

2023

# Game Changers

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS DISRUPTING  
THE TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY



**WOMEN  
LEADING**

TRAVEL &  
HOSPITALITY™

## Change is a verb; it requires action.

Every one of the women profiled in this report have put in the work to accomplish not only launching their own business, but growing an organization that positively impacts the travel and hospitality industry.

They're problem solvers. They saw gaps and needs in the market and thought, "Why not be the one to brainstorm and implement the solutions?" Creating something from nothing takes a balance of creativity and practicality. It's dreaming big while tackling the daily to-dos. But they did it, and they're here to tell you how.

Our Game Changers report features women who started apps, firms, luxury hostels, tech solutions, incubators, among other business types. Some had a long history in the travel and hospitality industry, while others utilized skills from a different arena to jump into this sector. Within the in-depth interviews featured in the report, this year's honorees share how they persevere and stay motivated through tough times; offer tips for building a great team to run a new business; and provide advice for other women interested in entrepreneurship.

If you've been relegating an idea, a little "what if I..." to the back of your mind, get ready for it to return front and center, backed by motivation from founders and CEOs who know just going for it can be game changing.

*Sally G. Holtgrieve*



**Sally Holtgrieve**  
*Senior Editor*  
**Women Leading Travel & Hospitality**

Creating something from nothing takes a balance of creativity and practicality. It's dreaming big while tackling the daily to-dos.





## Kim Bennett

FOUNDER AND CEO, ATLASGURU

### What inspired you to launch your business?

I was planning a 12-day trip with three other people to Vietnam and Cambodia and struggling with how to build the itinerary to maximize our time. We wanted to visit smaller villages, yet still see important cities and sites, but not spend too much time in airports or on long drives. I spent hours on blogs, books, reading trip reports in forums, and studying maps. What I really wanted was a way to look up itineraries, maps and images from people that have traveled in those regions. After thoughtful consideration, I quit my corporate marketing job and started the process of building a business.

### How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?

Launching a travel business just months before the world shut down for COVID was challenging. I feared how I would get crowdsourced itineraries and people interested in visiting the site to plan their travels when no one was traveling. Fortunately, I love the travel space and enjoy my work, which motivated me to shift the focus from growing the business to perfecting the product. As a result of our COVID investment in improving the product, we're seeing a significant increase in traffic and interest in AtlasGuru.

### What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?

We've had a remote team from places around the world and we've kept the same team together since day one. There are four things that have proven successful:

- We've created an environment that's friendly and filled with camaraderie. Everyone looks forward to a little socializing before we get down to business.
- Providing flexibility to the team when they need it.
- Motivation comes through the belief that the product and travel is fun, which makes the work fun.
- As a startup, I believe strongly in running a tight ship.

Simple things such as using tools to organize projects, payroll is always met, meetings are consistent and on time. These are taken for granted in large companies but aren't always the norm in small startups.

### What are you doing that's different from everyone else?

There has been a wide gap on the spectrum between DIY travel planning on one hand, and hiring a travel advisor on the other. DIY travel has required an enormous amount of research to plan an itinerary, and using a travel advisor removes the fun of planning a trip. What makes AtlasGuru different is that we address the unserved place in the middle by providing hundreds of full itineraries from a community of travelers. We focus on the "dreaming stage" of travel by enabling travelers to share their knowledge and experiences with each other by crowdsourcing itineraries. Now, with the introduction of ChatGPT, we're taking this a step further. In August 2023, we introduced a new feature, Itinerary AI, that combines real itineraries with generative artificial intelligence to create personalized trip plans. This advance in generative AI has the opportunity to be a game changer in the travel planning space.

### What do you want to achieve next?

The disruption in travel fueled by generative AI has only just begun. We see a huge opportunity for startups like AtlasGuru to move swiftly to create high quality, personalized itineraries that can be easily converted into a real trip. This AI-assisted trip execution could come in two forms: one, sending AI-generated itineraries to travel advisors to finalize and book the trip or, two, enabling users to book reservations directly from their AI-generated itinerary with just a few clicks. Both have the potential to radically change travel planning as it is today.





**Alexis Bowen**  
CO-FOUNDER, ELSEWHERE

**What inspired you to launch your business?**

Elsewhere is a product of COVID. It was the summer of 2020 and the whole industry was out of work and at a complete standstill. My co-founder and I had both worked in travel for the last 10 years and, along with the rest of the industry, we were sitting around wondering what was next and whether the industry would ever be the same. And without knowing where it would take us, we started talking about a project. We knew what we loved about the industry, and we knew what we wanted to change. We had a killer network of local partners around the world that we knew should be at the center of the project, and we knew we wanted to create a more ethical and sustainable model of tourism.

So, with the industry literally crumbling around us, we convinced ourselves that now was the perfect moment to start something new and build a modern brand with a sustainably driven purpose built into its foundation. That's how we had the crazy idea to start a travel company in the middle of a global pandemic.



**What has been the greatest challenge and how did you overcome it?**

Riding the rollercoaster of a young business is hard. There are constant ups and downs when starting a new business, and as someone who pours their heart and soul into any project I'm pursuing, it's difficult to separate yourself from the company. It's also been an interesting journey navigating how different phases of my company demand that I show up as different versions of myself. Elsewhere is now in a growth stage and that requires a very different version of "me" than the scrappy "make-it-work" persona I needed to cultivate to get my company off the ground. We're now grappling with scale, how to become bigger and better, and how to integrate into a global legacy brand, and this all requires that I wear a new hat. Furthermore, I'm a new mother and now reckoning with a totally new identity that has nothing to do with my work.

**What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?**

Hire people with different skill sets than you. Each one of us has unique talents and gifts, and we need to lean into our own strengths while also leaning on those who have strengths in different areas. And while this feels obvious, it can be hard to let go of control and ego and acknowledge that someone else can handle it better.

