

The Unexpected Entrepreneurs

For 10 years, the President’s Engagement and Innovation Prizes have equipped a select few graduating Penn seniors with a large cash award and faculty mentorship for post-graduation projects designed to make a “positive, lasting difference in the world.” The prizes, unlike anything else in higher education, have catapulted new social entrepreneurs into the world—and created a “community of changemakers” who are leaning on each other (and other alumni) to take their organizations to the next level.

By Dave Zeitlin

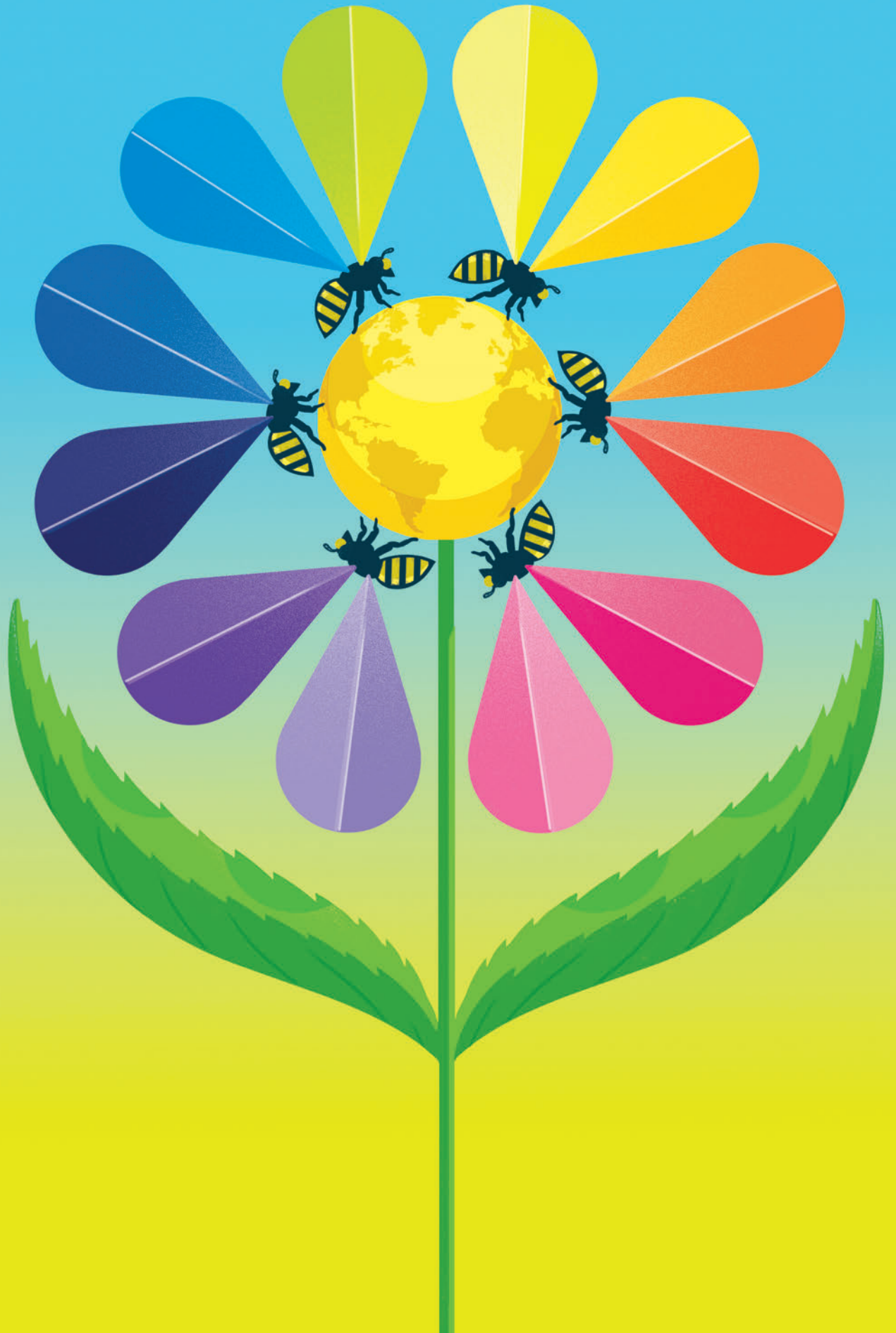
Rowana Miller C’22 had received University emails about the President’s Engagement and Innovation Prizes beginning her first year at Penn, but she didn’t pay much attention to them. “I never thought it was something that I was really the intended audience for,” says Miller, a sociology major with minors in creative writing and urban education. “I assumed that it was mostly a prize for Wharton businesses and engineering inventors.”

