

Breaking the Code

The ranks of DC's tech titans have been broken by the upstarts and up-and-comers in the entrepreneurial landscape who, in more cases than ever, are women. We take a look at a few names you'll want to know. | *By Jennifer Sergent* |



The Fortifier

Carla M. Valdes is a top partner at Fortify, the city's first early-stage venture capital fund for tech startups. At just 26, she's already giving speeches at major startup conferences, such as Powder Keg in Indianapolis last month—one week after hosting a two-day pitch competition that she had planned. Digital Intelligence 2.0 awarded the winner \$100,000, in no-strings seed money, from among 100 entries—up from 50 last year. When co-founder Jonathon Perrelli plucked her from a wealth management company to start Fortify last year, Valdes went all in: She not only helped build the fund, but was also instrumental in creating The Fort, an accelerator that provides money and workspace to DC startups.

"The thriving ecosystem in DC was in need of more early-stage angels and professional checkwriters," says Carla M. Valdes, Fortify's general partner. The Northern Virginia native credits being a mom as part of her success: "It's taught me a ton about the importance of priorities."



Coffman's idea for Feastie won her a spot in the first class of resident startups at The Fort, DC's new tech accelerator.

The Food Finder

Finding a great recipe online might not take rocket science, but to **Valerie Coffman**, a former physicist at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, it takes a high degree of programming and algorithm-development skills. Coffman turned her foodie passion into a business with *feastie.com*, which runs on an algorithm she wrote to mine recipes from more than 1,000 food blogs. Her "feastiebot" extracts information, such as ingredients and dietary restrictions, to make searches more accurate, and scours social networks to score recipes by popularity. Within five years, Coffman aims for her delicious concept to become "the hub of the foodie social-media sphere."



"I thought it was important to ensure there were more people that look like me" in DC's tech scene, Johnson says.

The Diversifier

Christine Celise Johnson is a star in DC's startup community, providing fertile ground for minority-run companies to grow and thrive. Her company, *IamDTech*, is on a "mission to diversify the tech entrepreneurship and startup landscape" through regular online and in-person networking events, she says. *IamDTech* also provides access to experts and resources—its community managers represent specific minority segments, such as women, Asian/Indian, African Diaspora and youth. Her work has been noted in *Washington Business Journal* and *Black Enterprise*, and this year, the *In the Capital* blog placed her among its Top 10 Most Powerful Women in the DC Startup Community.

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Using her background in grassroots advocacy, Rachna Choudhry helped build POPVOX into an online forum where constituents can read about any bill, see the interest-group positions on each side, and then share their own opinions. The grassroots input is then aggregated, so lawmakers can see support and opposition building in real time.

The Populist

From homeland security to puppy protection, POPVOX gives citizens a nonpartisan platform to research and comment on any bill pending in Congress. Under the direction of co-founder and Chief Marketing Officer **Rachna Choudhry**, 36, the infant site won the social media category at the South by Southwest Accelerator Competition and was named one of 25 Women-Run Startups to Watch by *Fast Company* last year. This spring, it received the Tribeca Film Festival award for Disruptive Innovation. Choudhry got into the game as a lobbyist working in grassroots advocacy—form letters weren't cutting it to prove support for an issue, she says. "Nothing compares to the personal story of a constituent."

The Personal Shopper

It didn't take long for customers of two successful shoe sites to start asking what kind of outfits would go with their fabulous new flats, wedges and boots. So **Kassie Rempel**, CEO of Lillybee and SimplySoles, obliged with KassiesCloset. The invitation-only shopping site curates outfits from multiple online retailers, offering a one-stop portal to purchase the look. She is so dedicated to the concept that she sold SimplySoles last month to focus on her latest venture. In the next six months, a Build Your Own feature will allow customers to assemble outfits through a recommendation engine that's based on their style preferences.



Rempel's five-year plan is to sell KassiesCloset to Amazon, bringing the shop-by-outfit concept to millions.



SnobSwap is perfectly placed in DC, Elise Whang, right, says, because "the tech and fashion community here is exploding."

The Swap Sisters

What do you get when you pair two entrepreneurial sisters—one a retailing pro with experience at Hermès and Chanel, the other an attorney with a consignment-store shopping habit? The answer is SnobSwap, a user-fueled online gallery of "pre-loved" designer labels. **Elise Whang** and **Emily Dang** created the site so that frugal fashionistas could find the gently worn likes of Gucci and Alexander McQueen—and either swap them for their own lightly used couture or purchase them outright at consignment prices. The idea's caught on: In September alone, SnobSwap was an event sponsor at DC's Fashion's Night Out, and the sisters showcased at San Francisco's Fashion+Tech Expo. In October, Startup America profiled them on its site. Next on the agenda? An iPhone app.



