



Presents

# GENERATION STARTUP

A Documentary Film by Cynthia Wade and Cheryl Miller Houser



**Release Date:** September 23, 2016 at IFC Center in New York, September 30, 2016 at Laemmle's Monica Film Center in Los Angeles, and October 7, 2016 at DIA in Detroit

**Run Time:** 93 Minutes

**Rating:** Not Rated

**Language:** English

**Official Web Site:** [generationstartupthefilm.com](http://generationstartupthefilm.com)

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## **SYNOPSIS**

GENERATION STARTUP takes us to the front lines of entrepreneurship in America, capturing the struggles and triumphs of six recent college graduates who put everything on the line to build startups in Detroit. Shot over 17 months, it's an honest, in-the-trenches look at what it takes to launch a startup. Directed by Academy Award winner Cynthia Wade and award-winning filmmaker Cheryl Miller Houser, the film celebrates risk-taking, urban revitalization, and diversity while delivering a vital call-to-action—with entrepreneurship at a record low, the country's economic future is at stake.

## FILMMAKERS

Directed By **CYNTHIA WADE**  
**CHERYL MILLER HOUSER**

Executive Producer **SUSAN MARGOLIN**  
**LAUREN ZALAZNICK**

Director of Photography **BOAZ FREUND**

Edited By **KIMBERLY PELLNAT**

Produced By **CHERYL MILLER HOUSER**  
**BRIAN P. EGAN**

Composed By **ERIC V. HACHIKIAN**

Music Supervisor **JIM BLACK**

Production Company **CREATIVE BREED**

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

Soon after launching my own production company, experiencing first-hand both the fear and excitement of being a fledgling entrepreneur, I met Andrew Yang, founder of Venture for America (VFA). Venture for America is a non-profit that provides recent college graduates with a path to entrepreneurship by placing them at startups in 15 cities around the country to work and train for two years, then helps them launch their own companies.

My eldest son was a VFA Fellow in Providence at the time, and I had seen first-hand his life-changing experience of being thrust into a lot of responsibility at age 22 with little direction at a fast-growing startup. Inspired by what VFA was doing, I convinced Andrew to give me full access and editorial free reign to follow a handful of Venture for America fellows. I wanted to capture the true life story of what it takes to build a startup, especially the emotional roller coaster of very low lows and high highs.

Director Cynthia Wade, famous for telling emotionally gripping stories, joined me in this ambitious undertaking to follow our subjects over several years. Cynthia had won an Academy Award for FREEHELD about a dying policewoman fighting to leave her pension to her female life partner, and received her second Oscar nomination for her award-winning HBO documentary MONDAYS AT RACINE about a hair salon that caters to women undergoing chemotherapy. And she is an entrepreneur herself. I knew she would bring tremendous heart and insight to this story too, as did our cinematographer Boaz Freund and the rest of the filmmaking team.

Cynthia and I then had to decide which VFA city to film in. While there is exciting startup activity in all 15 VFA cities – places like Cincinnati, Cleveland, Baltimore and Miami -- we were particularly attracted to Detroit, once a world-class industrial powerhouse that had fallen into bankruptcy when we started filming. And yet we were taken with the spirit of pride, resilience and determination among Detroiters, and signs of rebuilding. During the year and a half we filmed there, we witnessed an extraordinary physical transformation of Detroit: new roads, buildings, restaurants, art spaces, and businesses opening every time we returned.

The Venture for America Fellows we follow in the film are part of a much larger community of entrepreneurs and small businesses in Detroit, many of them spearheaded by locals who showed tremendous dedication to a city they never abandoned even during its most challenging times. While many still view Detroit as an emblem of the nation's past, those of us involved in making this film hope we have captured the spirit of entrepreneurship and rebuilding palpable there.

GENERATION STARTUP is a tribute to the Detroit of today, a city moving towards a new embodiment of innovation and prosperity. It is also a tribute to the

Venture for America fellows we follow in the film, and people across the country who have the courage and determination to start businesses that, in turn, help to rejuvenate their cities through entrepreneurship.

