The Women Who Empower Innovator Awards launched in 2021 to provide entrepreneurial changemakers with the financial resources, mentorship, and connections to help make a difference in their ventures and ambitions. In 2022, our second annual awards provided a total of $220,000 to 22 Northeastern students and alumnae with demonstrated leadership, innovation, authenticity, and community-building.

Our finalists truly represent the best of Northeastern. They are reflective of the university as a whole, in its global reach and in its interdisciplinarity—representing all Northeastern colleges, multiple countries on five different continents, and a range of passions.

As you read their stories on the following pages, I have no doubt that you will be inspired by these women, their ideas, and their businesses. Our innovators are already making a meaningful mark on the world. Together, we can magnify their impact.

Diane Nishigaya MacGillivray
Senior Vice President for University Advancement
Northeastern University
IT’S ABOUT THE INNOVATOR, NOT THE INNOVATION

"It was an honor and a pleasure to participate as a judge. The participants were incredible and all were worthy of winning an award. It was a pleasure to work with the other judges and be part of the wonderful community that Northeastern has created and brought together.”
– Cathy Sakellaris, judge, Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, and member of the board of trustees, Leadership 100

“Part of the value of this competition is they will have each other. There is a tremendous amount of value in having a cohort where they are all at about the same stage of their business journey. Just having people to bounce ideas off of is really, really valuable.”
– Jean Kovacs, judge, Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, and partner and co-founder, Hillsven

“It is really inspiring to be around all of these women who really are taking ownership of their leadership, and taking ownership of ideas, and taking ownership of where they want to go in life.”
– Jill Bornstein, judge, Women Who Empower Innovator Awards, and founder, UpNext Leadership and Executive Coaching

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

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

Cathy Papoulias Sakellaris
Member of the Board of Trustees, Leadership 100

Cheryl Kaplan
President, M.Gemi

Jean Kovacs, CPS’83
Partner and Co-Founder, Hillsven

Jill Bornstein, PNT’22
Founder, UpNext Leadership and Executive Coaching

Leslie Kilgore, PNT’25
Board Member, Netflix

Julietta Dexter, PNT’20
Co-Founder and Chief Growth and Purpose Officer, Science Magic Inc.
Natasha Shazana, Class of 2013, quit her private equity job in New York City to build a new empowering bra brand in Malaysia. Photo Courtesy of Natasha Shazana

Empowering Bra Brand for Everyday Women in Malaysia

by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

Her old college friend Jessica Pogranyi confirms, “She is super sociable, probably the most sociable person I know. She has a lot of energy. She is a go-getter.”

Shazana grew up between Malaysia, Singapore, U.K., Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, while her parents pursued careers in banking. At the age of 17, Shazana came to study at Northeastern’s D’Amore-McKim School of Business in Boston, after her prom date told her about the university and its co-op programs. She maximized every single opportunity at Northeastern, Shazana says, doing two co-ops, two internships, and a semester abroad in Shanghai, China. She majored in marketing and finance.

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

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

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


Shazana

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

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

Shazana was ready to try her own business with the support of her future husband, Chris Evans, who also quit his day job and originally acted as Soko’s co-founder, providing her with big picture, strategic advice. Although Shazana has not lived in Malaysia for almost two decades of her life, she felt a pull to go back and try to build a business that would represent real Malaysian women. She ventured into bras because women’s empowerment has not reached this industry in Malaysia yet. The existing brands did not reflect values of modern women or what local millennials and Gen Z’ers wanted from them, Shazana says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shazana focused on three things with her bra brand: representation, utmost comfort and great shopping experience.

She called her company Soko, from a Malaysian word sokong, which in English means “support.” To create the bras she would be proud of, Shazana conducted extensive research. She found an experienced technical designer who carefully designed the bras. First manufactured samples were tested by 50 women, who slept, jogged and jumped in them.

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

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

In the first three hours after the launch, Soko made five digits in sales, Shazana says. She attributes the launch success to her followers who were posting about the bras on Instagram. Soko’s size offering from L to 2XL.

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

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

Her main marketing tools are social media, specifically, Instagram, and pop-up events. In Soko’s first year of operation she only spent $2,500 on marketing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This all means that maintaining a healthy, rounded diet within a food desert is difficult and expensive, if not impossible. But one Northeastern graduate has a solution, and she’s taking it on the road.

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

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

“The reception has been awesome,” she says. People have described the pop-up shop as “an oasis” of healthful food in an otherwise barren landscape. “We’re selling yummy things—none of our items are too precious or premium. It’s grab-and-go.” Vegan cheese puffs, crispy onion-ring snacks made of pea flour, and mushroom jerky sit alongside fresh fruits, vegetables, and granola bars.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The trailer is small enough to tow with an SUV or a truck; no commercial drivers’ license is necessary, Girard says. And as she expands, she plans to hire people from the local communities to run the storefronts and partner with local food brands.

