Alumni

Innovators With Impact

Meet four passionate, creative, and gutsy social entrepreneurs who are taking on injustice and inequality across New York City.

By
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Jerelyn Rodriguez (Allison Michael Orenstein)

Jerelyn Rodriguez

Technology against poverty

The South Bronx might be the poorest congressional district in the United States, but Jerelyn Rodriguez ’11CC thinks the borough is rich with rising tech talent. “The Bronx

is full of creativity, innovation, and grit — people here invented hip-hop and helped lead the graffiti-art movement," she says. Many neighborhoods, however, lack the educational resources to nurture the potential of their young people. Rodriguez's nonprofit organization, the Knowledge House, strives to fill that void, providing free coding and entrepreneurship programs for low-income students.

Rodriguez knows the borough's challenges firsthand. A South Bronx native, she grew up in a single-parent household, surrounded by poverty. But through the support of her mother, a teacher, Rodriguez attended a private high school in Manhattan and eventually went to Columbia College, where she majored in film studies. She started working in education reform after graduating and grew frustrated by the dominant focus on college as the sole pathway to success. "Being on the college track worked for me, but a lot of my friends dropped out or didn't even get to college," she says. So Rodriguez looked for new ways to bring professional opportunities to her community.

She created the Knowledge House in 2014 as a pathway for young people in the Bronx (ages sixteen to thirty) to break into the tech industry without earning a degree. Rodriguez, who was featured on Forbes's "30 Under 30" list in 2016, says that with the ubiquity of smartphones and video games, the students are already tech-savvy: "Because they consume technology every day, they can gain these skills and actually make a lot of money."

To date, the Knowledge House has trained over a thousand students in digital literacy, coding, advanced Web development, and entrepreneurship at its Hunts Point headquarters, as well as through programs at schools and government agencies across New York City. "They give us the tools we need to be relevant and stay relevant," says Stephon Nixon, a former student who was hired as a technical-data analyst at Viacom. Critically, the Knowledge House not only offers participants an education but also guides them through the hiring process, with 75 percent landing entry-level jobs or freelance contracts.

Rodriguez hopes that graduates of the Knowledge House will help to revitalize their communities by starting their own ventures and employing their peers, while bringing their unique perspectives. "We want to develop talent in low-income places and nurture people of color who can offer innovative solutions in the mainstream tech industry, which lacks diversity," she says. "We're hoping that one of these ideas pops, that one of these kids gets discovered, and that one of their startups can

actually create jobs. We’ve already seen our students do amazing things.”

Thomas Campbell

Rethinking housing projects

Public housing has long been associated with soulless brick high-rises, riddled with crime and dysfunction. Thomas Campbell ’09BUS is ready to transform that reputation. With his real-estate development company Thorobird, Campbell wants to provide low- and middle-income tenants with dwellings they’re proud to call home. “We set out to uplift communities by adding affordable apartments and by improving people’s living conditions,” says Campbell.

Rather than shuffle poorer residents of the New York metropolitan area into ghettoized complexes, Thorobird works with private investors and the government to develop new, modern housing projects in economically distressed neighborhoods. Tenants, who are selected by municipal housing authorities, remain in their communities and live in apartment buildings that feature patios, gardens, and other communal spaces. “Physical and social amenities give people a sense of ownership and control,” says Campbell. “When people are packed away into crowded, isolated developments, they tend to feel institutionalized.”



Thomas Campbell (Allison Michael Orenstein)

In the Mount Hope neighborhood of the Bronx, the company is constructing a 138-unit building that will have a rooftop terrace, balconies, and a support office for its mixed-income residents, including the formerly homeless. And in Brooklyn's rapidly gentrifying Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, Thorobird is building a complex that will house 236 apartments, a senior center, an art gallery, a supermarket, and an aquaponic farm to grow fresh produce. Campbell says that the inclusion of the store and farm are a result of conversations with the neighborhood's community board. "We learned that Bedford-Stuyvesant is a food desert, because a lot of the mom-and-pop stores that used to sell healthy food have been priced out," he explains.

"We differentiate ourselves from other firms by getting to know a community and understanding exactly what it needs before we build," adds Campbell, who credits his professors at Columbia Business School's Eugene Lang Entrepreneurship Center and Tamer Center for Social Enterprise for giving him the skills to launch the startup in 2010. "Misguided, top-down housing policies have historically failed local communities. We think that our projects are sustainable, that they're going to be great investments in terms of financial and non-financial return. That's good business."