-- Cheryl Miller Houser, co-Director and Producer

## **DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS**

I've never had a traditional career. After college, as my classmates headed to Wall Street and Madison Avenue, I chose instead to work inside New York City homeless shelters. There, I helped established Head Start programs, created job training programs, planned summer adventures, made sure carefully chosen gifts were given to each child during holidays. My budget was microscopic; the needs were enormous. I learned to be tenacious, relentless. I practiced the art of pulling rabbits out of hats, of making something from nothing.

During those years, though, I kept hearing a call. It was an itch, a drive I couldn't shake. I wanted to tell stories. I wanted to make films. I was offered a partial scholarship to Stanford University's MA program in documentary film. It was a risk. Best-case scenario, it would take me more than a decade to pay off my student loans -- and even then, only if I hustled for years.

I hustled. I took every job I could. I was a dishwasher, freelance grant writer, a driver of low-income moms who needed rides to the supermarket. I had a job where, each day, I took the temperature of ham sandwiches for the Board of Health. It took total focus on the end-goal to just keep going, roll with the punches and keep it moving. When finally I got on a film set, I was the hauler of tripods.

Over time I built a production company, a brand, and a body of work. Along the way, I've eaten ants and bats, shimmied into abandoned buildings, been chased by a pimp, flown a drone into a toxic mud volcano, caught the wire on an aircraft carrier, lived in an arsenic-filled village in Cambodia, and slept on the couch in the home of a dying police officer for weeks -- all to tell stories that would otherwise go unmarked and unnoticed by the world.

What the entrepreneurs in GENERATION STARTUP are doing might on the surface look different than what I did during my years in New York homeless shelters. But it stems from the same impulse: to risk something. To create something from nothing. To do.

*--Cynthia Wade, co-Director*

I was drawn to making GENERATION STARTUP because our young entrepreneurs' stories spoke to me personally. Several years ago, with great trepidation, I left a well-paying, secure job as head of production at a TV production company to launch my own company. I should have done this much sooner, but it took me several decades to get up the guts. In 2013, the desire to be master of my destiny, to only make programming that engaged me to the core and inspired viewers, finally won out over my fear of failing.

I embarked on making GENERATION STARTUP soon after starting my company, stirred by the idealism, courage and determination of the recent college

graduates who were moving to economically depressed cities across the US to join or launch startups through a program called Venture for America. I wanted to follow several of these young entrepreneurs for an extended period of time to capture the immersive, true experience of what it's like to build a company. But not in Silicon Valley or New York. In an unexpected place: Detroit, a city built on entrepreneurship and innovation which is making a comeback, largely thanks to those very same factors.

Despite the widely held stereotype of 20-somethings as entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship among 18-34 year olds is at a 24-year low. This has grave implications for our country's economic future, since young companies generate two-thirds of all new jobs. So here were 20-somethings who were not just taking big risks, they were also bucking the trend of most of their peers, who cite fear of failing as one of the biggest impediments holding them back.

Our subjects were afraid of failing too. They were also full of self-doubt and somewhat clueless when they started out. And they failed time and again. But none of them gave up. They all worked tirelessly, demonstrating tremendous grit and resilience. In the year and a half that we followed most of them, they grew into confident leaders and entrepreneurs. Their extraordinary transformation over a short period of time is a testament to how much we can all learn and grow when we put ourselves in situations outside our comfort zone and stretch ourselves.

The grit, resilience and hustle of our subjects is mirrored in the city of Detroit, which was in bankruptcy when we started filming there in August 2014. While Detroit is still grappling with widespread poverty and other problems, it is rebounding, with employment and population numbers on the rise, largely thanks to the growth of new businesses. This same force is driving the economic rejuvenation of many cities across the US.

Our subjects are living proof that entrepreneurs are made, not born, and come from many different backgrounds. They show that through entrepreneurship and hard work anyone can pave their own way to job fulfillment and personal growth, and in the process strengthen their community.

For me the film isn't just about entrepreneurship. It's about the human capacity to step outside our comfort zone, overcome our fear of failure, not follow what others might expect of us, and create our own path forward. I regret that it took me decades to do that, but it's never too late, and never too soon either, even if you have no idea what you're doing. As our subjects illustrate, the quickest way to learn is by failing and learning from your mistakes, then going back at it with greater confidence and expertise.

I hope that when audiences see the film, they are inspired to do just that, in all spheres of their lives.