Girard envisions Welly’s Wellness trailers parked outside antique fairs, high school football games, national parks, or anywhere people congregate.

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

“I believe that health truly is wealth, and everyone should have access to that,” Girard says. “Healthier individuals lead to healthier environments and healthier communities.”
When Yewande Masi and her boyfriend would visit family in West Africa, they’d often return stateside with a block or two of raw shea butter, an ivory-colored fat that’s extracted from the nuts of shea trees—and that makes for an excellent moisturizer for your skin.

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

Masi mostly made them just for herself, and her boyfriend at the time. Occasionally, friends would ask to buy her luxurious, homemade creams, and she’d laugh, flattered by their support, she says. Not long after one trip, Masi and her boyfriend broke up. Nursing a heartache, she says, proof that being in community with her customers is also just good business.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Masi mostly made them just for herself, and her boyfriend at the time. Occasionally, friends would ask to buy her luxurious, homemade creams, and she’d laugh, flattered by their support, she says. Not long after one trip, Masi and her boyfriend broke up. Nursing a heartache, she says, proof that being in community with her customers is also just good business.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Masi was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower, that drew more than 100 entries in this, its second year.
HEALING MORE THAN JUST AN INJURY
by Molly Callahan

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

So, she started her own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a great success and Price’s patients reported feeling healthier, more energetic, and more like themselves again. Often, she says, they would linger after classes or treatments, sipping tea and connecting with one another.

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

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

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

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

As a physical therapist, you feel like you can’t treat just the symptom, you have to look at the whole picture of someone’s life,” Price says. “I love group classes and health coaching because I feel like we learn so much from one another—and that connection is so important.”
Picture this: You’ve just completed an Ironman triathlon—a race consisting of a 2.4-mile swim, then a 112-mile bicycle ride, then a marathon foot race. You need to hydrate and replenish important nutrients and electrolytes your body lost during the grueling athletic contest. What do you reach for? Sugary sports drinks? Bland bottled water?

When Kate Weiler found herself in this exact situation, she turned toward an unexpected source: maple trees. The trees’ sap, typically boiled down to make maple syrup, can be pasteurized instead to make a nutrient-rich, electrolyte-filled drink that’s perfect for pre- and post-workout. Enter maple water.

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

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

Weiler was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower, that drew more than 100 entries this year. “Kate is one of the original pioneering women in Northeastern’s entrepreneurial ecosystem, persevering and excelling at a time when we didn’t talk about the need for diversity in the innovation economy,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s empowerment at Northeastern.

“Maple water is still unknown to a lot of people, but when they discover it, we get emails that say things like, ‘This product changed my life,’” Weiler says. “Maple water provides a natural energy that feels uplifting, but not in the same jittery way that you might get from caffeine. My goal is to make Drink Simple a household name.”

Weiler has completed 12 full-distance Ironman races, and finds parallels between the mental effort required of a triathlete to get over the finish line and that required of an entrepreneur to realize their vision. “In Ironman and in entrepreneurship, there are going to be dark times,” she says. “You have to find a way to get yourself out of them, and know that you can.” For example, Weiler says she might feel miserable at mile 75 of the bike ride, but “you just keep going because you might feel great again by mile 112.” Or, Weiler has encountered unexpected obstacles when it came to getting Drink Simple on grocery store shelves, describing the beverage world as something of an old boys’ club. “I use that mental fortitude a lot in entrepreneurship,” she says. “It can sometimes be difficult to break through, but you just have to keep going.”

“FOR ALL-NATURAL HYDRATION, LOOK TO THE TREES”

by Molly Callahan

and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

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

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

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

“My goal is to make Drink Simple a household name.”

– Kate Weiler, co-founder, Drink Simple

“Maple water is still unknown to a lot of people, but when they discover it, we get emails that say things like, ‘This product changed my life,’” Weiler says. “Maple water provides a natural energy that feels uplifting, but not in the same jittery way that you might get from caffeine. My goal is to make Drink Simple a household name.”

Weiler has completed 12 full-distance Ironman races, and finds parallels between the mental effort required of a triathlete to get over the finish line and that required of an entrepreneur to realize their vision. “In Ironman and in entrepreneurship, there are going to be dark times,” she says. “You have to find a way to get yourself out of them, and know that you can.” For example, Weiler says she might feel miserable at mile 75 of the bike ride, but “you just keep going because you might feel great again by mile 112.” Or, Weiler has encountered unexpected obstacles when it came to getting Drink Simple on grocery store shelves, describing the beverage world as something of an old boys’ club. “I use that mental fortitude a lot in entrepreneurship,” she says. “It can sometimes be difficult to break through, but you just have to keep going.”
ENGINEER WITH A PASSION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS COMMUNITIES DEVELOPS A ROBOTIC SIGNING ARM FOR DEAFBLIND PEOPLE

by Alena Kuzub

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She set up 3D-printers, bought soldering irons and started building a signing hand in collaboration with the Deaf-Blind Contact Center in Allston. She designed all of the parts herself, 3D-printed them, assembled them and started writing code.

