGENCY WILL PROVIDE DISADVANTAGED WOMEN WITH CRUCIAL WORKFORCE TRAINING.

While volunteering at the Justice and Diversity Legal Clinic in San Francisco, **MARY DEVEGA, CPS'22, I'25**, honed her advocacy instincts. Many of the women who came to the clinic didn't have the money or professional skills to re-enter the workforce after a divorce or death of a significant other, she says.

It was then that DeVega came up with the idea for **MPowered**, her staffing agency for disadvantaged women that would provide them with the necessary training and professional development to land a job or further their careers—and help them thrive.

"Empowering women and championing women in the workforce is so important to me," says DeVega.



THIS FOUNDER IS PIONEERING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN BOSTON'S REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY.

For more than 15 years, **KAITLIN MCCARTHY, E'09**, worked in the real estate development, engineering, and construction industries.

"As I grew in leadership roles, it became more and more obvious to me that there were no women in ownership roles," McCarthy says. "I felt it was important for women coming up in the industry to see that there can be a woman in the ownership role."

She started **Ionic Development Co.**, one of Boston's first woman-owned real estate development and consulting firms. McCarthy has grown Ionic to three employees and works on life science, office, retail, and affordable housing projects, always with an eye toward improving the communities her company's projects are located in.



IS IT POSSIBLE TO CONCOCT A BETTER VINEGAR? SHE THINKS SO.

For all its tangy flavor, vinegar can do a lot more than complement a salad—people have been using it for thousands of years for its health properties. It's precisely those properties that **HANNAH KIM, BHS'28**, seeks out in the vinegar she sells through her company, **Bok Bok**.

Kim uses a proprietary base liquid and double fermentation process that allows for flexibility to add new flavors and health-boosting ingredients to Bok Bok's vinegar, which comes in liquid, dehydrated block and powder versions, and soon, a semisolid "pearl" form.

Entrepreneurship "requires a lot of courage and self-encouragement. And it can be difficult," says Kim. But to her, the journey is worth it.



WHEN IT COMES TO HELPING BLACK-OWNED AND WOMEN-OWNED BRANDS FIND THEIR VOICE, SHE'S GOT THE JUICE.

KERRIAN JOHNSON, MBA'25, would occasionally come across an ad that caught her eye. She'd then text a link to her friend, Kyra Marshall, and the two would exchange ideas for improving upon the campaign.

They began to observe that Black-owned and women-owned businesses rarely received the creative support they needed, and they stepped in to close that gap with **Fruit Juice Studio**. The firm offers services in creative direction, brand design, brand strategy, and overall consultation.

Johnson says that she and Marshall saw "so clearly that there was a need in our community for this kind of work. It was important to fill it in the ways that we can."



2024 INNOVATOR AWARDS RECIPIENTS



AS A CHILD, SHE BELONGED TO VIETNAM'S 'LONELY GENERATION.' TODAY, SHE CREATES ECONOMIC AVENUES FOR LOCAL PRODUCERS.

Growing up, **LINH DINH, CPS'25**, was part of Vietnam's "lonely generation," she says, children whose parents—hers included—went abroad seeking more lucrative employment to better support their families. Dinh recalls that farmers, too, left home.

"They didn't see the potential in the farm," she says. But in 2018, Vietnam's government began reinvigorating the country's agricultural export economy by backing small and medium producers who create local, high-quality goods.

Wanting to connect Vietnamese farmers and craftspeople with consumers in the U.S., Dinh founded **ATURE**. The platform cuts out expensive middlemen, and elevates artisans who are dependent upon the sale of their goods and wish to make their living close to home.



FOR BIOTECH AND MEDICAL COMPANIES, THE REGULATORY PROCESS IS A CONFUSING MESS. SHE'S CLEANING IT UP.

While on a biotech internship, **RAMA DODDI, CPS'24**, was tasked with conducting research for a new medical device her employer was interested in developing.

Doddi immersed herself in the world of this device: Were there comparable devices already on the market? What was the regulatory pathway to getting this device to customers? The exploratory process was tedious, she says, and she began thinking that "there has to be a better way."

That moment led Doddi to launch **RegINTL**, a user-friendly platform that helps small- to mid-sized companies map out their particular regulatory landscape. Companies with small teams especially need support navigating regulatory complexities, says Doddi, and with her venture, they'll get it.