*-- Cheryl Miller Houser, co-Director*

## **FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES**



### **CYNTHIA WADE (Co-Director)**

Cynthia won the Academy Award® and 16 film awards for her HBO documentary FREEHELD about a dying policewoman fighting to leave her pension to her female life partner. Wade was a lead producer on the Lionsgate feature adaptation, also entitled FREEHELD, starring Julianne Moore, Ellen Page and Steve Carell. In 2013, Cynthia received her second Oscar nomination for her award-winning HBO documentary MONDAYS AT RACINE about a hair salon that caters to women undergoing chemotherapy. Cynthia's 2010 short documentary BORN SWEET, about a Cambodian village poisoned with arsenic well water, was shortlisted for an Academy Award and won 17 festival awards worldwide. Cynthia is the director of the feature-length documentaries SHELTER DOGS (HBO), LIVING THE LEGACY (Sundance & IFC Channels), GROWING HOPE AGAINST HUNGER (Sesame Street Prime Time Special, Emmy Winner), and GRIST FOR THE MILL (Cinemax). She has directed commercial campaigns for Unilever, Abbott, Kimberly Clark, Sanofi, Pfizer, Hershey and Bristol Myers Squibb, including the viral branded films Selfie (Dove Real Beauty) and #EndMommyWars (Similac). Her camerawork has been seen on HBO/Cinemax, PBS, A&E, AMC, The History Channel, LOGO, Oxygen, MTV and Discovery. Cynthia is a MacArthur grantee and holds an MA in documentary filmmaking from Stanford University and BA cum laude from Smith College.



### **CHERYL MILLER HOUSER (Co-Director/Producer)**

Cheryl started her career developing and producing feature films, including David O. Russell's first movie SPANKING THE MONKEY, winner of the Sundance Audience Award. She has produced several award-winning social issue documentaries including CHILDREN OF DARKNESS (PBS), a film about children with mental illness that was nominated for an Academy Award, and TRUST ME (Showtime) about an interfaith camp in rural North Carolina founded the summer after 9/11. She has helped create and produce hundreds of hours of TV for broadcasters such as the Discovery Channel, National Geographic, History Channel, A+E, Lifetime, Food Network, Discovery ID, and Travel Channel, including 90 episodes of *Dr. G: Medical Examiner*, the top-rated show on Discovery Health and the pilot for the hit Travel



Channel series *Hotel Impossible*. In 2013 Cheryl launched Creative Breed, a full service multi-platform production company, to create engaging stories across all media that provide uplift and positive impact. GENERATION STARTUP is the company's most ambitious project to date. *Mad Genius Tips*, a popular web series Cheryl created for Food & Wine Magazine, was nominated for a James Beard Award, the highest honor in the food world. Cheryl holds a B.A. in Comparative Literature from Brown University.



**SUSAN MARGOLIN (Executive Producer)**

With over 25 years' experience in film distribution, Susan Margolin is a keen marketer, digital distribution pioneer and dedicated supporter of filmmakers and the independent film community.

In 1991 she launched New Video Group with partner Steve Savage to distribute feature films, TV programming and web originals via home video, then DVD and then digitally. They partnered with over 500 content creators, including A+E®, HISTORY™, Lifetime, Tribeca Films, Sundance Institute, Major League Baseball® and Scholastic®.

In 1999, Susan launched Docurama Films®, a division of New Video that acquires and distributes award winning documentary films across all platforms including theatrical, home entertainment, and digital. Through Docurama Films, Susan championed over 300 celebrated, award-winning films including D.A. Pennebaker's BOB DYLAN: DONT LOOK BACK, NARCO CULTURA, OUR NIXON, and the Oscar®-nominated films HELL AND BACK AGAIN, WASTE LAND, GASLAND, PARADISE LOST 3 and THE INVISIBLE WAR.

In 2011, New Video signed on as Sundance Institute's exclusive digital content aggregation partner for Sundance Film Festival and Lab titles. In 2012 Susan and Steve sold New Video to Cinedigm Entertainment Group.

Susan is Executive Producer of the recently completed documentary GENERATION STARTUP and is working with a range of additional documentary filmmakers. A graduate of Brown University, Susan is a board member of BAFTA NY and of Chicken & Egg Pictures, and she serves on the advisory board of New York Women in Film and Television. She is a 2011 Producers Guild of America "Digital 25: Leaders in Emerging Entertainment" honoree.