After the initial prototypes had been built, her father Todd Johnson, a software engineer, took over developing software for the hand to make it sign.

To ensure the device is the most effective, Johnson enlisted help from Northeastern’s Institute for Experiential Robotics and its director Taskin Padir, assistant professor of Northeastern University.
Rather than looking for an application for her work, Johnson identified an unmet need within the DeafBlind community and set course for her project to make an impact. This is the recipe for success.

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

In a turn of fate, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind saw an article about Johnson’s work and offered her a small grant to continue working on a robotic arm. This allowed her to start her own company, Tatum Robotics, a company founded by Samantha Johnson, is developing a low-cost, anthropomorphic robotic hand that will fingerspell tactile sign language and a safe, compliant robotic arm so that the system can sign more complex words and phrases. They are creating a user interface and gesture recognition software with the help of some DeafBlind collaborators as frequently as possible to better understand tactile ASL and the needs of the community.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It is very impressive. I haven’t seen anybody that dedicated as of yet,” Mansur says.

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

“The technology itself is novel,” Johnson says. “What we are doing could do more than benefit DeafBlind people.”

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

“We can really make such an impact on the lives of these people who currently don’t have any means of communicating. And this could be the first,” Johnson says.
THIS SALIVA-BASED TESTING DEVICE COULD PUT AN END TO PAINFUL FINGER PRICKS FOR PEOPLE WITH DIABETES

by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wenjun started out as a great scientist, doing her Ph.D. and then working in labs at Northeastern, but she was always thinking of the market potential and human impact of her research,” says John Friar, executive professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of Zhang’s mentors. Zhang came up with several ideas for technology that could help people with diabetes, Friar says, but had little experience bringing those ideas to the market.

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

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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

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

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

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

“Wenjun started out as a great scientist, doing her Ph.D. and then working in labs at Northeastern, but she was always thinking of the market potential and human impact of her research,” says John Friar, executive professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of Zhang’s mentors. Zhang came up with several ideas for technology that could help people with diabetes, Friar says, but had little experience bringing those ideas to the market.

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

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

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

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

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

“Wenjun started out as a great scientist, doing her Ph.D. and then working in labs at Northeastern, but she was always thinking of the market potential and human impact of her research,” says John Friar, executive professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of Zhang’s mentors. Zhang came up with several ideas for technology that could help people with diabetes, Friar says, but had little experience bringing those ideas to the market.

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

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

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

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

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

“Wenjun started out as a great scientist, doing her Ph.D. and then working in labs at Northeastern, but she was always thinking of the market potential and human impact of her research,” says John Friar, executive professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of Zhang’s mentors. Zhang came up with several ideas for technology that could help people with diabetes, Friar says, but had little experience bringing those ideas to the market.

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

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

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

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

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

“Wenjun started out as a great scientist, doing her Ph.D. and then working in labs at Northeastern, but she was always thinking of the market potential and human impact of her research,” says John Friar, executive professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of Zhang’s mentors. Zhang came up with several ideas for technology that could help people with diabetes, Friar says, but had little experience bringing those ideas to the market.

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

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

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

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

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

“Wenjun started out as a great scientist, doing her Ph.D. and then working in labs at Northeastern, but she was always thinking of the market potential and human impact of her research,” says John Friar, executive professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and one of Zhang’s mentors. Zhang came up with several ideas for technology that could help people with diabetes, Friar says, but had little experience bringing those ideas to the market.

“Saliva,” Zhang says, “is a window to your overall health.”
THERE’S A NEW BOSS IN TOWN: BLACK OWNED BOS.

by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

As the driving force behind Black Owned Bos., Turner was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower herself, and knew what the entrepreneurial landscape looked like for non-white businesses in the city.

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

When she was a student at Northeastern, Turner says she fielded lots of questions along these lines. “People would ask where to get their hair braided, or where to find the best soul food,” she says. “They were looking to connect to a home within a home.”

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

The business, which turned two at the end of September, has grown exponentially in the year that it has been associated with Black Owned Bos. branded merchandise. “I don’t know that we would’ve had the same opportunities without Jae’da,” Ellis-Phillip says. Through exclusive Black Owned Bos. programming, Sweet Glam has hosted events in partnership with Puma and State Street, she says.

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

“It’s really helped a lot.”