**What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?**

The hardest thing about taking the leap is that first step because you know it's going to be a long and hard road, and there will be a lot of sacrifice. There will be days when you dream about a steady paycheck, but you also get to wake up every morning and invent answers to big, challenging questions. While it's tough, it's interesting and fulfilling in such a unique way. I think what makes that first step so hard is the unknowns and self-doubt. To conquer these fears, I gave myself a parachute. My parachute was a timeline. I was willing to give myself two years to enter into a grind phase and sacrifice everything during that period to build my company. And after two years, if I didn't have the stability I needed at that point, it was time to move on. Establishing a defined timeframe allowed me to set my own boundaries. It gave me the courage to dive in headfirst, while also providing a lifeline if my time had run its course.

**What do you want to achieve next?**

I'm focused on this journey with Lonely Planet, which is at an incredibly exciting and pivotal moment. Lonely Planet is 50 years old this year and our work today is about bringing this loved brand into the digital age and for the modern traveler. It's exciting to work between two companies doing such wholly different work — one, a legacy brand and a global household name, and the other a scrappy startup that set out to disrupt a traditional space. Although the companies are in wildly different stages, they're aligned in spirit. We're both on a mission to get people out and discovering the world because we truly believe travel can make the world a better place.





**Sally Bunnell**  
CEO AND FOUNDER, NAVISAVI

**What inspired you to launch your business?**

NaviSavi (which is short for navigational savviness) started after I felt like the experiences I was being shown through promotional videos and the actual experience were different. I was the head of video content at a record label and was seeing the rise of user-generated content (UGC) videos and the authenticity of them when they were unedited. I started doing just that and posting unedited videos on my social channels of the places I would travel and then email packets of all the places I stayed each trip to friends who were interested in doing the same. In 2013, I created and pitched NaviSavi as a TV show for short-form travel video content and pivoted into a crowdsourced app in 2017.

**How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?**

Well there has been more than one tough time! I was to launch the app on April 1, 2020, so I was already met with one of the industry’s biggest challenges in its history! I took that opportunity to rebuild the app and reach out to hundreds of content creators, asking them to upload footage as they weren’t traveling or creating new content. It turned into one of our greatest strengths, which is now our UGC library of over 60,000-plus travel videos.

**What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?**

Leading by example is something I’ve always believed in and being a positive motivation for others. If you can bring together a team (mine is fully remote) to create a family, people will believe in your vision and are willing to work as hard as you to see your collective efforts come alive.

**What are you doing that’s different from everyone else?**

I don’t play by the rules. Anyone that says no to me only makes me work harder and I find another way to go about it. I come from the music business and we work hard, play hard and don’t stop until we get the job done, whatever it takes. I can come into travel without having to stick to the traditional ways things are done. I’m here to show them a different path.

**What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?**

Honestly, it was brutal out there and still is as a woman in tech — fundraising and an industry that is slow to adapt. All I can say is never stop beating down the door. Eventually you’ll meet the person that gets it; keep them close and along for the long ride.





## Stephanie Daniel

CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, LEGENDS

### What inspired you to launch your business?

I've been a lifelong passionate traveler. I believe in the power of travel to help us authentically connect with ourselves, each other and the world. I also have a foundational belief in the power of data to help us make the right decisions. My entrepreneurial spirit and love of the ultimate challenge runs deep. Building Legends uniquely combines all of these things and I'm so excited to be bringing it to life. My co-founder, Shaina, and I met and bonded over our shared passions and pain points of why it was so hard to find the travel that suited us easily. We identified it as a data problem and had a realization that our phone and photo data had been totally unharnessed. Over time we developed a belief that we could harness tech to solve it in a win-win way for travelers and brands.

### How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?

My grandmother had a sign in her house, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," so I guess it's in my DNA! Determination, grit and resilience have always been part of who I am and ultimately a reminder that it's a choice. Building something is for sure one of the biggest challenges in life, but can also be the most rewarding.

Building something is for sure one of the biggest challenges in life, but can also be the most rewarding. ▾

### What are you doing that's different from everyone else?

Our technology unlocks phone data and the 5 million photos we take every day to create traveler preference profiles that help brands personalize. We've created the tool for a zero-party data future — where a consumer decides to share information with an easy one-click opt-in.

### How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?

I'm a naturally positive person and I've been used to a fast-paced, intense environment for a long time. But getting more comfortable with making decisions in startup life with not necessarily full data has definitely been a learning curve. I do trust instinct, trust in the process and believe in the power of a supportive community.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

Just do it! Fear of failure is part of being human, but if we don't try we don't grow. Also, it doesn't need to define us and we have to keep space and boundaries. Seek community for help and support in the evolution and advice from those who have experience, including those who are a few steps ahead.

### What do you want to achieve next?

We're working closely with strategic partners to deliver our B2B product. We're excited to go live soon with our API solution and prove our value to the ecosystem. We will continue our phased approach across segments, including travel advisor networks, lifestyle hotels, DMOs, airlines, loyalty and more. We're laying the foundation for our long-term vision of Legends as the marketplace where travelers own their DNA Passports and we are the GDS of traveler data to the industry.





**Debbie Garcia, CMP**  
FOUNDER AND CEO, VIRSITOUR

### What inspired you to launch your business?

The inspiration to launch virsitour was a direct response to a pivotal moment in my career. It was early 2020, and I had just landed a significant client in the event planning industry. This client had a large-scale event in the pipeline, and I was tasked with sourcing the perfect venue to make it a success. However, there was one significant hurdle standing in my way — COVID.

It quickly became evident that traditional, in-person site visits were out of the question. I scoured the internet, hoping to find a solution that would allow me to virtually explore potential venues for my client's event. To my surprise, I found that there was a glaring gap in the market for easily accessible virtual site tours. The few options available were fragmented, hard to locate, and lacked the comprehensive information I needed to make informed decisions. It was in this moment of need and opportunity that the idea for virsitour was born.