## **LAUREN ZALAZNICK (Executive Producer)**

Lauren Zalaznick has devoted her career in media to transforming the cultural landscape, from her start as an award-winning independent feature film producer to her most recent role as Executive Vice President at NBCUniversal. The hallmark of her career has been leading the growth of some of the strongest television and digital brands in media. Today, Zalaznick advises and invests in digital media startups, primarily focused on new content platforms. Every week, she publishes a widely read and influential newsletter about women in business and culture, The LZ Sunday Paper.

From 1984 to 1994, she produced a number of groundbreaking feature films including the Cannes and Sundance Festival award-winning film *KIDS*, directed by Larry Clark; Todd Haynes' *POISON AND SAFE*, starring Julianne Moore; Tom Kalin's *SWOON*, and Jim McKay's *GIRLS TOWN*.

From 2002 to 2014, Zalaznick held progressive positions of leadership and p&l responsibility within Comcast NBCUniversal. Her television career started at Viacom in 1994, as Vice President, On-Air Promotion, VH1. She later oversaw Original Programming and Development for the network's highest-rated and most buzz-worthy shows. Returning to her film roots, she served as Executive Producer of the beloved 2001 Paramount feature film *ZOOLANDER*.

Zalaznick herself has been widely recognized as an industry shape-shifter and innovator, and has received many honors for her achievements. She was the youngest person ever to be awarded the Brandon Tartikoff Lifetime Achievement Award; as well, she was inducted into the Broadcasting & Cable Hall Of Fame. Time magazine named Zalaznick one of the "Time 100: World's Most Influential People", and Vanity Fair named her to their "New Establishment" list; earlier, she was the subject of a New York Times Magazine cover story. Zalaznick also delivered a TED talk that has been viewed well over half a million times.

She currently sits on the Board of Directors for Shazam, Penguin/Random House, and The Nielsen Corporation. She is a senior advisor to many industry-leading content and tech startups, including Refinery29, Atlas Obscura, LifePosts, and Medium.com. She is also an Advisor to venture capital firm Greycroft Partners, The Sundance Institute, and Venture For America, among others.

Zalaznick is a Trustee of the Corporation of Brown University, and currently serves as the Chair of the Advancement Committee. From Brown, she received her B.A. in English literature, while also fulfilling a pre-med curriculum. She graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. She currently resides in New York City with her husband and three children.



### **BRIAN EGAN (Producer)**

Brian joined Creative Breed right after graduating from Fairfield University's Film, TV and Media Arts Program, exactly when Cheryl was launching Creative Breed. He was drawn to working for a fledgling company for the same reason that the subjects in GENERATION STARTUP are joining or launching startups: to build something from the ground floor and to stretch and learn by constantly taking on new challenges. Due to his well-rounded filmmaking skills, he is excited to have the opportunity to wear many different hats on Creative Breed projects. Brian has played an integral role in every aspect of GENERATION STARTUP, from pre-production and production through editing and post production.



### **KIMBERLY PELLNAT (Editor)**

Kimberly Pellnat is a passionate storyteller who creates emotionally engaging narratives across all platforms. Kim's long-form work can be seen on NatGeo, VH-1, TLC, HGTV, and more, including two of Food Network's highest-rated prime time series: Food Network Star and Rachael vs. Guy: Celebrity Cook-Off. Her 100+ YouTube videos for Barack Obama's re-election campaign hit over 21 million online views, were shown at the 2012 Democratic National Convention and have been featured by major media outlets including CNN, CBS News and Time Magazine. Kim also helped create the hugely popular web series *Mad Genius Tips* for Food & Wine Magazine, nominated for a 2016 James Beard Award, and web videos for Nickelodeon, One, Vogue, Refinery 29 and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. Kim started her career as a camera operator for ABC News (Buffalo), then spent 5 years producing and editing promos for Nickelodeon before moving to long form television, web series and documentaries.