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

“As far as the future, it’s really just about breaking down these barriers for small, Black-owned businesses in the Greater Boston area,” Turner says. “It’s that whole mentality of ‘lift as you climb.’ And it’s been an exciting journey so far.”

So, Turner started an Instagram account, where she would post photos and information about local businesses. “I wanted to highlight and amplify those businesses I grew up with,” she says.

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

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

It was a turning point in the movement for racial equity—and for Black Owned Bos. Turner says. “It was overwhelming at first, but I appreciated the value of the platform and watching it grow.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s really helped a lot.”

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

“As far as the future, it’s really just about breaking down these barriers for small, Black-owned businesses in the Greater Boston area,” Turner says. “It’s that whole mentality of ‘lift as you climb.’ And it’s been an exciting journey so far.”

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

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

“It’s really helped a lot.”

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

“As far as the future, it’s really just about breaking down these barriers for small, Black-owned businesses in the Greater Boston area,” Turner says. “It’s that whole mentality of ‘lift as you climb.’ And it’s been an exciting journey so far.”
While other teenagers were making top-eight lists of their best friends on MySpace, Tahisha Charles was using it to do something else entirely. As young as 13 years old, Charles would make fan forums for musicians and artists such as Nicki Minaj, Janae Aiko, Omarion, Ciara, and more. Charles would track news updates about the artists and share pop culture tips with a community of fans she helped to coalesce. It was a way to stay in the know about some of her favorite musicians.

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

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

Charles also wrote prolifically under the moniker “Mixtapechick” for HipHop87, a music news and entertainment site with a huge audience in the Philadelphia area. Then, she graduated from high school. Charles, whose early music-writing career was beginning to take off, searched for a place where she could really make a name for herself; where she could get the kind of recognition she deserved for her tireless coverage of local and national artists, but struggled to find one that fit.

So, she made her own site. Charles, who graduated from Northeastern University in 2020 with a master’s degree in journalism, created Mixtapechick.com to be the go-to source for national music news, as well as coverage of Boston’s local hip hop and rap scene.

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

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

The post took off. More than 4 million people clicked on it, she says. “It was incredible. It absolutely did numbers,” Charles recalls. Unfortunately, the post isn’t online anymore—a hiccup with her website a few years later caused Charles to lose everything. She rebounded and rebuilt the site, but her record-smashing post about Beyoncé’s record-breaking album was lost to the internet ether.

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

“Tahisha is an amazing example of a woman trying to help Black artists, whose work is underrepresented in traditional media outlets,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

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

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

For Charles, it all comes back to helping others. Whether it’s the local artists she works with, or the students she hopes to someday employ, it’s about giving back. “I have a big heart, and I’m always looking for ways to help people,” she says. “At the end of the day, I feel fulfilled when I can accomplish that.”
HOW A NORTHEASTERN DEGREE IN BUSINESS EMPOWERED THIS ENTREPRENEUR TO START A WOMEN’S FASHION BRAND IN NIGERIA

by Alena Kuzub

Temidola Ikomi, a 2017 graduate of the D’Amore-McKim School of Business, really missed the Northeastern community, so she joined Women Who Empower. Ikomi wanted to build new connections with like-minded women who wished to help each other grow and might have their own businesses, she says, because she is a co-founder of an African-inspired fashion brand in Nigeria, her home country.

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

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

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

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

They always knew they wanted to do something in the fashion world, Ikomi says. “Fashion has been a great way for me to express how I feel, my identity without necessarily saying anything,” she says. “We all do love fashion. We all also want to embrace our Yoruba culture, [and] that’s something we’re able to do with a modern twist.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She describes the Irawo clothes as African-inspired womenswear that is modern and elegant as well as very comfortable and professional. She says, Irawo garments are for trailblazers who are chasing their dreams in their own way. They can be mothers, students or working professional women.

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

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

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

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

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

“They are utilizing influencers to help us break into the U.S. market,” Ikomi says.

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

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

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

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

“I believe in being very well-rounded and utilizing what I am learning on my job for the business,” she says. “It’s not necessarily about choosing one, but it’s about making time for whatever is important to you and prioritizing your time.”
Amy Andes’ friends call her the Garbanzo Bean Queen, although her coronation was anything but expected. “I really did not know this would be my future,” says Andes, with a laugh. But Andes champions the humble garbanzo bean with an ardor that borders on passion, as she’ll readily admit. “Garbanzo beans are a huge part of my life,” she says. “I’ve eaten every hummus that ever existed.”

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

And, as Andes has discovered, the beans are endlessly adaptable. Like an old dog learning new tricks, garbanzo beans can shine in a variety of foods; not just hummus. Andes, who earned her bachelor’s degree in chemistry at Northeastern in 2017, became interested in food science after she joined a chemistry club at the university. An early co-op taught her that medical chemistry wasn’t for her, and she was searching around for a good fit for her practical approach to the field when the club brought in a food scientist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andes was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower, that drew more than 100 entries in its second year. The award, Andes says, was “a reminder to keep going.”