I envisioned a platform that would connect event planners like myself with destinations, offering a seamless and immersive virtual experience. This platform would allow planners to explore venues, examine details, and make informed decisions without ever leaving their offices. Thus, virsitour was launched, not just as a solution for me but as a game changer for the entire event planning industry, helping us adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

### How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?

During the challenging times, my source of perseverance and motivation came from a very personal place — my children. The upheaval caused by the pandemic had a profound impact on their lives, and as their mother, it was my responsibility to remain resilient and set an example for them. I wanted to show them that even in the face of disaster or unprecedented circumstances, it's essential to keep looking towards the future. The belief that I could make things better for both myself and others was a driving force. I knew I had a great idea and my passion for it burned brightly. That passion served as a constant reminder of why I embarked on this entrepreneurial journey in the first place.

### What are you doing that's different from everyone else?

What sets me apart from others in the industry is that I remain deeply rooted as an active event professional. I haven't let my passion for the industry wane as I pursue innovation. On a daily basis, I'm right there in the trenches, collaborating with clients, suppliers, and attending conferences to gain firsthand insights into what works and what doesn't in the meetings and events world.

This dual role, straddling the realms of a tech startup and an event professional, fuels my unique perspective. I'm constantly engaged in conversations with industry peers, gathering their feedback and experiences, learning about their pain points and what they truly value. This dynamic approach keeps my innovation engine running. Each day, I'm driven to discover new ways to enhance the industry's efficiency and effectiveness. I'm always researching and learning, and it's this commitment to staying actively involved in the field that allows me to bring fresh ideas and solutions to the table.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

Here are some bullet points that I stick to when I started my journey as an entrepreneur:

1. Believe in Yourself: Have confidence in your abilities and vision.
2. Embrace Resilience: Be prepared for challenges and setbacks.
3. Seek Mentorship: Learn from experienced mentors.
4. Build a Support Network: Surround yourself with a supportive community.
5. Continuously Learn: Stay curious and keep learning.
6. Plan Thoroughly: Develop a solid business plan.
7. Start Small: Begin with manageable steps.
8. Financial Savviness: Understand your business finances.
9. Network Effectively: Connect with potential clients and partners.
10. Embrace Failure: See failure as a learning opportunity.
11. Be Adaptable: Be open to change.
12. Stay Passionate: Let your passion drive you.
13. Prioritize Self-Care: Balance work and personal well-being.
14. Advocate for Equality: Promote gender equality.
15. Celebrate Achievements: Acknowledge your successes.

### What do you want to achieve next?

My next goal is to continue pushing the boundaries of innovation within the events and meetings industry. I believe that even as we embrace technology, we should never lose sight of the core foundation of our industry, which is built on relationships. I like to refer to this as "personal tech" — the idea of using technology to enhance and nurture relationships rather than replace them. While virsitour has made significant strides in this direction by introducing virtual site tours and simplifying RFP management, there's a deeper level of personalization that I want to explore. My vision involves leveraging video conferencing, peer-to-peer reviews, and visual submissions to create a more immersive and personalized experience for event professionals. This means providing them with the best information and insights to make informed decisions, all while maintaining the crucial human element that sets our industry apart.





## Lee Gonzalez

FOUNDER, L&L HOSPITALITY

### What inspired you to launch your business?

Studying abroad as a student, I stayed in so many disgusting hostels and recognized that the budget accommodation space was grossly underserved. My last year of university, I took an entrepreneurial management class and wrote a business plan for a chain of hostels. I worked a few years on Wall Street but knew within the first couple of months that I'm not passionate about finance. My sister and I dropped out of the rat race and moved to Barcelona to give this hostel thing a shot. We haven't looked back since.

### What has been the greatest challenge and how did you overcome it?

I continued to operate our New York City hostel throughout the pandemic; we never closed our doors to guests. Knowing what I know now, I should have shuttered the business for a period, but I was making the best decisions I could with the limited understanding we had of the situation at the time. It was disorienting, it was risky, it was terrifying. I approached the situation with stubborn tenacity and managed by reducing my operational scope to one day and then, eventually, one week at a time. The pandemic was a crash course in crisis management for everyone and I got through it by putting one foot in front of the other.

### What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?

We're really focused on building a team based on attitude and ability over direct industry experience. Our most successful receptionists never worked a day at a hotel before joining our team. Instead, they were proven "people" people who we recognized had the EQ and intelligence to do the job brilliantly. Another very important aspect to creating a well-functioning team is always keeping an eye towards diversity. We approach hospitality a little differently than traditional hotels and that's really infused by the unique fabric of our team. We strive for diversity in every sense of the word — background, thought, approach to life. This shared open-mindedness binds our team, leads to innovation, and allows us to continually adapt to create a safe and welcoming environment for our guests.

### What are you doing that's different from everyone else?

We've created a brand (Lolo Pass) that makes hosteling palatable to the North American traveler. So many Americans have stayed in hostels while traveling abroad, had very fond experiences, but would never consider staying in a hostel domestically. The sector has a reputational deficiency that we're working to overcome. Major international hotel chains are falling all over themselves to connect with travelers early in the customer life cycle by building brands based on today's buzzwords like "local," "authenticity," "experiential travel," and "social responsibility." These tenets of hospitality are ingrained in hosteling. Hostels have always been a place to connect meaningfully with the local community, embed oneself in a regional culture, and forge lifelong friendships with fellow travelers. We create properties that uphold North American standards of comfort, cleanliness, design and service while creating space for that "hostel magic" to occur.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

Start talking. I know vision boards and manifesting are all the rage, but the very first baby step is talking about your ambitions and dreams to anyone who will listen. Two things will come of these vulnerable conversations: one, advice, intros and sincere offers to help and, two, accountability. Once I say I'm going to do something, there's a certain level of embarrassment if I don't follow through. If you'd met me right after college when I was working on Wall Street and asked me what I did for a living, I'd respond with, "oh, \*sigh\* ... I work on Wall Street ... but what I *really* want to do is ...". I got to a point where I didn't want to talk about opening hostels the rest of my life. I needed to go out and do it.