Thorp, 28, was selected to attend the elite 500 Startups accelerator in California this summer, getting training, support and seed money for her venture.

The Gift Giver

Lauren Thorp took an unlikely road to her perch as a vendor on Facebook's new gifts site, where she curates handmade gifts for monthly subscribers through Umba Box, her 1-year-old company. She had noticed how hard it was to find beautiful, handmade items for her wedding decor. At the same time, she had come to DC to work in

international development with hopes to "change the world," but realized her tasks were little more than paper-pushing. Umba Box was her resulting epiphany. "Running my own business also supports other small businesses and artists around the country," she says. Next year, she hopes to launch a new handmade e-commerce platform.

PORTRAIT OF RACHNA CHOUDHRY PHOTOGRAPHED ON LOCATION AT THE W HOTEL WASHINGTON BY JOSHUA COGAN. PORTRAIT OF LAUREN THORP PHOTOGRAPHED BY KATE SKOGEN OF JETKAT PHOTO. PORTRAIT OF KASSIE REMPEL PHOTOGRAPHED BY KATE WARREN OF GO KATE SHOOT. PORTRAIT OF ELISE WHANG AND EMILY DANG PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEE GUSMAN



The Transporter

Rachel Holt dreamed of being the New York Knicks' statistician when she was in middle school. At 29, the Stanford MBA and self-described "efficiency and data nerd" is now intent on seeing people, not basketballs, move toward their goals. She's the general manager of Washington DC at Uber, an on-demand private car service accessible through a smartphone app. Uber is an answer to DC's decentralized and often-confusing taxi network. "DC has quickly become one of our most successful and fastest-growing markets," Holt says of the San Francisco-based company. With investors like Goldman Sachs and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Uber—and Holt—are sure to be going places.

Uber's Rachel Holt rallied the DC cyber world—who responded with an influx of texts, emails and posts to the city council—to hold off regulations proposed by the DC Taxi Commission that targeted the car service's rapidly expanding business model.

The Highlighter

It's the next step in sharing content in social media: a platform to post selected passages from online articles, instead of forcing friends and followers to read the whole thing. DC-based **Sarah Ware**, CEO and founder of Markerly, calls it the Internet's social highlighter. Her own highlights include being nominated for

the LivingSocial Oscar of Strong Moves and winning a spot at 500 Startups, the prestigious accelerator program in Mountain View, Calif., where she is currently in residence. "Sharing content should be more personal, and bookmarking should be more specific, and content discovery should be better targeted," says Ware, 25.



Sarah Ware launched Markerly—the Pinterest of text. Users can mark passages and instantly share them via Facebook or Twitter.



Liz Steinger brought a few big boys on board, including LivingSocial and DCWEEK, to host its packed workshops.

The Code Cracker

Web development can be a lonely place for women. But the few and the proud are attracting more of them through Rails Girls, a worldwide movement that began in Helsinki in 2010 to teach Ruby on Rails, one of the Internet's most popular development languages. **Liz Steinger**, 32, a project manager in the DC government's Office of the Chief Technology Officer, started a local chapter last year, and has since been invited to present in Helsinki and Berlin. Her success has prompted women to start their own chapters in Atlanta, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Richmond, Va. and Albany, N.Y. She'll host the second Rails Girls DC workshop during DCWEEK on Nov. 3.



The Fairfax, Va.-based Women in Technology organization nominated Lindsey Mask this year as a top female entrepreneur.

The Networker

As a veteran of state and national politics, **Lindsey Mask** knows the power of the good ole boys club—and wants the girls to have one, too. So she started Ladies America, a national network of professional women whose DC epicenter claims more than 2,000 members. The group hosts regular networking events and annual conferences, and this year's initiatives focus on helping women in tech, global economics and finance. "United women are stronger and more powerful," Mask says, "and can help other women succeed in professions where we statistically fall behind our male counterparts."

PORTRAITS OF RACHEL HOLT AND LIZ STEINGER PHOTOGRAPHED ON LOCATION AT THE W HOTEL WASHINGTON BY JOSHUA COGAN; PORTRAIT OF LINDSEY MASK PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHNNY KAHN; PHOTOGRAPHY; PORTRAIT OF SARAH WARE PHOTOGRAPHED BY JUSTIN KLINE