Established 10 years ago by then-president Amy Gutmann Hon’22, the President’s Engagement Prize (PEP) awards

\$100,000 in funding each spring to graduating seniors (across all four of Penn’s undergraduate schools) who create projects designed to make a positive, lasting difference in the world, as well as a \$50,000 living stipend for each team member and mentorship from a University faculty member. The President’s Innovation Prize (PIP), announced a year later as the “commercial analogue” to PEP, offers the same award, plus office space at Penn’s Pennovation Works facility. Touted as the largest of their kind in higher education, the annual prizes have launched the careers of new social entre-

preneurs running organizations whose aims range from empowering students through unique educational programming to furnishing homes of poor people to reducing food waste with a product that predicts the shelf life of produce.

But Miller never considered herself an entrepreneur, at least not until the pandemic hit in 2020. Looking for an outlet the summer between her sophomore and junior years, that’s when she started a virtual creative writing camp for children in quarantine with little else to do. “And we got 150 signups on the first day we opened them,” says Miller, who used a grant from



the Kelly Writers House to develop and run the camp. Before long, she realized, it “went beyond needing something engaging to do during the pandemic,” she says. “The need was really about providing creative writing education to kids.”

That’s how Cosmic Writers was born. As she developed the organization alongside cofounder Manoj Simha W’22, she was encouraged to apply for the President’s Engagement Prize by Kelly Writers House faculty director Al Filreis. Recalling her initial perception of the award, “I said, ‘I don’t know, that doesn’t really seem like it’s for me,’” Miller recalls. “And Al said, ‘You have to apply. You’re going to start the organization anyway. This is what the prize is for.’”

So, as they built their organization during their senior years, Miller and Simha also prepared their PEP application, crafting a project proposal with a detailed budget and gathering letters of recommendation. When they advanced to the semifinals, they had an interview with a committee of Penn trustees, faculty, and administrators.

On “one of the first warm days of 2022,” Miller received a call from an unknown number. *Do you have a few minutes to talk to the president of the University?*

Um, yes.

Then-interim president Wendell Pritchett Gr’97 got on the phone to inform Miller that she and Simha were among 12 graduating seniors to win the prize that year. They met at College Green to celebrate. And, just like that, an “organization that we thought we’d have to spend many years bootstrapping while doing other jobs full-time, became a full-time job,” Miller says.

So what comes next? The \$200,000 (half for project implementation expenses, the other half for their living expenses) was a huge boost, as was mentorship from a faculty member—in their case, fittingly, Filreis. But as other prizewinners have discovered, particularly those who weren’t schooled at Wharton, learning how to run an organization can be a steep climb.



“If I had not won the President’s Engagement Prize, I would have looked for teaching jobs and run the nonprofit on the side.”

—ROWANA MILLER, COSMIC WRITERS

“If I had not won the President’s Engagement Prize, I would have looked for teaching jobs and run the nonprofit on the side, most likely,” Miller says. “It was a very different world than I expected to be in. I’m not going to lie; the first few months were really hard.” One early challenge of being an unexpected entrepreneur, she says, was not having the set structure of a 9-to-5 job. “I was on track to burn myself out really fast.” Another was harboring a “degree of imposter syndrome” being unaccustomed to the lingo bandied about by investors and start-up gurus. And then there was the difficulty of finding sustainable funding once the PEP cash dried up, while experimenting with the best and most cost-effective ways to provide children with the tools to write creatively. (After trying afterschool programming, one-on-one coaching, and virtual and in-person workshops, Cosmic Writers has pivoted to selling creative writing activity books, the first of which were published in June. On top of being less expensive per child, Miller says, the reason for making activity books the cornerstone of the organization is that “we think that they capture the absolute best part of what we do—which is the moment of sparking excitement about writ-

ing in a kid.”)