**Sue Graves**  
CEO, EXPERIENCE ALIVE

### **What inspired you to launch your business?**

The inspiration to launch my business came during the pandemic when the hotel industry was facing its worst scenario with nearly 85 percent of staff laid off overnight and struggling to recover. It was at this time that many in the industry were calling me saying they could no longer sustain the demands of the industry and they were quitting. I thought to myself, “So much thought leadership leaving the industry will bring pain to this industry I love so much.” Many were working in excess of 14 hours to 18 hours a day checking guests in, cleaning rooms, and trying to please owners, corporate staff and guests at the same time.

With the industry struggling to recover and decimated teams at both the corporate level and field level, I felt the urgent need to step up. I thought if I could go out and find solutions to help solve some of the greatest problems using technology, that could really be an important transition for the industry, reducing expenses while utilizing technology solutions to eliminate repetitive tasks, create better workflows for teams while increasing satisfaction for guests and employees and building value for owners.

### **How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?**

Honestly, my passion for the business was the main driver. When I'd find a solution that was a “game changer” for the industry, it propelled me even further. I worked closely with solution providers (mostly founders) to help them with their road maps, encouraging them to make the changes necessary for their solution to be easily adopted in the industry. They got excited and that excitement just grew exponentially as I told their story to hoteliers, who also got excited about the possibilities of doing things differently to accommodate both the needs of guests and associates.

### **What are the secrets to your success?**

Perseverance, optimism, not letting obstacles get in my way, but instead using those to fuel my passion for the success of the business and the industry.

### **What are you doing that's different from everyone else?**

I'm a solution architect that went out and found affordable technology solutions that I already know can make a difference in the business, increasing value for owners/operators while improving workflow and increasing happiness for our guests and employees. I've interviewed over 400 technology companies already and have selected only those that are affordable and resolve the highest needs of the industry.

Labor solutions using artificial intelligence and machine learning are truly amazing, taking the subjectivity out of decision making, decreasing onboarding time by nearly 70 percent using conversational AI, while increasing guest satisfaction 11 percent to 21 percent in under 45 days. Labor solutions are the greatest need right now so I went and found the best solutions to fix this problem. Most in my field will approach the organization with a traditional model of assessing the tech stack and then going out and finding solutions. I save steps for owners/operators by sharing solutions that I know work and make the biggest difference.

### **What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?**

Surround yourself with people that are positive, creative and truly want to make a difference. This means extending your network to the greatest degree. It's extremely important to draw energy from those that have a passion to build a future that can make a positive difference in the world. Prior to launching my business, I joined every tech meet-up group to engage with a community where I could share my story and offer support and service to those I found that were creating a solution that could fit the hospitality industry. I connected with venture capital companies for advice and support and offered my expertise to help vet hospitality solution providers. As events opened up, I attended as many in-person events as possible to engage with those looking for and/or creating solutions. Having the confidence to create new relationships and make the jump to engage as much as possible with a service mind has been phenomenal. I've also been engaging with other consultants in the industry to build strategic partnerships around the world expanding my opportunities. If you come at everything with a service mindset, opportunities will always present themselves.

### **What do you want to achieve next?**

As I continue to find problems, sometimes I can't find a solution provider. I've started a short list of needs for the industry and I'd eventually like to be the actual creator of the solution. Until that time, I've got plenty of great solutions to connect to help this wonderful industry thrive.





## Coabi Kastan and Jan Seale

FOUNDERS, OUT OF OFFICE

### What inspired you to launch your business?

We love to travel, often together, and we always found the process of planning, researching and booking travel incredibly daunting. In 2019, we were on a trip together to London. We created a Google spreadsheet and had numerous notes on our phones of all the places we wanted to go — most of them recommended by friends and family. Our process was so disjointed and disaggregated that we ended up missing a reservation for high tea. It was after that experience we decided to start OOO to solve the problems that exist within consumer travel.

### How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?

Having each other has been extremely helpful in navigating difficult situations. Ups and downs are inherent to the founder journey. We lift each other up, and when one person is struggling the other can take the lead. We motivate each other to keep going. We also try not to ride the highs too high and the lows too low.

### What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?

Surround yourself with the most talented and capable people that you possibly can. It's easy to worry about bringing on talent that could outshine you. Don't fall victim to that! As a leader, you're always thinking about what's best for the business as a whole, and often that means putting ego aside. Surround yourself with the smartest people and they will help push you to that next level.

### What are you doing that's different from everyone else?

We're taking a brand-first approach to consumer travel, while also focusing on a very specific target audience. We recognize that the post-COVID world has given rise to a younger generation of travelers, and those people are looking for a travel solution that fits their needs. Lastly, we leverage AI/data science to inform personalization in travel and combine that with your social network for truly trusted recommendations.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

Ask for help! Only 2 percent of venture funding goes to women entrepreneurs — it's tough out there for a female founder. Build a support network. Lean on other women who have started businesses and find a great mentor.



Build a support network. Lean on other women who have started businesses and find a great mentor.





## Christine Winebrenner Irick

HOST, SOUL OF TRAVEL PODCAST  
FOUNDER, LOTUS SOJOURNS

### What inspired you to launch your business?

When I set out to create my own small group travel business, I brought the foundation I have in sustainable travel with a desire to connect deeply to nature, self and other cultures; explore less traveled areas; and intentionally create moments that allow for growth and transformation. I reflected on my travel experiences and realized that the most transformative experiences were connecting with individuals and communities, and exploring local food, traditions and culture, especially when learning from other women.

I also noticed that each time I traveled during — or following — periods of change in my life, travel created space for me to reflect and reconnect with myself. I brought my passion for gender equity into tourism, curious to see how sustainability and gender intersect and understand how travel can open our eyes to gender oppression and the need for climate action. Shortly after I launched this dream company, it was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This pause gave rise to the Soul of Travel Podcast, where I created a space to tell the stories of people making a positive impact in tourism and amplify the voices of women worldwide who use travel as a vehicle for change.