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

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

“As a university, we’re in the business of creating amazing people, entrepreneurs, and innovators who will go do amazing things,” says Ludwig, who is also part of the Women Who Empower team. “During our selection process, a woman’s current venture or project is important to the extent that it’s reflective of her innovative mindset. We are investing in the woman, the person behind the idea.”

“We want to honor and showcase women who are breaking the mold, solving difficult problems, looking for opportunity, and making a difference,” she says. “This award lifts up our innovators by recognizing them not just with a grant but through celebration, media opportunities, and by leveraging the power of our networks. We validate these women and what they are trying to do.”
VENTURE CAPITAL ISN’T DISPERSED EQUALLY. SHE’S WORKING TO CHANGE THAT.
by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

So, she’s doing something about it.

Envision, her inclusive startup incubator, provides resources, opportunities, and mentorship to underrepresented founders—namely, women and people of color.

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

“I started wondering what we could do to increase women in the field,” Berger said. See a problem, solve it. Berger branched off from the entrepreneur club and started the Women’s Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE) at Northeastern in 2018. Four years later, WISE is a thriving organization with more than 20 student-leaders and four main programs: We-Learn, a professional development series; WeBuild, a design incubator; WeSupport, a mentorship network; and WeLaunch, a venture accelerator.

“I learned a lot about how beneficial it is to have a supportive, safe community that understands you,” Berger says. “WeBuild in particular was really helpful to people.” Indeed, many of this year’s Innovator Award winners utilized some or all of the services offered through WISE.

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

When Berger was transitioning out of her leadership role within WISE, she took a step back and realized that there weren’t many organizations like it—at other universities, or anywhere.

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

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

“What it comes down to is that if we provide a little bit of money and a supportive community, it helps spur entrepreneurship,” Berger says. “I feel incredibly honored to be part of this. Community is such an important pillar of my life in almost everything I do.”
WILL THIS LUXURY RETAIL COMPANY BECOME THE NET-A-PORTER OF VINTAGE FURNITURE?
by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

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

By 2020, that shared love bloomed into something more: Ólafsdóttir and Callarelli launched LDV, a retail platform for curated, luxury vintage furniture and decor. They rely on their own exacting taste to handpick the items they’ll sell, seeking out estate sales, small auctions, and private dealers in Italy, France, and the United States to procure pieces from some of the most sought-after designers of the time.

Ólafsdóttir has collected works by the famed Italian photographer and designer Willy Rizzo; art from American sculptor and designer Paul Evans; and master designer Karl Springer, arguably one of the most influential fixtures in American furniture design in the late 20th century.

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

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

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

Arts Décoratifs, as the style was known in France, was a celebration of luxury, glamour, exuberance, and faith in progress. It was a truly global artistic phenomenon, pulling from French, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Egyptian traditions—and monuments to the style can be found in the arching craftsmanship of the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building in New York City. The style celebrated beauty and expression, and moved toward a design sensibility that furniture could be beautiful as well as functional. Nearly 100 years later, Ólafsdóttir sees a parallel movement beginning, as people emerge from the isolation of COVID-19 and begin to celebrate beauty once again.

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

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

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

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

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

“I really appreciate what Women Who Empower is doing, and knowing there’s this group of women all supporting each other gave me a comforting feeling. I know I’m not alone in what is still a very male-dominated field.”—Birta Ólafsdóttir, co-founder & chief brand officer, LDV

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

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

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

“Maybe it’ll become the Net-a-Porter of vintage furniture, but I’m just doing this because I love it,” she says. “No matter what happens, I’m going to continue. This is just the start for me. Maybe I’ll grow with LDV, or maybe it will take on a life of its own. All that matters to me is that at the end of the day, I love what I do.”
“A little bit of good can turn into a whole lot of good when fueled by the commitment of a social entrepreneur.” This quote by Jeffrey Skoll, a Canadian billionaire and eBay’s first president, might very well describe Tabitha Boyton, a recent graduate of Northeastern University – London. Boyton is somewhat of an outlier among the five winners of the 2022 Innovator Awards, given by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower this summer. She won in the undergraduate student category and took home $22,000 for founding and running Res Publica. This interdisciplinary magazine and academically rigorous platform promotes discussion and debate of various ideas and concepts among younger audiences. Its international team works on a volunteer basis.

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

Res Publica is committed to politically educating and increasing engagement, Boyton says, while uplifting women of color in the industry. “We are a women-led diverse platform, and this is something that publication really prides itself in and it is highlighting that people who look like us do have a place in discourse, and do deserve to have their voices heard, and also do have the platform to do so,” Boyton says. As a woman of Asian descent, Boyton has experienced severe racism and sexism in and outside of her professional life, she says. “I didn’t let that genuinely horrific experience hinder me from building something that I thought would rebuild my confidence, but also be valuable to other people,” she says. “I basically ended up embracing my vulnerabilities.”

