

# A road of their own

SEVEN SIMMONS ALUMNAE SHARE THEIR MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THEIR START-UPS

Introduction by Jennifer Pinck  
Profiles compiled by Marwa Salem

**I am constantly reminded** that my business is different—different from my competition and the other mainstream businesses engaged in the complex world of construction and real estate development. I operate in an industry that is definitely still male-dominated with a primary focus on profits. Many of these “traditional” businesses exercise an outsize influence on policies that can have significant consequences in our daily lives. My business is different in our values-based approach—we operate with transparency, respect for everyone, and a roll-up-your-sleeves “let’s solve this problem” attitude. And we operate successfully, working for clients who share these values.

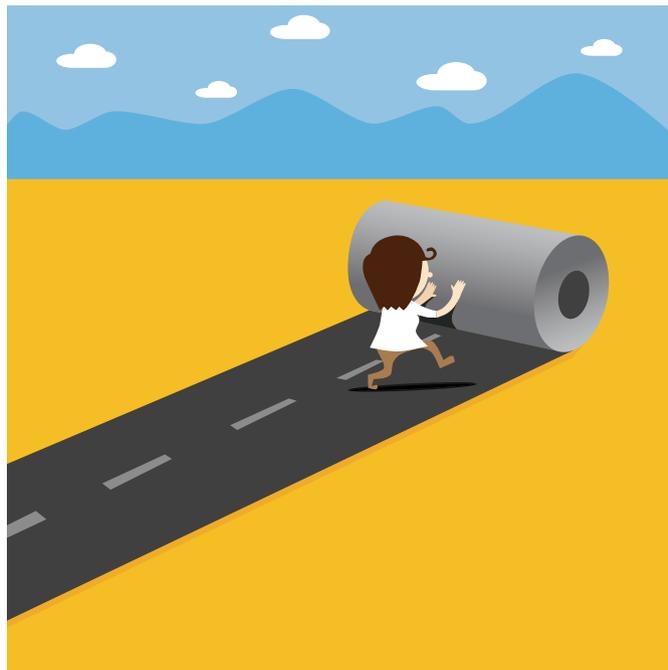
As I look around, I see more and more women starting up and running profitable businesses—with passion and mission. It is not *just* about making money; it’s about making an impact—for ourselves and for others. I don’t believe we are all altruistic “do-gooders.” We are just driven and motivated

by our complex selves that want to achieve, be challenged, accomplish, contribute, make a difference, and enjoy what we do.

The women profiled here characterize the importance of measuring success and value not by dollars alone. We are women who care about community, who care about equity, who care about the health and well-being of citizens of the world. The common thread is about positive impact and consequences, and about creating environments where we are determining the culture and the change.

Reading their stories reminds me of the lessons I learned from the deans and founders of the Simmons MBA program,

Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim, that our environments tell us what to do, if we listen and pay attention. I am heartened to see that the Simmons MBA program has continued to reinforce these important messages as it educates new generations of principled leaders. ■



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## Christine Granfield, MBA '90

### *HealthCare Journey, LLC*

I have been in the biopharma industry for over 20 years, with experience in education in many therapeutic areas, including multiple sclerosis. During my “healthcare journey,” both with family members and patients, I realized how many silos of information exist: non-profits, patient advocacy groups, hospitals, managed care organizations, drug companies, etc., all competing for the patient’s attention. In an effort to merge those silos for the patient’s benefit, I created the concept for HealthCare Journey. Our vision is to be the most respected, valued, and used Virtual Multiple Sclerosis Center for all patients, caregivers, HCPs, and payors; providing the highest quality information and services

to best manage diseases/conditions and symptoms. As an entrepreneur, I strive to change health paradigms so that patients, caretakers, and health care providers can learn from each other and work as a community to achieve the best health outcomes.

[healthcarejourney.com](http://healthcarejourney.com)



## Rebecca Szetela, MBA '07

### *Create!® Sewing Studio*

I have been involved with the creative arts for as long as I remember. I learned to sew as a child and I have always loved creating

my own garments and home decor. During brainstorming exercises in my entrepreneurship class at Simmons School of Management, I got in touch with one of the things I loved most about growing up in my family: total access to supplies and space to create. So when I wrote my business plan it naturally became an idea for a “creative place” where I could share what inspired me and provide access to the tools of creativity to others.

In 2008 I launched Create!® Sewing Studio, a private sewing school in Acton, Massachusetts. We have taught sewing to students who travel from all over eastern Massachusetts and into Southern New Hampshire. We even have students from as far away as Fairfax, Vermont and southern Florida who come to stay with relatives and attend our Sew Fun 4 Kids™ sewing camps. Although most of our students are children, we teach all ages and all levels of ability, offering group, private and semi-private instruction year round. Our students learn to sew in a friendly, warm environment with a high level of professional instruction. All classes include the use of new sewing machines plus all sewing tools and notions. Our instructor-to-student ratio is the highest in the local industry and our instructors’ credentials are extensive. We love to impart the “tricks of the trade” while making the learning experience safe, fun, and sociable.

[createsew.com](http://createsew.com)



## Sara Hartmann, MBA '10

### *Secret Ships*

I've always known that entrepreneurship would be my path. For years I'd viewed each potential new job through the lens of how it would help prepare me

to someday launch my own business. I chose to study in the entrepreneurship program at Simmons because I recognized it as a place where I could acquire the tools to manage my business objectively without losing passion for my vision.