As she got her footing in the entrepreneurial world, Miller leaned heavily on her alma mater, “running around the Penn ecosystem, trying to figure out what resources were available.” She already knew the value of the Penn network from the application process, when she sought help from past winners Meera Menon W’20 and Philip Chen W’20 of the Unscripted Project, another educational nonprofit [“Arts,” Sep/Oct 2021]. And Penn Law’s Entrepreneurship Legal Clinic was “absolutely essential in filing the articles of incorporation and launching the business entity,” Miller says. But it became more challenging to seek out assistance from the Penn community once she was no longer on campus. “That’s when I started thinking that it was too bad that President’s Prize winners would have to go through the process of trial and error and digging around to try to find these resources year after year.”

At a Penn Alumni event in late 2022, Miller shared that sentiment with Ann Reese CW’74, a past Penn Alumni president and a Penn Trustee Emerita. “That informal conversation,” Miller says, “turned into a small alumni initiative to try to formalize the process” of getting resources to President’s Prize winners. In July of 2023, they ran a one-day virtual pilot program to help prizewinners network and learn from alumni eager to help young start-up founders. And this past May during Alumni Weekend, Miller, Reese, and a handful of other members of a newly formed committee held an in-person launch event at Houston Hall. It included educational programming for the 2024 President’s Prize winners (on topics such as social enterprise legal structures, strategic planning, and fundraising); a panel discussion moderated by Lee Spelman Doty W’76 (a committee member, original PEP donor, and former Penn Alumni president and Penn Trustee Emerita) in which past winners shared some of the hurdles they’ve faced and lessons they’ve learned;

and a 10-year showcase with presentations from selected winners about their organizations. Alumni in attendance were then encouraged to scan a QR code and fill out a form indicating what organization they'd like to support and the manner in which they'd like to do so—from mentorship and board service to investment, networking, and more.

Miller hopes the relationships formed will be long-lasting, at least five to 10 years. Having looked back on past winners whose organizations struggled, she realized that one through-line was not having “access to wealth and connections.”

“I am not a high-net-worth individual,” Miller says. “I don't have family members who are. I didn't go to college expecting to found a business. And I had not been going through college gathering a network; I was networking for the first time, pretty much, after I won the prize.”

This new alumni initiative, she hopes, will ensure that “regardless of people's backgrounds, they have a real safety net in the Penn community that will allow them to take their organizations from ideas to sustainable realities.”

THE CONNECTORS

Unlike Miller, Katlyn Grasso W'15 knew she wanted to be an entrepreneur “since I came out of the womb.”

“I always joke that I handed the doctor my business card,” she says.

A decade ago, as a Wharton undergraduate, Grasso began working on GenHERation, a network that addresses the gender leadership gap by connecting young women with companies that might want to hire them [“Profiles,” Mar|Apr 2018]. During the summer before her senior year, she read an email from Gutmann announcing the formation of the prize. “It was almost written in the stars for me,” Grasso says. “I was working on this business already and thinking about how I was going to sustain it post-graduation.”

In a *Gazette* column announcing the President's Engagement Prize [“From College Hall,” Sep|Oct 2014], Gutmann

called it a “unique and unprecedented way of putting Penn knowledge into Penn practice” and “a start-up fund for full-time civic engagement, enabling exceptional Penn students to bring purpose and passion together to work for the betterment of humankind beginning just as soon as they graduate.”

“Nobody else that we know of offers prizes of this magnitude for student projects focused exclusively on local, national, and global engagement,” Gutmann wrote. “They are unique in scale, and yes, also maximally ambitious by design. Being a President's Engagement Prize winner will be a badge of the highest level of post-baccalaureate civic imagination and action. It is a big prize because we are committed to having Penn graduates do big things in the world.”



“It was a tremendous opportunity—the most transformational part of kickstarting my entrepreneurial journey.”

—KATLYN GRASSO, GENHERATION

The University also made clear from the start it would cast a wide net to uncover potential social entrepreneurs with an eye toward “global engagement.” The inaugural batch of winners included students from all four undergraduate schools: Grasso, Shadrack Frimpong C'15, Jodi Feinberg Nu'15, and Adrian Lievano EAS'15 and Matthew Lisle EAS'15. And Frimpong's Tarkwa Breman School and

Lievano's and Lisle's Everwaters addressed health and education in poor and rural regions of Africa. Winning the prize “changed everything,” Frimpong once told the *Gazette* [“Profiles,” Sep|Oct 2019]. “I always tell people the real money wasn't even the \$150,000. The real money was the Penn name and the Penn stamp.”