Without formal training in journalism, website or graphic design, Boyton embarked on establishing this new publication in 2020 when she was a law and international relations student, the world was shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic, and her own mother was at the hospital, undergoing a surgery. In just under two years, Res Publica grew to 35 team members and about 250 contributors. “The editors range from San Marino to Mexico, Hong Kong, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Russia, so it really is such an eclectic group of people,” Boyton says. This year, the magazine will publish its 1000th piece.

Res Publica has been featured in several awards for journalism, style or tenacity, Boyton says. It’s been selected as one of the best newcomers in London, a top-five specialist publications in the U.K., and was shortlisted for the U.K. Civility in Politics Awards. It covers a variety of topics from politics and law to art and culture. The magazine is dedicated to the UN sustainability framework and a green approach to publication, primarily existing digitally online. “We don’t print out absolutely every single one of our issues. We do up to three [print-ed issues] per year,” Boyton says. But for her, Res Publica is not just a mere magazine or a media platform. “My project isn’t just words on a page,” she says. “Because we are a career accelerator for young, marginalized writers who move on to bigger and better things. And for me, seeing those people who I’ve mentored, who have written for us, who have worked for us, grow into such young, confident, capable, especially young women, it’s such a big reward.”

Boyton says that uplifting others has been instilled in her from childhood both by her parents and her teachers. She was born to a British-German mother and a Hong Kong Chinese father and grew up in Hong Kong. Being a Hong Konger at heart, she says, made her very independent. At the age of 11 she moved to the U.K. to attend an all-girls boarding school, Cheltenham Ladies’ College, which she approached as a new adventure. “I am always looking to find new things that I can do,” Boyton says. “For example, I am trying to do sushi rolls at the moment.” She tried a lot of sports as a child, including horseback riding, figure skating and, unconventionally for U.K., lacrosse. “My family has always been really supportive of all of my endeavors,” Boyton says. “They’ve always pushed me to work..."
hard, and pursue my potential and always impressed upon me how important it is to give credit where it is due and also to practice gratitude.”

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

A renowned British philosopher A.C. Grayling, who started New College of the Humanities that became Northeastern University - London in July, says that Boyton showed herself to be ambitious “in the best possible ways” since she joined the college. He describes Boyton as a bright, very entrepreneurial, creative and committed individual.

“She is marvelous proof of what can be done when energy, positivity and intelligence are brought to bear on a project. And she is always full of projects,” Grayling says.

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

“For me, the most important thing is about actually having this productive exchange of ideas, because ultimately, debate is fundamental,” Boyton says. “Table whatever you want, but be open to the criticism or be open to the praise that you would receive from that. You’ll have to make your point stand up.”

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

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

Res Publica has 16 long-form thematic magazines under its belt, covering a plethora of topics, from patriarchy to technology, to the pandemic, to theology.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She also participates in a number of other social initiatives, she says. She has been an ambassador for the European Youth Parliament and acts as a mentor at Publish and Prosper, a U.S. based organization that helps youth build new academic student publications.

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

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

“I suppose it’s all about being your best authentic self. And always asking yourself how you can evolve,” Boyton says.
There’s a saying in wrestling: Once you start the sport, everything else in life is easy. For Hannah Ung—whose travels have taken her halfway around the world, and whose startup might take her even further—it’s proven true.

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

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

While the trip ultimately enriched her worldview and her college experience, Ung ran into a problem almost every night. She couldn’t leave her luggage in her room. And when she tried to find safe places to store it, she encountered unaffordable hourly rates, or just flat-out “Nos” from business owners.

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

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

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

MEET THE FOUNDER BEHIND THE AIRBNB OF STORAGE

by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She’s raised more than $30,000 in funding and is launching a pilot version of Boxy to test it out on an early group of hosts and stashers. For now, Ung and her co-founder are matching hosts and stashers by hand. Soon, they hope to expand and automate the platform so that the next time Ung travels, she’ll have a hand storing her luggage.
Growing up on a small homestead farm in Lexington, Massachusetts, Michelle Beaudette learned early the value of leading a sustainable, self-sufficient lifestyle. Beaudette helped her family care for goats, honey bees, and chickens—though the latter came only after she promised her mom she would take care of them personally. Her family composted religiously, and had a healthy appreciation (and a first-hand understanding) of how they interacted with and affected their environment.

So, in middle school, when Beaudette started getting curious about makeup and cosmetics, it was just as important to find a brand that was ethical and sustainable as it was to find the perfect shade of lipstick. She found a few brands she liked, including Lush, a British retailer that uses vegetarian and vegan ingredients in its products and aims to reduce waste in its packaging.