After graduation I worked in other startups, and I spent a year backpacking around the world. With my background in design, I spent much of this time exploring markets and craft workshops collecting beautiful and unusual objects. Secret Ships grew out of the idea to make these finds accessible to shoppers in the US.

In 2013 I co-founded Secret Ships, an online shop specializing in fashion-forward socially sustainable finds from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In two years our business has grown to include a mobile boutique and a brick and mortar pop-up shop.

We're currently one of Boston's only mobile retailers—our Caravan Boutique and can be found in neighborhoods like Allston, Harvard Square, and the South End from May thru October. Our design driven collection of global clothing, accessories, and home textiles can also be found at our new pop-up shop near Davis Square in Somerville. Over the next five years we plan to open a permanent flagship shop in the Boston area.

[secretships.com](http://secretships.com)



## Carolina Tejedor Meyers, MBA '11

### *Caramelo Clothing Company*

The first inkling that locally-owned shops are the heart and lungs of a flourishing neighborhood hit me in my native Bogota, Colombia. In a city of entrepreneurialism, intense energy, and occasional danger, the storefront—immaculately swept, deliciously decorated, and constantly watched over by shopkeepers—stood for stability, power, and new ideas. Even as a teenager I had a keen sense that the local merchants had an influence that infused the neighborhood in ways that were subtle, yet sturdy. More than a decade later, during a business school project in Boston for which I interviewed minority female entrepreneurs just beginning to leave their marks, I saw the influence that local Latina women have over their families—both children and adults—as breadwinners, decision-makers, and role models of power, imagination, vision, and persistence. They inspired in me the value of assertive curiosity, patience, targeted questions, and occasional silence in forging deep, durable connections with a local community. Caramelo Clothing is a family-run business. People love the store—they tell us all the time. They love the mix of smooth and clunky. They dig the Latin music in the background and the way it makes them swing their hips without even trying. We hand-pick every single item we sell because we love it and we know we can find a good home for it in Boston. Matching the clothing to the person is our bailiwick, and we won't fool anyone. If it looks good, damn right we'll let you know. If it's too tight in the shoulders or just not your color, we'll give it to you straight. We want you to walk out of the store—regardless of whether you've made a purchase—and say, "Man, that was fun!"

[carameloclothing.com](http://carameloclothing.com)



## Areen Shahbari, MBA '11

### *Cactus*

A Fulbright Alumna, I am a social entrepreneur and an international multilingual media and business professional, with experience in entrepreneurship, management, business consulting, media and TV anchoring. I am the founder and CEO of Cactus, an organization that aims to fight the chronic unemployment among Arab women in the MENA region by teaching, training, and consulting women on how to start scalable and sustainable businesses. In less than two years, Cactus's workshops, lectures and counseling services have empowered, inspired, and promoted entrepreneurship among more than 1000 women. In addition, Cactus has launched intensive entrepreneurship courses in which 90 female participants have enrolled, 33 percent of whom started or grew their businesses while employing more than 150 employees. Eighty percent of these employees are women and 40 percent of them gained employment after graduating from Cactus. In 2010, I won the Simmons Silverman Business Plan Competition and I was a finalist of the 2011 NAWMBA Strategy Competition and a 2012 finalist of the Echoing Green Business Plan Competition.

[cactusint.com](http://cactusint.com)



## Obiageli Ukadike, MBA '12

### *The WaWa Project*

I am one of three co-founders of the WaWa Project, an organization devoted to providing children with disabilities access to education and training to give them a sustainable future. We are operating in Ghana, West Africa, a country where the World Health Organization estimates about two million people are living with disabilities, and where stigma against those challenged with disabilities remains strong. The way we do this is by renovating existing elementary and secondary schools to be handicap accessible. After renovating the physical space, we assist in getting children with disabilities back into inclusive classrooms and develop curriculum to help change misperceptions about people with disabilities. Our project was awarded a seed grant of \$10,000 from the Simmons Silverman Business Plan Competition in 2012. This year our goal is to raise \$50,000 to help complete the renovations to our school near Accra, Ghana.

[wawaproject.org](http://wawaproject.org)



## Alexandra Fuller, MBA '13

### *Level Ground*

In July of 2013, I launched Level Ground Mixed Martial Arts, a social enterprise with a mission to unleash the strength, power, and ingenuity of urban youth. The organization couples athletic training with mentorship, academic advancement, and youth employment so that young people will be empowered to fight for—and seize—their dreams. Under my leadership, the organization has grown to serve over 120 students across four Boston sites in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and Hyde Park. Level Ground has assisted all of its graduating seniors, helping them enter into college, and has directly provided jobs and internships to 12 youth. My students have achieved incredible success athletically as well, bringing home over 70 medals collectively from various grappling tournaments across New England. I pride myself in creating a culture at Level Ground that is not only inclusive, but is also shaped and enhanced by the passion of our students, staff, and volunteers equally. As a female leader both at Level Ground and the male-dominated space of Mixed Martial Arts, I attribute much of my success to Simmons' emphasis on gender, culture, and diversity within MBA curriculum.

[levelgroundmma.org](http://levelgroundmma.org)