### **BOAZ FREUND (Director of Photography)**

Boaz Freund is an award-winning cinematographer whose work spans every continent and genre, including documentaries, commercials, branded content, independent films and art installations. Boaz's work reflects his love of story telling and distinct visual style he brings to every project. His documentaries include the upcoming release DESTINATION: TEAM AMERICA for Tribeca Productions and United Airlines; GORED (Tribeca Film Festival Premiere), SON OF THE CONGO (SWSX Film Festival Premiere),

PATROLMAN P and FINISHING HEAVEN (HBO). He has shot numerous 30 for 30 for ESPN and a video series around the world for the Clinton Foundation. Boaz has shot commercials for some of the world's most recognized brands such as NASCAR, Budweiser, Dove Men + Care, Under Armour, and Macy's to name a few. His collaborations with video artists have been shown in Moma NY, The Metropolitan Museum of Art NY, The Rose Museum Boston and Museum of Modern Art Russia.



### **ERIC V. HACHIKIAN (Composer)**

Eric V. Hachikian is an Armenian-American composer whose music has been hailed by the New York Times as "lovely and original." His music can be heard in a variety of major motion pictures (FURY, GET HARD, FERRELL TAKES THE FIELD, THE PLACE BEYOND THE PINES, CHARLIE COUNTRYMAN, BETTER LIVING THROUGH CHEMISTRY, PROJECT X, 50/50, THE WRESTLER) and network television shows (Netflix's *Marco Polo*, ABC's *Mixology & Revenge*, Fox's *The Mindy Project*, CBS's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, HBO's *Silicon Valley*, *Entourage* and *How To Make It In America*, Showtime's *Homeland*

and *The Big C*, FX's *Tyrant* and *The Strain* and The Discovery Channel's *LIFE: The Series*. As Creative Director and co-founder of Soundcat Productions, a boutique music company with studios in New York City and Los Angeles, Eric has written and produced music for numerous national and international ad campaigns including Apple, Google, Budweiser, BMW, Snickers, Kate Spade, Wendy's, among many others. Eric has also written for Off-Broadway productions, and his compositions have been performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the New York Pops Orchestra, the Baltimore Symphony, and the Boston Pops Orchestra, and in such venues as New York's Carnegie Hall and Alice Tully Hall, Boston's Symphony Hall, and The Getty in Los Angeles. Eric has studied counterpoint in Paris and DJ'd parties in New York City; he is a perpetual student of world music, his musical instincts have no boundaries, and his multi-genre interests result in a unique and personal sound.



### **JIM BLACK (Music Supervisor)**

Jim Black is an award-winning music supervisor with over twenty years in the music industry. In 1998 he founded Clearsongs Inc., a full-service music supervision and consulting company for Motion Pictures and Television and has worked on over 90 films and TV shows, including Academy Award winners such as BLACK SWAN, THE WRESTLER and HBO's *Treme* and *True Detective*. Jim has also worked

with corporate clients such as Apple, JBL, Zynga, and Samsung on the most effective ways to integrate music with advertising and digital media in order to maximize consumer outreach.

## **SUBJECT BIOGRAPHIES**



### **ANDREW YANG**

Andrew Yang is the Founder and CEO of [Venture for America](#), a fellowship program that places top college graduates in start-ups for 2 years in emerging U.S. cities to generate job growth and train the next generation of entrepreneurs. Andrew has worked in start-ups and early stage growth companies as a founder or executive for more than twelve years. He was the CEO

and President of Manhattan GMAT, a test preparation company that was acquired by the Washington Post/Kaplan in 2009. He has also served as the co-founder of an Internet company and an executive at a health care software start-up. He has appeared on CNN, CNBC, Morning Joe, Fox News, TIME, Techcrunch, the Wall St. Journal, and many other media outlets. Andrew was named a Champion of Change and a Presidential Ambassador for Global Entrepreneurship by the White House for his work with Venture for America and one of Fast Company's "100 Most Creative People in Business." He is a graduate of Columbia Law and Brown University. Andrew's first book, *Smart People Should Build Things*, was published by Harper Business in early 2014.



### **PAMELA LEWIS**

Pamela Lewis is the Director of the [New Economy Initiative](#) (NEI), one of the nation's largest philanthropic partnerships, funded by 12 national and regional foundations and managed by the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan. It is in its eighth year of innovative funding and the development of

public/private partnerships that have helped create more than 17,000 jobs and 1,600 companies throughout the region. As a highly talented economic development expert, Lewis brings vision and process to guide the NEI team in strategic grantmaking and program development.