### How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?

I fell in love with the tourism industry very early in life. I was especially enamored by what I was learning about educational travel, conservation, and sustainability in connection with travel. Connecting social issues important to me with a career in travel felt too good to be true. Now, over 20 years after my first tourism course and studies in sociology, I can see that this combination of social impact and travel, especially after adding a focus on gender equity, allows me to honor my personal values of community, connection, growth and adventure. I'm powered by my mission to create a world that allows women to know themselves as valuable and equal members of our global community. I feel driven by something larger than myself. These conversations and connections are so personally rewarding, and I feel honored to share them with our listeners. Sometimes, the work looks different, but it all comes from the same space to honor who I am and what I want to create for other women.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

When women ask me what advice I have when they want to start their business, my answer is just start; after that, don't quit. We can easily get caught up in the planning and dreaming phase and be hyperfocused on what the 10-years-in, most successful version of our business looks like and be overcome by perfection paralysis. You cannot start where you're going to end. Instead, you have to lay the foundation, do the parts you know how to do best, and be ready to learn along the way. Entrepreneurship is excellent for lifelong learners looking for continual growth because you will constantly learn, grow and evolve alongside your business.

### What are the secrets to your success?

The most important secret to success is defining what success means to you. Many of us, myself included, don't feel successful if we measure ourselves against someone else's definition. Once you pinpoint what you're trying to create, your definition can be fluid and shift with you as you grow. I've seen women reach their defined pinnacle of success and feel like they have nowhere else to go or anything left to give, and it isn't true; they simply need to redefine what success looks like for them in this phase of their lives and careers. Two more critical factors are surrounding yourself with people who will support you and remaining consistent in your efforts. Every leader needs support and encouragement; the right people make all the difference. Consistently showing up for yourself and your clients or community — and not giving up — will ultimately bring you success.

### What do you want to achieve next?

My immediate goals include full sponsorship of my Soul of Travel podcast and leveraging sponsorship as another way to tell the stories of aligned brands to create an even greater positive impact. I want to continue to expand the Soul of Travel community and offer more content outside of the podcast to pull from the knowledge of the incredible women who have joined me over the past three years. I'd also love to offer in-person opportunities for community building and, eventually, a Soul of Travel Summit. At Lotus Sojourns, I'm in the process of rebranding and realigning my trips to be even more focused on impact and gender equity. When I look at the far-reaching goals, I'd love Soul of Travel to be a women-focused televised travel series and to publish a series of guidebooks about impact-driven travel that supports women globally.





## Nina Kleaveland

CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, LANYARD

### What inspired you to launch your business?

During my 10-plus years in corporate hospitality, I often admired entrepreneurs who were building something of their own. In 2020, I left behind the corporate world and founded my company, Lanyard, based on a gap I saw in the market. Lanyard helps employers find housing for traveling, temporary and seasonal workers. We're solving a huge pain point for companies in the hospitality industry among many others. Starting Lanyard has enabled me to combine my passion for hospitality with the intellectual challenge of building a company. In addition to Lanyard, I started Female Founders in Hospitality with the goal of supporting and connecting a community of women who share the same entrepreneurial journey and desire to change the industry for the better.

### What are the secrets to your success?

No secrets. It's a combination of optimism, drive, resilience and, of course, a bit of luck.

### How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?

Every risk is a calculated risk. I'm not jumping out of a plane without a parachute and hoping for the best. That's not my style. My experience at Starwood, American Express, and Wyndham gave me the confidence and foundation to be able to take risks, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, but always learning and evolving. I also thrive on learning and the intellectual challenge of building something new.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

Find your community. It could be other founders, other women, other professionals in your industry. Being part of a community like Female Founders in Hospitality motivates me, inspires me, and encourages me to keep going on the hard days.

### What do you want to achieve next?

Growth, growth and more growth, driven by satisfied customers who find value in our product. At Lanyard, we have tremendous momentum and a ton of demand from employers looking for workforce housing. Our creative supply partnerships help us serve a growing number of markets and needs. We can't move fast enough.

Every risk is a calculated risk. I'm not jumping out of a plane without a parachute and hoping for the best. That's not my style.





**Harsha L'Acqua**  
CEO, SAIRA HOSPITALITY

**What inspired you to launch your business?**

I was seeking out a way to merge two passions: hospitality and philanthropy. I grew up watching my father work closely with Mother Teresa, helping her fund and operate homes and orphanages around the world. During my travels and working in real estate and luxury hotels over 10 years in the UK, U.S., and Southeast Asia, I saw first-hand the need on both sides. Local, overlooked communities needing education and opportunities; hospitality owners and operators struggling with community diplomacy, turnover, and sourcing local, well-trained talent. Based on these needs, I created the business plan of Saira Hospitality at Cornell's Hotel School in 2014. It won first place in Cornell's annual entrepreneurship competition, giving me the funding, support and confidence to turn it into reality and launch it in 2015. Saira was always intended to build meaningful partnerships between luxury hotels and the communities they inhabit, offering hotel partners community diplomacy, higher retention and local talent. While the initial idea was to partner with luxury and lifestyle hotels to create permanent schools, today we've launched both bespoke pop-up and permanent schools to educate and empower local communities for employment in hospitality.



**What are the secrets to your success?**

I think the question is really when are you a success. We've been successful in various locations, but to continue being successful, the key, not secret so much, I think, is to stay open-minded. To continuously adapt your model to the market. The market will change, its needs will change. Be open to change, new ways of thinking and doing, always learning from experiences and listening to others. I like to envision where we will be at the end of each week, where we will be in one year, two years, five years and review these goals at each landmark. To always have a long-term goal and at the same time have the patience to honor the present process.