“I know Dr. Gutmann says there's nothing like this at any other university, and I don't believe that there is,” says Grasso, who got an extra nudge to apply by Lee Kramer, Wharton's former Undergraduate Director of Student Life, who offered to be her mentor. “The prize gave me the runway to say, *How can I turn this into a sustainable organization?* I didn't have to get a full-time job and try to work on this on the side. I was really able to put my dream into action right away. It was a tremendous opportunity—the most transformational part of kickstarting my entrepreneurial journey.”

Grasso is still in touch with her fellow inaugural prizewinners and has become something of an ambassador for the President's Prizes. She's organized dinners with former winners to talk to the newest ones about building sustainable organizations, fundraising, operational logistics, finding mentors, and more. And she regularly takes part in annual President's Prize information sessions at Penn's Center for Undergraduate Research & Fellowships (CURF), which aids undergraduates in the application process.

“I think the ultimate gift is to be able to pay it forward,” Grasso says. “My group of winners, we were the first ones, so we were figuring it out as we went. As an entrepreneur, as a founder, I'm always thinking about how if I could make somebody else's journey a little easier based on my experience, that's my duty.”

Among many others, Grasso has mentored Griffin Amdur W'18, who won the 2018 President's Engagement Prize along with classmates James McPhail C'18 W'18 and Andrew Witherspoon W'18 for the Chicago Furniture Bank, a nonprofit that collects gently used furniture and

distributes it to individuals and families facing poverty. Amdur recalls sitting in a Wharton class as a sophomore when Grasso, Lievano, and Lisle showed up to speak about the President's Engagement Prize and their then-fledgling organizations. "And I was like, *Wow, this is an amazing opportunity*," Amdur says. "They're doing so much good. And that's a huge amount of money."

Amdur—who, like Grasso, "always wanted to start something"—and his cofounders felt like they were in a good position to win the award after volunteering at the Philadelphia Furniture Bank and learning about the business model. For their prize application, they proposed bringing a similar model to Chicago, which didn't have a furniture bank and has "relatively cheap warehouse space compared to other markets," says Amdur, who grew up in Chicago.

After winning, they quickly sought more funding, using the PEP—and the article and video that the University made about them—as a conversation starter. Believing that they had a short time in which to "play the Penn card really hard," Amdur says, the new entrepreneurs emailed "every Penn alum with a fancy title." Most of the time, they didn't get a response. But those emails helped them get major donors and enough capital to become the largest furniture bank in the country.

As of 2023, per its website, the Chicago Furniture Bank has furnished over 13,000 homes for over 21,000 people and given away furniture weighing over 6,000 tons. With 65 employees and a fleet of 15 trucks, the nonprofit covers most of its operating budget through revenue from a separate nonprofit junk removal service (a model Amdur says other furniture banks are now adopting).

Amdur has been pleasantly surprised by the organization's rapid growth, noting that "our goal was to furnish 400 homes per year, when we were first starting." But he called it a "no-brainer" to solicit donations "because all this stuff is being



Had it not been for the President's Engagement Prize, the Chicago Furniture Bank "absolutely would not have happened. And it's definitely made a big impact in Chicago."

—GRIFFIN AMDUR,
CHICAGO FURNITURE BANK

thrown away, and it's a great product; it just needs to go to people who don't have anything. We're simply the connectors."

After more than five years in charge, Amdur and Witherspoon recently stepped aside and brought in new leadership, though they continue to run the board of directors. (McPhail only worked there for the first year after graduating, but he too remains on the board.) Amdur also has been helping fellow prizewinning alumni, including a team that won the 2023 President's Innovation Prize for Sonura, a beanie that filters out harmful noises for infants in neonatal intensive care units. He connected with them during the 2023 virtual networking event put on by Rowana Miller, who recalls Amdur sharing "some of the most helpful advice I've heard from anyone" by offering specifics about combing through the Penn alumni database and sending off those cold emails. "I appreciated that they were honest that there's an element of luck in everything," Miller says. "There's a moment right after you win when you feel like you have it

made and you've gotten over the hump. And then the euphoria wears off, and you realize how much you have to learn and how much is out of your control."

"They're a really strong example of what happens when the President's Engagement Prize really, really works," Miller adds.

