

Fall 2025

District Angels:
A New Kind of
Investing
Collective

Cachai:
Redefining
Distributed
Systems



BELTWAY BITS

BELTWAY BITS

Pictured Ann Marie Guzzi, Brendan Whitaker

D.C. Tech Is Evolving, Here's Who's Leading the Charge

Dan Kwon moved to Washington, D.C. in early 2024. Originally from the New York metro area, he brought with him a strong background in technology and experience navigating some of the country's most competitive startup ecosystems. What Dan found in D.C. was a refreshing change of pace, a fundamentally different startup culture. Unlike other hype-driven environments, D.C.'s tech ecosystem emphasizes substance over spectacle. There is an emphasis on meaningful, mission-oriented momentum aligned with the city's unique strengths.

A Hidden Innovation Hub

When people discuss innovation hubs in the U.S., D.C. is often overlooked. Coastal giants like Silicon Valley, New York, and Austin tend to dominate the spotlight with headlines about rapid scaling and massive

funding rounds. But under the radar, D.C. has been cultivating its own identity. Proximity to federal policy centers, research institutions, and a strong civic backbone has led to a distinctive and collaborative ecosystem. Here, ambitions are grounded, and the community moves with purpose.

Why Beltway Bits?

That spirit of collaboration and impact is what inspired Dan to create Beltway Bits. More than just a newsletter or brand, it's a growing platform supporting those building the D.C. innovation economy. At its core is this inaugural edition, spotlighting the established leaders and emerging talent pushing the region forward. Alongside this print issue is a weekly newsletter featuring launches, funding updates, events, and milestones to help keep the community connected.

Looking Ahead

Soon, Beltway Bits will evolve into an online platform where startups, investors, and supporters can collaborate,

share resources, and foster partnerships in real time.

Join the Movement

Why now? Because the D.C. tech startup ecosystem deserves greater visibility and stronger collaboration tools. The people featured here represent just a snapshot of the diverse, dynamic community committed to building a more connected and forward-thinking ecosystem. Whether you're looking to get involved or already building here, we want to hear from you.

Beltway Bits is for anyone building, funding, supporting, or simply curious about the D.C. tech and startup scene. Our mission is simple: help good people find each other, shine a light on what's being built, and create more opportunities for connection across the region.

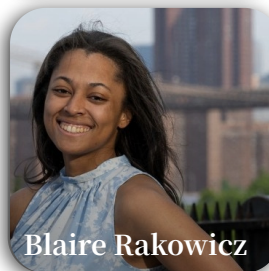
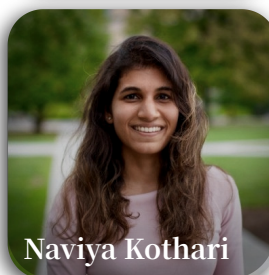
Welcome to Beltway Bits

Finally, a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has contributed their time, stories, and energy to this first edition and the ongoing growth of this community. Your passion and collaboration are what made Beltway Bits possible and will establish D.C. as a leading ecosystem alongside Silicon Valley and New York.