**What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?**

I would do what I didn't do and jump in sooner. I don't like the word "should," but there comes a time when you have to realize you've done all you can do alone and you need the help of others who have different skill sets and new ideas. At that point, whether it's one, two or in my case five years into the company, it's time to look for that person that can ideally bring more to the table than you can. At a senior level, I look for people better than me in many ways — better at closing deals, better at thinking outside the box, who can speak about the company as if it were their own, who are strong enough to take on the risk with me, and who I see as an equal at all times.

**How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?**

I meditate every day, ending my session with gratitude and manifestation. If you're taking risks, you have no choice but to stay positive. Otherwise you're sending the wrong signs out to the universe. In a non-spiritual sense, if you're not feeling positive about the risk, don't take it.

**What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?**

Do it. Just do something. Launch it, however you can. Test it, pilot it, do something. Once you have a business plan, once you can see the end goal, start it, even and ideally on a very small level. Without any proof of concept, it has no legs. Whatever happens, it needs to happen. If it takes off or if you have to re-create the idea, you're still winning.

**What do you want to achieve next?**

I'd like every hotel that's being developed to incorporate in its budget a school for the local communities surrounding the property so they can be educated and empowered. For the developed hotels, I'd like for them to change their mindset towards hiring and realize that if you're facing high turnover, something fundamentally needs to change. You're likely hiring the wrong talent and need to think outside the box.





## Tracy L. Prigmore

FOUNDER AND MANAGING PARTNER,  
TLTSOLUTIONS + SHE HAS A DEAL

### What inspired you to launch your business?

The idea to create She Has a Deal was inspired by my own journey to hotel ownership. When I entered the space, I found that the overwhelming majority of owners and developers are men and that access to information and mentorship wasn't readily available in the way in which I needed to achieve my aspirations. It was challenging to create the connections and access the networks, which is one of the key barriers preventing women from advancing in the field. Furthermore, as I meet aspiring hotel owners, they express the same eagerness to gain the knowledge and experience needed. Our initial focus is to create new pathways to hotel ownership and development for women. In 2019, we launched She Has a Deal with our first hotel investment pitch competition, SHaDPitch. We inspire and connect women by facilitating education and experiences that will help them achieve their ambitions.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

Sculpt a career that's aligned with your passion and purpose. Be honest with yourself and don't let the opinion of others drive your career decisions. Take bold steps every day as you never know who and what will show up to support you when you're living your purpose.

### How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?

I live by faith in God and I know that joy comes in the morning. I've learned how to order my steps and stay focused on the big picture as I navigate my way through tough times. Furthermore, I was blessed with my son Noah (who is now 11) after five years of fertility treatments, and when I'm going through adversity, I remember what's on the other side when I persevere and don't lose hope.

### What do you want to achieve next?

I would like to achieve four major goals next:

1. Raise \$100 million-plus for the SHaD Prosperity Fund to invest in women-led hotel real estate projects originating from the She Has a Deal platform and SHaDPitch.
2. Successfully launch the BOW Fund to invest in Black-owned women businesses to help them scale to mid-market levels.
3. Become a venture capitalist and angel investor to help make people's entrepreneurial dreams come true.
4. Serve on a couple of for-profit company boards.

### How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?

By learning as much as I can about a topic. I will read books, attend seminars and workshops, listen to podcasts, consult with experts, and take classes because I believe that knowledge is power. The more I know the better I can anticipate the challenges and mitigate the downside. I'm also a contingency planner so I outline different scenarios and potential responses to shift the downside of the risks.

Take bold steps every day as you never know who and what will show up to support you when you're living your purpose.





**Christina Rice**  
FOUNDER, OMNOIRE

**What inspired you to launch your business?**

In 2015, I was experiencing one of the most challenging times in my life and I turned to yoga as a way to begin to heal from the inside out. I fell in love with this ancient practice and I decided to get my yoga teacher training that same year. One thing I noticed as a student, yoga teacher trainee and as a teacher is that there were very few Black women in my classes. Yet as I continued to chronicle my healing journey, more and more showed up when I taught and that was a lightbulb moment for me. I know that shared experiences can foster belonging, growth and healing, and it was then that I felt a calling to build a company for Black women to feel seen, heard and supported through their healing and wellness journeys via our transformational wellness experiences around the world.

**What are the secrets to your success?**

I don't give up on myself. I have challenging moments, days, weeks, and I allow myself to ride through all the emotions that come with building a company, supporting people emotionally and mentally, while also balancing my personal life. But the one thing that keeps me going is my confidence in myself that I will always figure it out. I will always rise to the top. Also, I've been an entrepreneur almost my entire adult life and I'm always looking at the next thing, always willing to be the first, always ready to pivot before I need to pivot. If something isn't working or something in my company simply needs to be refined, I don't hesitate to roll up my sleeves and fully lean into the change required for us to continue to grow and expand.

**How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?**

Fear doesn't stop me, it fuels me. I'm an adventurous person by nature. In fact, I started scuba diving to get over my fear of open bodies of water. I also had a fear of public speaking for a long time and would decline speaking engagements as a result until I decided to challenge myself one year to just keep saying YES and getting on stage until that fear diminished and eventually disappeared. I firmly believe that once you conquer one fear, it gives you confidence to challenge the next one and the next one after that. I've been chasing down my fears since my early 20s when I started my first business. Nothing can stop me.

**What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?**

I say this all the time: The best and most successful companies were built from a founder's personal need. Build from what you know. Build from what you need now or what you needed three [years ago], five years ago. That's where the most authentic ideas come from and there's a deeper passion that settles within that will fuel you during the hard times. Take a chance. The world needs what you have to offer. Oh, and start before you're ready. No business is ever perfect at launch. How many iPhone updates do we get a year and Apple is a billion-dollar company. You start it and build from there.