In turn, Amdur still credits those who aided him as he was getting his feet wet—including Seth Zweifler C'14, who worked closely with prizewinners in his role in Penn's Office of the President (before moving over to a job at Penn Law earlier this year), and Grasso, who introduced them to Lynn Jerath W'95, a Chicago-based Penn trustee who now serves on the Chicago Furniture Bank board. Had it not been for the President's Engagement Prize itself, the Chicago Furniture Bank "absolutely would not have happened," says Amdur, who had another post-graduation job lined up before getting the life-changing call from Gutmann in 2018. "And it's definitely made a big impact in Chicago."

THE INVENTORS

It hasn't been smooth sailing for all of the prizewinners over the last decade. Some organizations haven't made it. Some have seen slow growth or pivoted. Founders have moved on to other jobs, or law school or medical school. Partnerships have fizzled.

During the panel at the Alumni Weekend event, Katherine Sizov C'19 used a colorful metaphor about the importance of having the right cofounder: someone who will "be there to hold your hair back when you're throwing up in the proverbial toilet."

Sizov won the fourth annual President's Innovation Prize in 2019 for Strela Biotechnology, which markets a biosensor that can predict the maturity of fresh fruit. She's had different cofounders since then but remains "very much a product of Penn and the community," with an office at Pennovation Works (in addition to one in Seattle) and backing from Brett Topche W'03 at Red & Blue Ventures, an early-stage venture capital fund that invests in companies from the

Penn ecosystem. And the company has shown steady growth, raising around \$16 million, partnering with stores like Target, and monitoring over two billion pieces of fruit to date.

During her Alumni Weekend presentation, Sizov shared that an apple in a grocery store can be more than a year old by the time it gets to you and that 40 percent of food ends up being wasted before it's consumed.



“Going into this journey is tough and loney, and anything I can do to be helpful is important.”

—KATHERINE SIZOV,
STRELLA BIOTECHNOLOGY

Sizov first discovered that statistic—“a ridiculous number”—as a junior at Penn and “started skipping class to go to farms and retail distribution centers and warehouses to learn about how our food gets replaced,” she says. A molecular biology major, she began to research ways to optimize the produce supply chain and reduce the nearly \$1 trillion in lost profits from wasted food. Stella’s solution, Sizov notes, is a piece of hardware that retailers can use to monitor ethylene, a gas that fruits release as they grow sweeter. Stella started with apples and pears, moved on to bananas and avocados, and has its sights set on peaches, plums, nectarines, and tomatoes.

Winning the PIP five years ago, Sizov says, was an “important buffer to kind of

keep the lights on and keep going.” And so she always answers the call from professors to help aspiring Penn inventors get their PIP pitches “in tip-top shape” every year. “Going into this journey is tough and lonely,” she says, “and anything I can do to be helpful is important.”

One of those inventors who came after her is Julia Yan EAS’22 GEng’22, who teamed with Sarah Beth Gleeson EE’22 and Shoshana Weintraub EAS’22 to capture the inaugural President’s Sustainability Prize, a subcategory of the President’s Innovation Prize. They won for Baleena, a start-up pioneering a device that captures microfibers at their laundry point source, protecting oceans and waterways.

Like Sizov, Yan surprised the Alumni Weekend audience during her presentation, explaining that two-thirds of our clothes are made of synthetic plastic fibers and that a single load of laundry can release 700,000 plastic fibers into our waterways, “wreaking havoc on our planet.”

A pill-shaped filter designed to capture microfibers before they leave the washing machine, Baleena began as a senior engineering capstone project. Yan, Gleeson, and Weintraub were classmates in Penn’s materials science and engineering department and were “really bonded by this desire ... to solve this microplastics problem,” Yan says. “We interviewed the EPA, the water department, and realized where the gaps were that we could address.” The Penn Water Center has also been an important resource for them.

Yan had heard about the President’s Prizes when she entered the engineering entrepreneurship minor program and, while working on Baleena, heard about the new Sustainability Prize, which she felt was “uniquely perfect” for their project. Yan figured it was “sort of a moonshot,” but applied anyway. If nothing else, she figured the questions and feedback from the judging session could help the start-up grow as they worked it on the side between the full-time jobs they had lined up after graduation.

From left: Julia Yan, Sarah Beth Gleeson, and Shoshana Weintraub.