Lewis, who has an engineering degree from Michigan State University and a Masters of Business Administration from Spring Arbor University, served as deputy team leader of NEI before being named director. She joined the initiative in 2011 as senior program officer, after serving as a member of the Kauffman Foundation's Detroit team, overseeing national entrepreneurial programs. She was recently named as one of the top 25 women in technology in Michigan and one of the 100 most influential women in Michigan by Crain's Detroit.

Lewis began her career at DTE Energy, spending 15 years in roles ranging from analyst to manager of process management and continuous improvement initiatives. At NextEnergy, she managed entrepreneurial programs focused on accelerating clean energy startups. Lewis has been a resident of Metro Detroit all of her life.

**BRIAN RUDOLPH, (Founder, [Banza](#))**

*“Building a company is all new to me, so it takes me completely out of my comfort zone. As long as I’m uncomfortable, I’m growing, and I’m learning more about myself. And that’s what I have to do to run this company.”*



Brian Rudolph is on a mission to change pasta forever. Unable to find a nutritious pasta he liked, he set out to make his own. Brian became obsessed with chickpea flour, which led to his creating the first-ever chickpea pasta, and then to launching Banza in 2014 at the age of 23 with his brother Scott. A lucky break to appear on CNBC’s

reality series *Restaurant Startup* led to heartbreak for Brian when they sunk \$100,000 into a big run to meet sudden demands from supermarkets and the pasta turned to mush. Brian then worked obsessively for months in a factory in Northern Michigan to figure out how to make his pasta in large batches. A year later TIME Magazine named Banza one of the Top 25 Inventions of 2015, and they won the \$500,000 first prize in Accelerate Michigan’s pitch competition. In 2016 Brian was named to Forbes’ list of *30 Under 30 in Food*, Crain’s Detroit *20 in their 20’s* and Entrepreneur of the Year by Michigan State University. Banza is now in over 2500 stores nationally, the company has helped create 32 new jobs, and they recently opened a factory in California. Brian originally moved to Detroit as a 2012 Venture for America Fellow and worked for two years as the first employee at the startup Quikly. He received his BBA from Emory University.

**AVERY HAIRSTON (First Employee, [Banza](#))**

*“If you told 8th grade me or 4th grade me I’d be in northern Michigan making chickpea pasta, I’d tell you you were crazy.”*



Avery moved to Detroit in August 2014 to join Banza as the first full-time employee, pairing his interest in entrepreneurship with his love of food. Since then he has worked (almost literally) around the clock in all areas of the business. Despite the grueling hours, Avery loves the thrill of working with a team to build

something concrete from nothing. In high school Avery founded RelightNY, a nationally recognized environmental charity which raised \$250,000 to buy and distribute energy-efficient light bulbs to low-income families in New York City. During his senior year of college, Avery helped his brother launch the fast-casual restaurant The Nugget Spot in Manhattan. When he isn't working, he's playing basketball and teaching himself how to cook. Avery graduated from Cornell University in 2014 with a BA in Art History and is in the 2014 Venture for America class.

**LABIB RAHMAN, (First Employee, Mason)**

*“My parents sacrificed everything in their lives to put me in the position that I am today. And whatever I do in my life should make them feel like that decision was worth it.”*



Labib moved to Detroit in August 2014 to work as a product manager for Mason, an early stage startup building android smart phones and tablets, where he was the first employee. His parents, immigrants from Bangladesh who went into debt to send him to Johns Hopkins University, had a different path in mind. They expected

Labib, the first person in his family to graduate from college, to parlay his degree in Biomedical Engineering into a high-paying, secure job. Labib's entrepreneurial passion began long before Mason. While in college he co-founded Medella Medical, which worked with various departments at Johns Hopkins to develop a more user-friendly digital health record platform. He also built an android app to help physicians and midwives in the developing world better adhere to childbirth safety guidelines. Eager to help his parents financially, in early 2016 Labib took a well-paying job at an established company, IPC Systems, as a product manager. On nights and weekends he is launching a startup with his brother to connect clothing manufacturers in the US with factories in Bangladesh that use fair labor practices, hoping to use technology to create a more efficient market and drive job growth in Bangladesh where he spent much of his young life. Labib is part of the 2014 Venture for America class.