**What do you want to achieve next?**

Oh so many things! When I started my Retreats Academy, I had one clear vision in mind and that was to build the "Airbnb of retreats for Black women," which is essentially a marketplace of retreats to choose the one that speaks to you the most from the destination, theme, dates, price and retreat host. I currently have 28 retreat facilitators on my team. We're also launching our home collection to bring our retreat experiences right into your homes. And my biggest, most wildest dream (as of now)? Open up a physical retreat space, which I aim to do in 2024/2025.





## Iris Serbanescu

FOUNDER AND CEO, WMNSWORK

### What are the secrets to your success?

My secret weapon is my mastermind group. I'm lucky enough to have an amazing group of four women entrepreneurs from various industries that I meet with weekly. They hold me accountable and keep me going on the path to reaching my goals. For me, it's much more fun to accomplish things in community, and it's important to have a group of people that see the highest version of you and can reflect back and show you your myriad strengths and capabilities. We get so mired in self-doubt sometimes as entrepreneurs that we need those objective perspectives which pull you out of it.

### What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?

Automate before you delegate! There's so much good technology out there that allows you to outsource and automate many of your tasks (e.g., accounting, email, CRM, data transfer, etc.) so you really can hire for those important roles. My strategy for hiring is to identify the areas you don't love and things you don't want to get good at, and hire for those roles. As an entrepreneur, your most precious resource is your energy. If you're spending your time doing tasks that drain you, you're not going to be able to focus on the high-level things that your business needs YOUR brain for. Staying in your "zone of genius" is important. In terms of hiring a great team, my advice would be to get as clear as possible on your brand and the type of environment you want to create in your business and then hire people that support that. You can train for skills, but character and outlook/attitude are the most important when you're running a small team.

### What are you doing that's different from everyone else?

I like to think I'm creating a space that focuses on the person behind the business and not just the enterprise itself and its success or viability. There are SO MANY accelerators and programs out there that will help you build and scale a business, but do they really focus on the human side of it? In my experience, no. So WmnsWORK, being women+ specific, acknowledges and prioritizes the human experience of running a business while also questioning and acknowledging the systems of oppression that have us as women+.

### How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?

I'm a big fan of going ALL IN on the self-doubt and fear that comes when taking risks. Feeling those "negative" emotions deeply and not ignoring them. Because once you acknowledge them, you can move through it so much quicker than if you pretended you didn't have it or just let it stop you. So when I'm feeling scared, instead of stopping and giving up, I get 10 percent MORE and really dive deep into the feeling until it lifts and passes through me. It sounds woo-woo, but it's these kinds of mindset and somatic practices that have allowed me to deal with all the big feelings that would normally get in the way of my risk-taking.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

This might sound trite, but get SO excited about what it is you want to create — your enthusiasm will carry you through the challenges you face at the beginning — and then take imperfect action. As a recovering perfectionist, I realized perfectionism's root was just fear of criticism and rejection. I got comfortable with the idea that I could support myself through the criticism and rejection that arose, and just started taking "imperfect" action and iterating from there. Getting comfortable with the fact that entrepreneurship is literally just a journey of self-discovery while making an impact, and there's no end goal, is what changed my entire relationship with perfectionism and fear of failure.

◀ You can train for skills, but character and outlook/attitude are the most important when you're running a small team. ▶





## Sam Spring

FOUNDER AND CFO, ROOMZA

### What inspired you to launch your business?

My journey to entrepreneurship involved a bit of scrappiness. Having a background in accounting can open a lot of doors for you, but you sometimes don't know where to find those doors. I found it was easy to be pigeonholed into a specific industry, which, while stable, left me yearning to build something fresh where my passion for problem-solving and interpersonal connections could thrive. I was on a mission to make a meaningful impact, and fate (or the internet) brought me to co-founder Curtis Crimmins, who had extensive experience in the hotel industry. I've always been passionate about travel, and Curtis' insights into the shortcomings of both traditional hotels and Airbnb allowed us to share a vision of improving the industry overall. After many, many brainstorming sessions with my new business partner, and now friend, I decided to make the jump from my steady career path that I had been on for the better part of a decade. Roomza was officially incorporated in July 2021, and we've been tackling industry issues ever since.

### What has been the greatest challenge and how did you overcome it?

Accountants, especially CPAs, might be known for their risk aversion. The near guarantee of stable employment after graduation, knowing my student debt would be substantial, was a huge factor in why I entered the industry to begin with. To jump into a startup full time with no committed funding or incoming revenue is something I'm sure my younger self would have never considered. However, somewhere along my journey, the pandemic reshaped my perspective, emphasizing the importance of embracing the present.

The financial stress of building a startup, even one with funding, is undeniably real. It's hard not to constantly weigh all possibilities, both good and bad, for our little startup. Yet I've discovered that the best way to overcome these fears is to ground myself in gratitude as it's a privilege to be in a position to take these risks. Along those lines, Roomza's mission to fix things for those in the industry who have always financially struggled is what also drives me to keep going. We aim to bring positive change to the lives of those working in the hospitality sector, and that purpose adds a profound layer of meaning to our entrepreneurial journey. I'm fortunate to

have a robust support system of family and friends, a business partner who is always up for a bout of healthy shared commiseration, and a sense of humor that has always helped me navigate the unpredictable terrain of entrepreneurship. These invaluable resources have not only eased the financial stresses, but have also made the journey remarkably fulfilling and exciting.

### How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?

For founders still in the trenches, our companies aren't just businesses; they are our livelihoods and sources of survival. However, being able to take stock of situations where things are just NOT working and seeing them for what they are — a total trainwreck — and then laughing, acknowledging, and letting it go has been the best way for my team to keep pivoting and moving forward. Embracing the journey and maintaining a flexible mindset has been the best way for me to stay positive through all the inevitable bumps and turns.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

My advice is twofold: Listen to and support other women. It's crucial to recognize we're all in this together, and rather than withholding information, let's foster an ecosystem of collaboration and mutual support. If we can live free of a scarcity mindset, recognizing that there's ample room for all of us to be successful and advance in our careers, then we all win! Why waste time recreating the wheel when there are so many women who have already been through it and are willing to share their experiences? Knowledge-sharing empowers us all, and kindness has a remarkable way of coming back to us in abundance.