“The prize really gave us the confidence to say, *We could try this. It doesn’t have to be 10, 20 years down the line. Why not try now?*”

—JULIA YAN, BALEENA

They never took those jobs. The call from Wendell Pritchett changed everything. Yan turned down a consulting gig in Chicago, and she and her cofounders set up shop at Pennovation Works, where they installed a washing machine in a hybrid lab/office space. After a year, they moved to an office in University City and are now attempting to pivot the company to bring their technology to big washing machine manufacturers and outdoor apparel brands rather than just everyday homeowners and renters.

“We’re very grateful for the prize because we had no capacity to bootstrap our own start-up at the position that we were in when we graduated,” says Yan, who likens her partnership with Gleeson to a marriage, pointing out they’ve learned a lot about navigating “our personalities and the ways we deal with various things and the fires we need to put out.” (Yan is currently the CEO of Baleena and Gleeson serves as COO; Weintraub decided to pursue her PhD—“a completely amicable split.”)

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THE MULTITASKERS

When Christina Miranda C'21 was 12 years old, she nearly lost her life in a struggle with anorexia.

"I was able to recover," she says. "But I just felt like it could have been prevented. And I know that if I had a program like the Body Empowerment Project when I was in middle school, things would have turned out differently."

Years after her harrowing experience, Miranda launched the Body Empowerment Project with her friend and classmate Amanda Moreno C'21. The two had run a student club together focused on eating disorder awareness and also did research at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, where they would see kids coming into the pediatric ICU because of eating disorders.

The Body Empowerment Project is designed to decrease eating disorder risk in adolescents through educational workshops focused on body image and self-esteem. The organization offers programs in Philadelphia and San Francisco Bay Area public schools, as well as for college students across the country. It also hosts professional trainings for teachers, nurses, and faculty in the School District of Philadelphia. Rather than address eating disorders head on in its workshops, "we talk about body image, confidence, building self-esteem," Miranda says. "These are really basic skills that help all kids, especially as they navigate that challenging adolescence timeframe" that's so often influenced by what they see on social media.

After developing the initial pilot program and getting approval from the School District of Philadelphia to run it in two schools in the spring of their junior year (switching to Zoom when COVID-19 lockdowns began), they applied for the President's Engagement Prize. The pandemic affected the applications that year, Miranda believes, because "you had to convince the committee that whatever project you were going to do could still take place virtually if necessary,



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—CHRISTINA MIRANDA,
BODY EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

with whatever safety precautions." They had proved that but ran into another challenge—finding a faculty mentor. "You'd be surprised how many people said no to us," says Miranda, who notes they hunted around Penn to find someone who could provide expertise in community engagement. Eventually, though, they found "the perfect person"—Caroline Watts, director of the Office of School and Community Engagement (OSCE) at Penn's Graduate School of Education. Currently on the Body Empowerment Project's board of directors, Watts helped propel the organization to a prize that's been transformational.

"Even several years later, I have not found a similar prize that exists," Miranda says. "People are like, *They gave two college seniors that kind of money?* It's really wild."

Cash in hand, Miranda and Moreno went full steam ahead on the Body Empowerment Project, trying to diversify their funding stream with other grants—one of their biggest challenges. Another challenge was self-inflicted yet proved to be a unique opportunity for growth. One year after graduating from Penn, both of the cofounders went to medical school,

Miranda to Stanford and Moreno to Harvard. Trying to run a nonprofit while completing clinical rotations was "definitely really busy," Moreno says, but "it was really my work with Body Empowerment Project that inspired that decision [to go to med school]. I thought if I could be an actual clinician, people in this space would trust me a lot more and I would be able to make a bigger impact. And I also thought it would help me expand the Body Empowerment Project, which it definitely did, because we're doing a lot of work with schools out here now in California, too."

One connection forged at Penn helped ease the cofounders' load; Clara Pritchett, Wendell Pritchett's daughter and a recent Brown graduate with experience in mental healthcare and education, has taken over as the Body Empowerment Project's executive director and will help guide the organization as it looks to expand into elementary schools.

They also sought inspiration from a pair of PEP winners from the previous year: Meera Menon and Philip Chen of the Unscripted Project. Since both organizations are rooted in education, Menon and Chen helped them navigate the Philadelphia school system and advised them on how to sustain their project and generate revenue. Menon and Chen also showed that a different kind of entrepreneurial path is possible, as both balance full-time jobs with their roles running the Unscripted Project.