**DEXTINA BOOKER (Employee, [Rock Ventures](#))**

*“You have to play the game to change it. As soon as I get to a place where I can bring other people who are different, then I’m going to do that so that we can have a more authentic and representative culture.”*



While some of Dextina’s fellow students from MIT moved to Detroit to take lucrative jobs at the car companies, this 2015 MIT graduate with a degree in Mechanical Engineering and Product Development opted instead to join the growing startup community there, inspired by Venture for America’s mission. When she moved to Detroit in

August, she worked for Rock Ventures for several months, helping oversee their investments in startups and nonprofits in Detroit, but quickly realized she missed building things. Dextina now works at the startup [Shinola](#) as a Mechanical Engineer where she is part of the team creating a line of Shinola Audio products. Dextina and her brother were raised by a single mom from Guyana who worked multiple jobs to provide for them, and attributes her resourcefulness to her mom. Dextina, recipient of the prestigious Times Scholarship in 2011 and other grants and awards, is grateful to the many teachers who opened her eyes to opportunities when she was growing up. Living in Guyana for three years with her mom when she was younger, Dextina was also turned on to traveling. While at MIT Dextina travelled to Turkey, Israel, South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland where she studied, taught STEM subjects, worked at startups and learned about people and cultures. Whether it’s building opportunities or physical products, it’s important to Dextina to be creating rather than just consuming. Dextina is driven to make quality products and create quality jobs for the underserved and traditionally overlooked. She tutors regularly at Detroit’s Downtown Boxing Gym Youth Program. Dextina is part of the 2015 Venture for America class.

**KATE CATLIN (Android App Developer, [Detroit Labs](#))**

*“You just kind of accept that you know nothing and that everything is going to seem hard and terrifying, but you’ll figure it out one step at a time.”*



Kate moved to Detroit in 2013 to work at Grand Circus, a startup that provides tech training. Inspired by the life-changing impact that technical training had on Grand Circus students, Kate dove into the intensive Detroit Labs Apprenticeship program where she learned to code and was then hired to

work on the DTE Energy app. Committed to closing the gender gap in the startup and tech worlds, Kate launched [Women Rising](#) in 2014 as a side project, which she hopes will be the foundation for her own startup one day. Women Rising helps women in tech find peers and mentors in order to advance their careers. Drawing on her experience in high school and during a gap year as a youth activist for the environment working on local, statewide and UN campaigns, Kate now speaks often at conferences and other venues about her new cause: attracting and retaining women in tech. Kate recently discovered she loves to develop sales deals more than software, so she now works in business development for Detroit Labs, which she finds incredibly rewarding. While she loves Detroit, this outdoors-woman from Washington State now works remotely from Denver where she can enjoy the mountains. Kate has a degree in Economics with a concentration in Entrepreneurship from Gonzaga University and is in the 2013 Venture for America class.

**MAX NUSSENBAUM (Co-Founder and CEO, [Castle](#))**

*“I’m faking it. Fake it till you make it, essentially. But if you act a certain way long enough, you eventually just are that way, right?”*



When Max was writing and directing musicals as a creative writing major at Wesleyan University, he never imagined he would soon be Co-Founder and CEO of Castle, a high-tech reinvention of property management. Max moved to Detroit in 2012 to join the startup Are You a Human where he did marketing, design and web development. In 2013,

he teamed up with VFA Fellows and future Castle Co-Founders Tim Dingman and Scott Lowe (and a fourth partner, Sean Jackson), to buy and renovate an abandoned mansion in Detroit’s Virginia Park Historic District. Castle grew out of Max, Tim and Scott’s working together on the house, which is now home to seven entrepreneurs and two companies; Castle and Banza work out of the ground floor. Though Castle almost folded because the trio kept “pivoting” at first and ran out of money, the company is now thriving. They were chosen to join the prestigious Y Combinator program in 2016, one of the world’s most powerful startup incubators, just raised \$2 million from a leading Silicon Valley venture firm, and have hired 8 employees, with more joining soon. Castle continues to grow their business in Detroit, with plans to launch in other cities around the country in the near future. Max is a graduate of Wesleyan University and in the 2012 Venture for America class.