THIS FOUNDER'S OWN HEALTH CHALLENGE LED HER TO DEVISE A DEVICE TO HELP OTHERS.

For a decade, **NICOLE GUADAGNO, E'25**, lived with constant pain stemming from an autoimmune disease. It took over her life until finally her medical team was able to control the disease in remission.

Upon reaching this health milestone, Guadagno knew that she wanted to help other people in similar situations. Her venture, **Remetra**, is a wearable device that provides autoimmune disease symptom management by measuring inflammatory markers and transmitting the collected data to a mobile platform for analysis.

"I wonder what today might look like if people could be liberated from disease and be empowered by their new health," Guadagno says. "This is what inspires me daily."



HER VENTURE TEACHES STUDENTS TO SOLVE CRIMES—AND EXPAND THEIR HORIZONS.

When **ALEENA JACOB, BHS'24**, attended Harvard Medical School's medical training program for high school students, it opened her eyes to new opportunities. Now on a path to becoming a doctor, she's giving back through her program **MEDscienceLAB Forensics**.

"I had this idea to bring forensics exposure to high school students," Jacob says. Students visit a "crime scene," gather evidence, interview witnesses, test and analyze samples in the laboratory, and collaborate to solve a criminal case.

The steps echo those followed by EMTs, medical examiners, medical pathologists, and others during their work, says Jacob. She hopes that her program will be an entryway to medicine—or another STEM field—for young people.



2024 INNOVATOR AWARDS RECIPIENTS



SHE'S FASHIONING A PLATFORM TO CONNECT STYLE-CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS WITH DESIGNERS.

FATEMA JANAH, E'22, has a background in engineering and a passion for technology and entrepreneurship. So, it's not surprising that she wants to build a bridge—and a community—with her e-commerce platform, **Palm**.

Janahi recognizes that Bahraini women like her want to express themselves through unique fashion, but they don't have easy access to local designers in the Middle East and North Africa.

Expanding a venture she first created as part of the Women's Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship at Northeastern, she's developing Palm to amplify artisans across the MENA region and to open the door to clothing options that honor traditional and modern sensibilities.



SHE MADE NOTE OF A PROBLEM—AND DEvised A SOLUTION.

MANVI KOTTAKOTA, KHOURY'26, is co-vice president of Northeastern's Entrepreneurs Club, takes part in co-op, and attends classes as a data science student.

With so many responsibilities, Kottakota observed that she—and her similarly busy classmates—lacked a streamlined, singular tool to take notes, keep them organized, and share them among each other.

"I noticed that brilliant ideas and important information get lost due to inefficient sorting," she says. This inspired Kottakota to create **Jot**, an AI-powered notetaking and task management platform that helps users organize their notes and thoughts effortlessly. Jot eliminates tedious manual efforts, enabling users to capture, synthesize, and apply insights to their work.



WITH HER VENTURE, SHE'S HONORING HER HERITAGE AND UPLIFTING OTHERS.

A first-generation Panamanian American, **SOFIA URRUTIA, DMSB'24**, spent her formative years immersed in the two cultures, an experience that inspires her each day to make a positive impact.

With her jewelry brand **Palmarosa**, Urrutia not only recognizes that accessorizing is key to an individual's self-expression, but she also partners with Panamanian artisans to highlight their craftsmanship and help them grow as successful entrepreneurs in their own right.

"It is important to create social change through whichever career path I choose," says Urrutia. "I wanted to tell my story and build an accessory brand that I felt aligned with my global perspective."



WOMEN COFFEE GROWERS IN NICARAGUA HAVE BEEN OVERLOOKED. SHE'S PUTTING THEM IN THE SPOTLIGHT.

EMILY ZELEDON, DMSB'26, grew up in a family that runs an agricultural export business selling coffee, beans, rice, cocoa, and other goods from their native Nicaragua. Early on, she learned that women coffee growers often lack access to financial credit and land, and are pushed aside by bigger coffee-growing enterprises.

She's changing that with **Las Mujercitas**, empowering women growers and other small farmers by training them, certifying their product so it gets the recognition in quality it deserves, and buying and selling the coffee at fair, liveable prices.

"It's not only about drinking a cup of coffee," says Zeledon. "It's about how—and under what circumstances—that cup of coffee is made."





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