"So I said, 'You know, if they can do that, maybe we can go to med school and keep this thing going,'" says Miranda, who plans to be a child psychiatrist. "They were inspiring in that way, even though our journeys have been pretty different."

Menon and Chen's journey has been different than most. Though they were both on the typical Wharton investment banking route as students, they were also involved in theater—an uncommon yet fruitful intersection. "Being on stage and playing other characters and improvising served us really well as we were inter-

viewing for our consulting and banking jobs,” Menon says. It also bolstered their friendship and got their entrepreneurial juices flowing. What if they could utilize the skills of theater to teach younger students “struggling to connect what they’re learning in the classroom to what happens outside the four walls of it”?



“I think it’s an incredible opportunity. And it’s just been a huge catalyst for me personally.”

—MEERA MENON, UNSCRIPTED PROJECT

As seniors, they piloted a program to bring improv training to a couple of Philadelphia public schools, hoping to empower students to “speak confidently, collaborate effectively, and persevere in the face of adversity,” in the words of their mission statement. They were forced to stop a couple of months later when the pandemic closed schools, but they continued with their PEP application, with theater arts lecturer Marcia Ferguson serving as their mentor.

Menon was in her childhood bedroom in California, the end of her senior year having been lost to COVID-19, when she got the call from Gutmann to inform her they had won. “I was really lagging in motivation,” Menon says. “I truly found so much purpose after that.”

Getting the Unscripted Project back up and running in the fall of 2020, with Philly schools virtual, was difficult. But “no one knew what they were going to do in education during the pandemic,”

Menon says. “And I so I think it actually gave us a really interesting opening.” The Unscripted Project managed to engage students online, and went non-virtual the following year, starting in about 10 classrooms and since having grown to about 25 classrooms, mostly in West Philly and Center City. They hope to expand beyond their 10-week core program and into the afterschool space, and they’re also hoping to launch in New York, where both work full-time (Menon as a management consultant, Chen as a venture capitalist).

How do they balance running a non-profit with demanding other jobs? Menon says she spends most of her evenings working on the Unscripted Project, plus all day Sunday. They rely on a team of eight teaching artists, a program director, and a grant writer, and can “operate in a pretty lean way” since they don’t pay themselves a salary, Menon notes.

Hearing from other past prizewinners in similar circumstances—be it balancing med school, law school, or full-time careers—is more proof that it can be done, and Menon has made it a point to return to campus and stay close to as many as she can. “I think it’s an incredible community,” she says. “And it just has been a huge catalyst for me personally.”

THE DREAMERS

“This award is a lot more than financial support. It’s a lot more than office space. It’s about the backing of Penn.”

Yash Dhir EAS’24 is feeling the backing—and the love—as he says this, just after he and his classmate Rahul Nambiar EAS’24 attended the Alumni Weekend showcase event, where Dhir notes they were “quite overwhelmed” to see other prizewinners explain how they went through the same steps they’re about to undertake.

Dhir and Nambiar are among the newest members of the exclusive club, recently getting the call from Penn Interim President Larry Jameson that they had won the 2024 President’s Innovation Prize for Jochi, an online ed-tech management platform that aims to improve the educa-



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—YASH DHIR, JOCHI

tional experience of students with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning differences. They’re joined by the 10th and most recent crop of President’s Engagement Prize winners: Simran Rajpal C’24 and Gauthami Moorkanath C’24 for Educate to Empower, and Anooshey Ikhlas C’24, Brianna Aguilar C’24, and Catherine Hood C’24 for the Presby Addiction Care Program [“Gazetteer,” Jul|Aug 2024].

Dhir always had an entrepreneurial bent and was inspired to start Jochi because of his own struggle with learning differences in high school at the American School in London. (He grew up in Delhi, India, before moving to London; Nambiar is from Dubai.) “For me, it was different,” Nambiar says. “I didn’t have much experience and was kind of a traditional computer science engineering student. This was just something that was a lot more exciting compared to anything else.”

As they tried to develop an app for students with diverse learning needs to keep track of their school assignments and outside activities—and reached out to schools to license the software to better equip administrators to support those students—we “spent a year or two run-

ning around like a headless chicken,” says Dhir, who notes that he “spent pretty much every moment outside of class working on Jochi.” They hope that winning the PIP, along with a couple of other awards, and setting up shop at Pennovation Works, will be a gamechanger as they aim to reach 20,000 learners by next year.