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

That moment of wanting more for herself and her peers would ultimately lead Beaudette to create the company she sought: Kaolin Beauty, an ethical, non-toxic, zero-waste makeup and self-care company. Beaudette was recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award, a competition hosted by Northeastern University’s Women Who Empower that drew more than 100 applicants this year.

“...I wanted something that was waste-free but still had high-quality values: non-toxic, ethically sourced ingredients, with empowering self-care and mental-health messages” —Michelle Beaudette, founder and chief executive officer, Kaolin Beauty

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

For Beaudette, who will graduate in May from the D’Amore-McKim School of Business at Northeastern, Kaolin Beauty is the result of years of ideation—tweaking and revisiting her plan time and again. She utilized the resources provided by university organizations such as the Women’s Interdisciplinary Society of Entrepreneurship (WISE), and IDEA, a student-run venture accelerator, to learn how to start a small business. She pinpointed the problem: Beauty companies generate tons and tons of plastic pollution. Then, with six months at the Sherman Venture Co-op—a paid opportunity for student entrepreneurs to develop their ideas—Beaudette worked out the details and got a certificate in organic skincare through Formula Botanica, an online cosmetic science program. She also worked with Scout, Northeastern’s student-run design lab, to build out her website.

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

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

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

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

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

“I always wanted Kaolin Beauty to be fully engaging,” she says, “something that was fun, but goes deeper than your average beauty brand.”
A TECH EDITORIAL BY GEN Z, FOR GEN Z

by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

She’s right.

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

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

What’s unique about Gen Z is that all of this has always been part of their lives. The iPhone launched in 2007, when the oldest Gen Zers were 10. “By the time they were in their teens, the primary means by which young Americans connected with the web was through mobile devices, WiFi, and high-bandwidth cellular service,” Pew researchers write. “Social media, constant connectivity, and on-demand entertainment and communication are innovations Millennials adapted to as they came of age. For those born after 1996, these are largely assumed.”

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This fall, she’s working with the Intellectual Property Law Clinic, run out of Northeastern’s School of Law, to trademark her designs.

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

“How do I grow The Circuit into its adult stage?” she wonders aloud. She could spin it off into its own startup, or work with other colleges to install The Circuit at their campuses, too. “At the end of the day, it’s a community first, and I’m so proud to have created this community for myself and my peers.”
Ph.D. CANDIDATE HONORED FOR BOOSTING ACCESS TO EQUITABLE HEALTH CARE FOR MARGINALIZED PATIENTS by Molly Callahan

Growing up, Cynthia Orofo knew she would do something with medicine. Her mother, sister and four aunts were nurses, and some uncles were also in the medical profession. She liked seeing her mother and aunt meticulously care for people, both applying their medical training and giving them personal attention.

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

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

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

The program aims to increase health literacy, improve disease self-management
Now, Ramdin describes Orofo as resilient. “She is quiet, low-key and determined. She is fierce,” O’Connor says. “She just has that stick-to-itness, and she does what she needs to do. She quietly advocates for people.”

Orofo thought of Culture Care Collective while an undergraduate student. She says her father, who has diabetes, was an inspiration and guinea pig for the app. “He is the ideal candidate for Culture Care Collective. He is a person with multimorbidity, English is his second language, and somebody who doesn’t really have great health literacy because his degree background is in business,” she says.

Community health workers are individuals with basic health training, Orofo explains, who can be an intermediary between the patient and the clinical care team of doctors and nurses. They are able to provide basic health knowledge, coach and facilitate disease management, help individuals navigate the health system, and do all the things necessary to manage their disease. The COVID-19 pandemic propelled the switch to virtual health care, and Culture Care Collective is leveraging this transition through a mobile app to connect marginalized patients with trustworthy members of the community that look like them and speak their language.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m going to dedicate my life to making sure folks that come from Randolph-like towns and cities—that don’t have a chance, don’t have a pipeline and don’t really have a lot of exposure—get that exposure and get interested,” Orofo says.
She’s on a Quest to Reduce Maternal Mortality—in the US and Abroad

by Molly Callahan

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

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

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

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

For Colon, who studied women’s health while earning her master’s degree in global health at the University of California, San Francisco, the most jarring disparities appear in maternal health. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finds that “Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women,” a rate that only increases with the age of the pregnant person. The federal agency also finds that as many as 80 percent of those deaths are preventable, with the right education and timely care. This summer, President Joe Biden declared it a “maternal health crisis,” and developed a 70-page plan for improvements.