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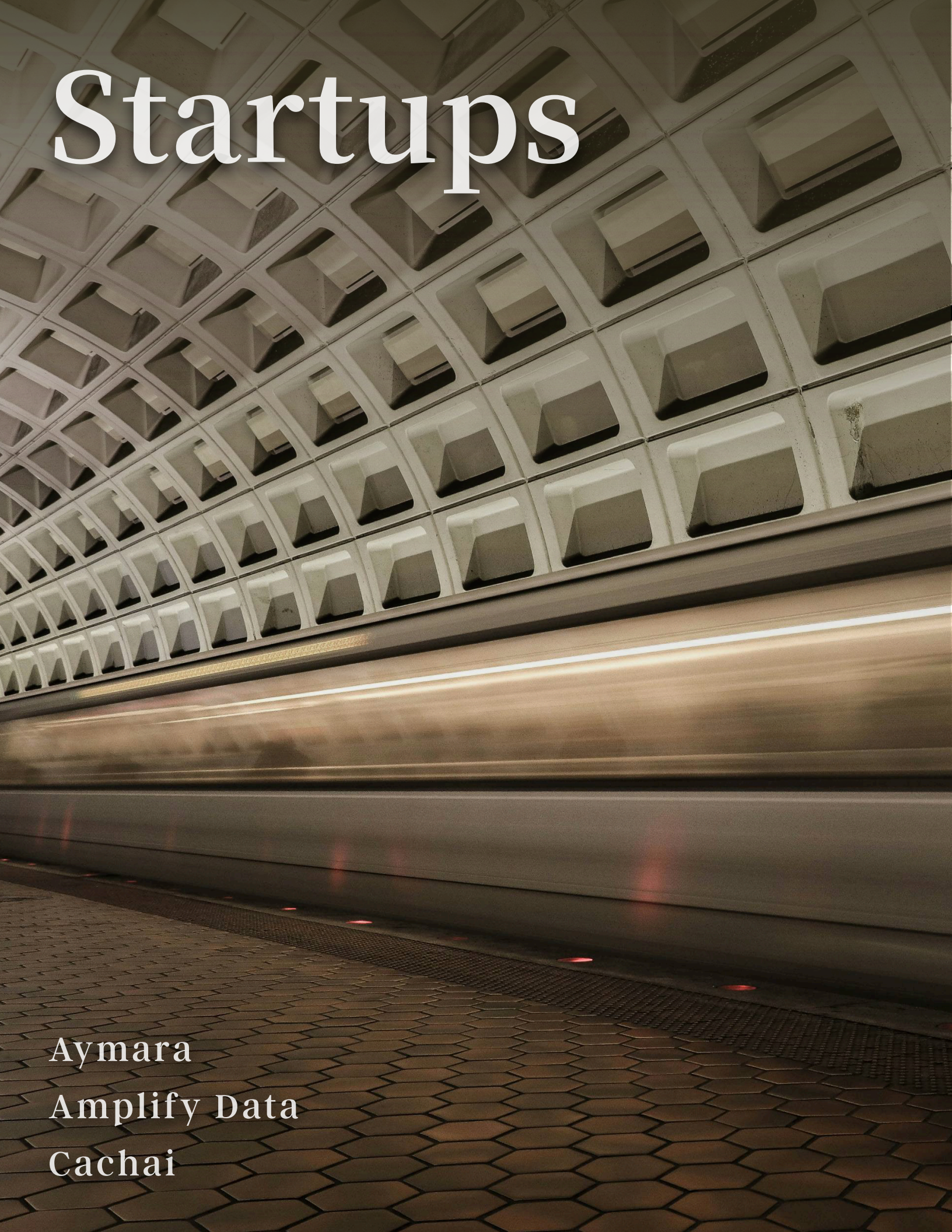
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Startups

Aymara
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Aymara

Redefining AI Safety: How Aymara Is Setting the Standard for Responsible AI

Mission and Technology

Founded in 2023, Aymara is revolutionizing AI safety by providing developers with the tools to mitigate biases, reduce hallucinations, and ensure responsible AI deployment.

As AI adoption grows, companies must navigate the risks associated with large language models (LLMs), from misinformation to ethical concerns. Aymara's platform offers automated red teaming at scale, enabling developers to create safety tests, analyze responses, and receive insights to improve AI reliability.

Unlike traditional AI evaluation tools, Aymara's platform provides science-grade safety assessments, allowing developers to systematically test their AI models for risk factors like bias, hallucinations, and

security vulnerabilities. Early adopters, including a Fortune 50 company and a leading AI model developer, have seen a 96% reduction in unsafe outputs and an 80% decrease in hallucinations, proving its effectiveness.

“AI safety isn't just about preventing harm—it's about building systems that truly understand the world they're shaping.”

Leadership and Vision

Co-founders Juan Manuel Contreras, Ph.D., a cognitive science and AI expert, and Caraline Pellatt, an innovation strategist, have a shared mission to democratize AI safety, making it accessible beyond major tech firms to startups,

enterprises, and regulators.

Aymara's capabilities expand to AI modalities, like text-to-image, audio and video, and multilingual safety assessments in languages such as Spanish and French. By continuously evolving, Aymara aims to set the industry standard for AI safety evaluation.

Strategic Positioning

Aymara operates remotely in Washington, D.C., which offers strategic advantages, particularly its proximity to the federal government. AI safety is increasingly relevant to policymakers, and Aymara is well-positioned to engage with regulators and government agencies as potential partners or customers. However, government procurement cycles can be slow and complex, making private-sector adoption a

Startup

faster route to early traction.

The DC tech community has the potential to foster more AI innovation by strengthening connections between startups, investors, and government stakeholders. Greater collaboration could help AI companies gain the support they need to scale and commercialize their technology.

Growth and Future Outlook

Aymara is looking for customers and strategic partners who are looking to speed their product development with Aymara's dev tools. Unlike many AI startups that seek investment prematurely, Aymara prioritized product development and market validation before raising capital.

AI safety is more than just risk mitigation, it is a form of intelligence itself. As AI systems become more integrated into everyday life, they must learn to respond appropriately based on context, culture, and demographic factors. Aymara aims to lead this movement, ensuring that AI is not just powerful but also responsible and aligned with human values. As the company scales, it remains focused on platform expansion, enterprise adoption, and shaping the future of AI safety through collaboration with policymakers and industry leaders.



Safer, More Accurate genAI.