There are still a lot of unknowns for the newly minted college graduates—but that’s what makes it exciting. “It’s just so much fun,” Dhir says. “It’s a privilege that we can say that this is our job after college.”

Like Dhir and Nambiar, Summer Kollie C’19 came a long way to get to Penn. And five years after winning the President’s Engagement Prize, she loves coming back to her alma mater to “connect with the people who are also a part of it.”

Along with Princess Aghayere C’19 and Oladunni Alomaja EAS’19, Kollie won the PEP in 2019 for Rebound Liberia, which uses basketball as a tool to bridge the literacy gap between men and women and for traumatized youth to cope with daily life in post-conflict Liberia.

Kollie experienced that trauma growing up during the Second Liberian Civil War. She recalls her father jumping on her to shield her, inside their own home, after a mortar shell fell next to their house. When she was six, her family emigrated to the US, joining the large Liberian community in Southwest Philly, where Kollie kept her head down, read a lot of books, and got accepted to “the Ivy in my backyard.”

“I just knew I wanted to do better for myself,” says Kollie, though she still felt connected to Liberia. Kollie’s roommates, Aghayere and Alomaja, were both born in Nigeria and also wanted to give back to West Africa. They zeroed in on basketball because Aghayere was a member of the Penn women’s basketball team, helping the Quakers to three Ivy League championships. “She came [to the US] when she was young as well, and basketball helped her to cope and learn different skills like confidence,” Kollie says. “So that was what we wanted to impart to the



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I was crying tears of joy.”**

—SUMMER KOLLIE, REBOUND LIBERIA

young women in Liberia as well.”

Kollie credits Shadrack Frimpong for being an unofficial mentor and Ocek Eke, director of Graduate Students Programming at Penn Engineering, for being their official one, helping them through the “daunting” PEP application process. Kollie was on a treadmill at Pottruck Gym when she got the call they had won. “I just sank to the floor,” she says. “I was crying tears of joy.”

Since then, Kollie says that Rebound Liberia has touched more than 800 kids through its programs focused on leadership development and employment skills, as well as an annual basketball tournament. She says they have plans to extend it to Nigeria and possibly rebrand the nonprofit to Rebound Africa.

Kollie lives in Philly and has another job as a workforce project manager at Temple University, so Rebound Liberia remains a pure labor of love—a dream forged from a traumatic childhood and uplifting immigration story.

For Ann Reese, hearing past prizewinners talk at the Alumni Weekend launch event (which she attended shortly before going to her 50th Reunion festivities), reinforced her motivation to support them with the new initiative connecting them to alumni mentors. “I’m inspired every time I talk to them,” Reese says.

“I really think they embody the ideals that we have as a university. And they’re great examples for students who follow them.”

Reese hopes that the alumni mentors, too, will get as much out of the program as the mentees. “There was a real desire for them wanting to be involved in a personal way, other than just fundraising or class-centered engagement with the University,” says Reese, who hopes past winners will help one another more than they have in the past. “I want to not only create an ecosystem for these prizewinners but keep the best and brightest of our alumni engaged with Penn.”

As she’s worked with Reese on developing the program, Rowana Miller has grown to appreciate the “incredibly special” camaraderie that exists between past prizewinners. At the heart of that is one of the original winners, Katlyn Grasso, who initially intimidated Miller before becoming “a really consistent source of advice and guidance.”

Sitting at the head of the President’s Prize table is a natural fit for Grasso, whose organization GenHERation has empowered more than 700,000 young women over the last 10 years, working with “more than 300 companies, sports teams, tech giants, government organizations, and more than 2,500 schools, all around the world.” On a smaller scale, helping empower her fellow Penn alum entrepreneurs and “being around like-minded people is just another great way to stay in touch with the Penn alumni community.”

“It’s a really important community of changemakers, of people who want to do big things in the world,” says Grasso, who hopes to assist even more applicants with “world-changing ideas” over the next 10 years. “I think college is the best time to start a business ... and I think for people who are naturally inclined to dream, this gives them that extra nudge to say, *Hey, I actually can do this in a safe and supportive environment of a university.*”

“This prize,” she adds, “gives them the license to dream.”