Rachel G. Barnard

Art over incarceration

For young people in trouble with the law, the courthouse is usually a place where lives are derailed. But architect and artist Rachel G. Barnard '11GSAPP wants to change that. Her nonprofit Young New Yorkers — the first arts-based alternative-sentencing program in Brooklyn — has helped more than seven hundred young adults avoid lifelong criminal records by teaching them to express their creative voices.

Barnard, who is originally from Australia, launched the organization in 2011 after winning a Goodman Fellowship, a grant administered by Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation that awards $20,000 to a student social venture. Young New Yorkers works directly with the court system and offers its programs to young people ages sixteen to twenty-five who have been charged with low-level misdemeanors, such as graffiti and petty theft. Normally, defendants might

be punished with community service or jail, but people who are sentenced to a Young New Yorkers program attend court-mandated art workshops, where they can use illustration, photography, and other media to grapple with questions of personal identity and responsibility.

“Once arrested, young people often hear themselves described as criminals or even monsters,” explains Barnard. “But when they bring their artwork into the courtroom or when they host an exhibition, they’re given a chance to step up and become known for their whole selves.” The workshops, which last from one day to eight weeks, culminate in a courtroom-based art show, where participants re-meet the officials who prosecuted and sentenced them in a more celebratory setting. After the program, most have their cases sealed.

“This humanizes the courtroom,” says Barnard. “It gives the people who are involved in sentencing a chance to see the kids beyond their rap sheets, which we believe leads to better case outcomes. That means fewer young people are saddled with lifelong criminal records that can have devastating collateral consequences.”



Rachel G. Barnard (Allison Michael Orenstein)

Young New Yorkers continues to grow — this year it expanded from Brooklyn into Lower Manhattan — and Barnard’s approach to finding creative solutions to institutional problems has gained traction. In January 2018, New York City named

her a public artist in residence to work with the Department of Probation on improving relationships between offenders and probation officers.

“So much of my art practice is about acknowledging that in an era of mass incarceration, policies need to change, but so do the working cultures of courtrooms,” says Barnard. “I’m looking to use art not to fight the system but to create change from within.”

April Tam Smith

The ethical eatery

April Tam Smith ’10BUS had, as she puts it, “zero experience” in the food-service industry when she took a leap of faith that seemed totally crazy: she opened a vegan restaurant in one of Manhattan’s hottest tourist spots, with the idea of donating all its profits to worthy causes.

A finance executive with a passion for philanthropy, Smith wanted to use her resources and network to launch a social enterprise that would generate revenue and invite participation from the local community. So in August 2017 she opened P.S. Kitchen, a restaurant that serves up plant-based cuisine with compassion.

Tucked beside Times Square on West 48th Street, the two-story eatery is casual and trendy, with exposed brick, pink neon lighting, and a menu that features Beyond Burgers and mushroom bao. Smith, who works for an investment firm, self-financed the business along with a few like-minded individuals. Though she relies on industry professionals to manage the restaurant and curate its menu, Smith coordinates with local nonprofits such as the Bowery Mission to hire employees who are in desperate situations — approximately one-third of P.S. Kitchen’s staff have been homeless, incarcerated, or the victims of domestic violence.



April Tam Smith (Allison Michael Orenstein)

Smith, who regularly volunteers in impoverished communities, sees the restaurant's hiring policies as equally important as the profits that it donates to groups such as ShareHope, a clothing company that supports health and education programs for garment workers in Haiti. "Whether I'm talking to someone in Haiti or South Africa, or from a hard background here in New York City, I hear the same messages," she says. "People want jobs, and they want the dignity that comes with being able to provide for their families." Smith adds that while the Bowery Mission and other organizations have great job-training programs, participants often struggle to find employment. P.S. Kitchen helps them to reenter the workforce. "We're happy when people move on from us, because it means they've found other opportunities and they're opening up a position for somebody else," she says.

Smith has always had a strong work ethic, and she doesn't take her own prosperity for granted. She emigrated from Hong Kong to Miami at age eleven and watched her mother, a garment-factory worker, put in the effort to succeed in the United States. She says that using her earnings to give others a hand up is only fair. "So much potential has yet to be unleashed in the world," she says. "People sometimes forget how privileged they are to have been born at the right place and time, even if they've worked hard to get to where they are."

With P.S. Kitchen, Smith hopes to establish a sustainable, community-centered way of giving back. “If we wanted to start a business that donates the maximum amount of profit, we could have traded stocks,” says Smith, who won the Social Enterprise Leadership Award from Columbia Business School’s Tamer Center for Social Enterprise this year. “But we think there’s something special about having this space of generosity that creates jobs and brings together people through food. In New York, power and money create a lot of noise, and we want to inspire others to look outward.”

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