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

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

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

Nwanna-Nzewunwa, who is a resident doctor in the Maine-Dartmouth Family Medicine Residency Program; Calhoun, a certified doula and doctoral student at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; and Colon, a certified doula with experience building global maternal health programs, are attacking the problem on a few different fronts. The first goal of their nonprofit organization is to educate mothers and families about what to expect during their pregnancy and births—and how to recognize warning signs. The second goal is to establish a network of doulas who can advocate for women within the healthcare system and guide them through their pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period. Finally, they plan to leverage simulation training to address structural biases within the healthcare system, including implicit biases that contribute to adverse blocks they faced in caring for pregnant people.

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

Doulas, they say, can provide support the rest of the time. Studies from the American Health Association have shown women who receive doula support reduce their odds of a cesarean delivery by almost 41 percent, lowered their odds of preterm birth by 22 percent, and were two times less likely to experience a complication involving themselves or their baby. Importantly for Colon and Nwanna-Nzewunwa, community-based doulas can also help to mitigate racial maternal health inequities and advocate for equitable care. Colon understands this critical role intimately. In 2015, while she was studying for her master’s degree in global health, Colon spent three months in India studying the care that people giving birth received. She lived among midwives in Bihar, and interviewed them about the systemic roadblocks they faced in caring for pregnant people.

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

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

It’s in that spirit that Colon and her co-founders plan to expand education about birthing and equip women with the tools to have a safe pregnancy and birth. “For me and my co-founders,” Colon says, “it’s about working diligently to make an impact because we care about women. Girls who dream become women with vision, and I want to maintain the integrity of my own promises to myself—as well as those of women everywhere.”
Amanda Céspedes and Madhuri Iyer are familiar with the complex web of laws and timelines and documentation that comprise the federal regulatory landscape in the United States. Anyone creating a healthcare startup or building a new medical device needs to make their way through an astounding 18,000 requirements established by the Food and Drug Administration to determine which ones apply to their products.

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

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

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

These federal regulations exist in a tangled mass that’s difficult to parse for even the most savvy entrepreneur. And it’s not just the U.S.—federal regulations in countries around the world are often complicated to follow. Céspedes encountered this in Chile. She’d spent five years working at a medical device startup that ultimately failed because of regulatory challenges, she says.

“It was five years, gone,” Céspedes says. And Iyer encountered the same challenge in Australia. For nine years, she worked at companies large and small and saw that in almost every instance, “it wasn’t clear what the quality and regulatory expectations were,” she says.

Frustrated with the murky regulatory environment, they each enrolled in a graduate level regulatory affairs program in the College of Professional Studies.

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

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

“It was five years, gone,” Céspedes says. And Iyer encountered the same challenge in Australia. For nine years, she worked at companies large and small and saw that in almost every instance, “it wasn’t clear what the quality and regulatory expectations were,” she says.

Frustrated with the murky regulatory environment, they each enrolled in a graduate level regulatory affairs program in the College of Professional Studies.

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

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

“A lot of times, the novel medical device innovators are people who don’t know the regulatory space but just have a great idea and want to help people,” she says. “Unfortunately, the FDA isn’t something you bring in after the fact; you have to build it in before you even start conceptualizing a design.”

So, the pair combined their experiences and strengths, and created a solution: EZReg, an online platform that clearly defines the federal requirements that healthcare and medical device startups must meet in order to get their ideas to market.

Céspedes and Iyer were each recognized with a 2022 Innovator Award in a competition hosted by Northeastern’s Women Who Empower.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most important, it doesn’t mean that Mullen isn’t still an entrepreneur at heart. This is just what happens sometimes. “Many ventures succeed and fail for a host of variables that we can neither predict nor control,” says Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship at Northeastern, and a member of the Women Who Empower team.

“Women then tend to take failure very personally, so they don’t keep innovating, they stop at the first sign of failure,” Ludwig says. “We want this award to be a validation of the woman as an entrepreneur and innovator, no matter the outcome of today’s venture.”

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

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

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

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

“Women then tend to take failure very personally, so they don’t keep innovating, they stop at the first sign of failure,” Ludwig says. “We want this award to be a validation of the woman as an entrepreneur and innovator, no matter the outcome of today’s venture.”

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

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

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

“Women then tend to take failure very personally, so they don’t keep innovating, they stop at the first sign of failure,” Ludwig says. “We want this award to be a validation of the woman as an entrepreneur and innovator, no matter the outcome of today’s venture.”

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

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

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

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

—Betsy Ludwig, executive director of women’s entrepreneurship, Northeastern University
The Women Who Empower Innovator Awards were developed in 2021 to support the next generation of inventors, groundbreakers, and creators in the Northeastern community. This year, we are awe-inspired by the hundreds of applications we received, but even more impressed by the innovators themselves. This piece encompasses the passions, personal stories, and insights of the 22 award winners who, with the support of the Innovator Awards, are positively impacting their communities, our world, and future generations.

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

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