### What do you want to achieve next?

This is just the beginning for Roomza and the change that will inevitably come to our industry. We've achieved so much in such a short time and are grateful to be included in the same conversations as long-time legacy brands. Our first rooms will open in New York City in December 2023, and once we complete our seed round, we will start tackling the growing pipeline of hotels eager to partner with us. We're so excited to enter the market at a pivotal moment, especially with Airbnb's supply being severely cut.

Over the last few years, we've tapped into a genuine need in the market, where consumers are craving recognition as individuals, the ability to personalize their stay to their preferences, and the assurance that their money is contributing to causes that align with their values. Roomza's core ethos is deeply rooted in the belief that better hotel stays begin with better hotel jobs, aiming to alleviate the labor crisis by offering respectable wages and bringing dignity back to the most important jobs that exist within hotels today. Our work extends beyond offering accommodation; it's about empowering both our workforce and consumers. We're contributing to a future of work in the travel industry that's more equitable, compassionate and responsive to the evolving needs of travelers.





## Leanne Turner

COO AND CO-FOUNDER, ALŌ INDEX

### What inspired you to launch your business?

I saw the problem from both sides: working in hotel sales, I needed an effective way to surface hotel ESG accomplishments to enterprises. As a travel manager, I needed to find and report on property-level hotel ESG metrics. Together with my co-founder, Anna Feinberg, we kept hearing about this problem over and over within the industry, and we knew we were the subject matter experts to solve it.

### How did you persevere and stay motivated through the tough times?

Human brains are biased to negativity; we remember criticism more vividly than compliments and we pay more attention to negative events than positive ones. To combat this tendency, I do something I did when my kids were newborns to get through the long days and sleepless nights: I create a visual reminder of all the times things have gone “right.” Every time we receive positive feedback, I write it on a Post-It and stick it on my office wall. When it feels like everything is going sideways and I can’t get out of my own way, I force myself to look at the Post-It data I’ve compiled over the last 16 months. It helps me to get out of that spiral and refocus.

### How do you stay confident and positive as you take risks?

Know when to cross the fine line from confidence into delusion. You will be told no. You will hear that your idea is bad or what you’ve achieved isn’t very impressive. You will be condescended to. You will be told no again. Without a dash of delusion, even the most constructive and helpful feedback will wear you down over time.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

You can’t do it alone. Your support system(s) should be fully on board with the long- and short-term financial implications of going into business for yourself. Also, everything takes either twice as much time or twice as much money as you think it will. Try to plan for both scenarios.

### What do you want to achieve next?

We want to deliver an intuitive, beautiful product and scale our team. We want to hire and promote excellent humans and pay them fairly and transparently so they can achieve their dreams, too.





## Loretta “LAW” Anderson-Webber

FOUNDER AND CEO, LAW OF HOSPITALITY

### What inspired you to launch your business?

Over the years and as my career progressed, I found that not many people demonstrated a level of passion for serving others nor a zeal for excellence in performing the basic job duties in the hospitality industry. However, it wasn't because they were all bad people, but mainly because they spent more time focused on operating the systems, navigating the fast-paced and ever-changing environment than making a connection with the guest, which is what hospitality is truly all about. I quickly shifted my focus to making sure that my staff was properly equipped, allowing them to make better use of their time connecting with people and making a difference in the lives of others.

In 2014, I had a vision to extend my reach and started my business part time as an independent hospitality professional consultant, trainer and service culture infuser to improve the market for highly skilled, cross-functional hospitality leaders. During the pandemic, the need increased as the world attempted to reopen and all industries struggled to establish a new norm. In March 2020, I took a full-faith leap and began operating my business full time, growing from a team of one to a first responder community of now over 900.

### What tips do you have for building a great team to run a brand new business?

Building a great team requires honesty, confidence and, above all, faith. I first had to be honest with myself to identify my personal key areas of needed growth and opportunity. I then identified the leading industry professionals that embodied those skill sets as strengths and quickly recruited them for my core leadership team. Confidence was also a key component as I had to wholeheartedly believe in my own vision, committing to operate in my own strengths, talents and abilities. I had to learn to be equally confident in the leadership team rallying around me to help propel the vision and mission of the company; developing them to not think exactly like me but to indeed think in their own way while having an owner's mentality. Above all, I had to have unwavering faith in knowing that if God provides a vision that he has already provisioned for it.

### What advice do you have for other women entrepreneurs or those looking to launch their own business?

Every person is peculiar, created with a unique set of skills, talents and abilities that when engaged brings them great joy. I encourage those desiring to be entrepreneurs to identify what that peculiarity is and seek ways to make it profitable. The formula for being profitable is actually very simple. Find the need and meet it. Find the hurt and heal it. Establish the want and make them crave it. Then find the standard and raise it. What they say is actually true: If you can find something that you love and make money doing it, then you'll never work a day in your life.

### What are the secrets to your success?

The secret is actually that there are no secrets. I'm an open book. I live to serve others and sharing of myself in full transparency helps me to develop those around me and achieve my ultimate goal, to BE the DIFFERENCE. I recognize that I need others in order to be successful, which is why my most immediate and next focus is on developing self-propelled "Hospitalians" that embody foundational principles and passion for serving and then equip them to be effective, infectious leaders through our LAW (Leadership and Work4CE) Development program.

• The formula for being profitable is actually very simple. Find the need and meet it. •



# WHO WE ARE



Women Leading Travel & Hospitality is a membership-based association that connects executive women across all sectors of the travel and hospitality industry. Its mission is to unite, inspire and empower its community of executive women leaders by providing unparalleled resources, support and motivation to achieve personal and professional growth. For more information, visit [womenleadingtravelandhospitality.com](https://www.womenleadingtravelandhospitality.com).



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