<https://www.aymara.ai>



Amplify

The Future of Data Exchange Starts with Amplify Data

Founded in 2022, Amplify Data is transforming how businesses share and monetize data. Traditional data-sharing solutions require complex integrations, long approval cycles, and high costs. Amplify Data removes these barriers with a zero-ETL approach, allowing companies to distribute data without APIs, ETL tools, or infrastructure-heavy setups

From Enterprise Expertise to Startup Vision

Co-founder and CTO Ameya Pathare brings extensive experience from Mastercard and Applied Predictive Technologies, where he developed a deep understanding of data-driven decision-making. This corporate background, paired with a startup mindset, has shaped Amplify Data's strategic vision: treating data as a product that solves real business problems.

A Scalable Platform for High-Stakes Industries

Unlike traditional data-sharing platforms, Amplify Data enables seamless, secure, and scalable data exchange without requiring costly engineering work. The platform is ideal for industries like finance, technology, and healthcare, where data distribution is critical but often restricted by compliance and operational bottlenecks.

Communicating Value to Customers and Investors

A key challenge was translating this highly

“At Amplify Data, we treat data like a product - easy to access, secure, and built to solve real business problems. We're making data sharing seamless, without the need for APIs or complex infrastructure.”

technical product into a compelling value proposition for both investors and customers. While customers focus on immediate problem-solving, investors need a broader vision of Amplify Data's potential. By balancing both narratives, the company has successfully carved out a unique, high-value position in the data economy.

Strategic Fundraising and Team Building

Amplify Data raised \$3.5 million in early 2023, closing its first round within months of launching. Unlike many early-stage startups, Amplify Data did not wait for revenue traction before securing funding; investors backed the team and vision first. The company strategically selected VCs experienced in pre-seed investments, ensuring alignment with their long-term goals.

Building a highly technical startup requires hiring talent that balances deep technical expertise with startup agility. Ameya and his team focus on hiring engineers who understand both scalability and security, two core pillars of their platform.

Looking Ahead

Monda, the all-in-one data monetization platform, recently acquired Amplify Data to enhance its customizable data-sharing capabilities for AI applications. This strategic move integrates Amplify's no-code data delivery technology directly into Monda's ecosystem, enabling users to create filtered data products, share them seamlessly across cloud platforms, and monitor usage, all without heavy engineering involvement, while reducing infrastructure costs.



Ameya Pathare

Accelerate Your Data Business

<https://www.amplifydata.io>



Strategic talent matching, a *curated* experience

Hippogriff, Search Partner, matching great candidates with great companies in Logistics, Manufacturing, Construction, and Technology.



Start Hiring



Cachai

Redefining Distributed Systems

From the DoD to Distributed Systems

Emma Bates, founder and CEO of Cachai, is on a mission to change the way businesses think about collaborative autonomy. With her background at the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), Emma noticed a major gap in how autonomous systems were being used, especially in high-security, mission critical environments like defense operations, drones, and ships. She saw firsthand that existing cloud systems weren't flexible, accessible, or user-friendly enough for these complex needs. This inspired her to launch Cachai with her brother, Jesse Bates, to bring a fresh approach to collaborative autonomy.



A Cloud Built for Complexity

At its core, Cachai is all about making complex distributed systems easy to incorporate into existing and planned systems. Its technology productizes key areas of expertise, like consensus-based state management, which aren't available from enough consultants and service providers to meet

emerging demand. What really sets Cachai apart is its ability to offer secure, user-friendly Edge and beyond-Edge solutions for consistency and resilience, without locking clients into the ecosystems of big cloud providers.

Serving the Under Served

In the long run, Cachai is positioning itself as the go-to solution for industries that need secure, independent

“Distributed systems shouldn't be reserved for massive companies with specialized teams. We're making them accessible, secure, and usable for everyone.”

cloud capabilities. Many of these businesses and sensitive organizations feel forced to use mainstream cloud platforms



Deploy at Scale, With Confidence.

<https://www.cachai.io/>

but struggle with control, security, and cost. Cachai offers a great alternative with its easy-to-use, highly secure features. While Cachai has made major strides in developing its technology,

Emma knows that the real challenge now is scaling up. The company is currently bootstrapped, focusing on generating revenue before seeking formal Seed funding. Emma understands that

long-term partnerships are crucial, so her team is focused on not just getting clients onboard, but ensuring they integrate Cachai seamlessly into their broader systems for maximum effect.

Operating Within Washington DC

Operating out of Washington, D.C., Emma is leveraging her strong network and the city's vibrant tech scene to build partnerships and connections. While Cachai's team is spread across the U.S., with Jesse in Houston and Sarah, the VP of Operations, in Denver, D.C. remains a key hub for the company's growth.

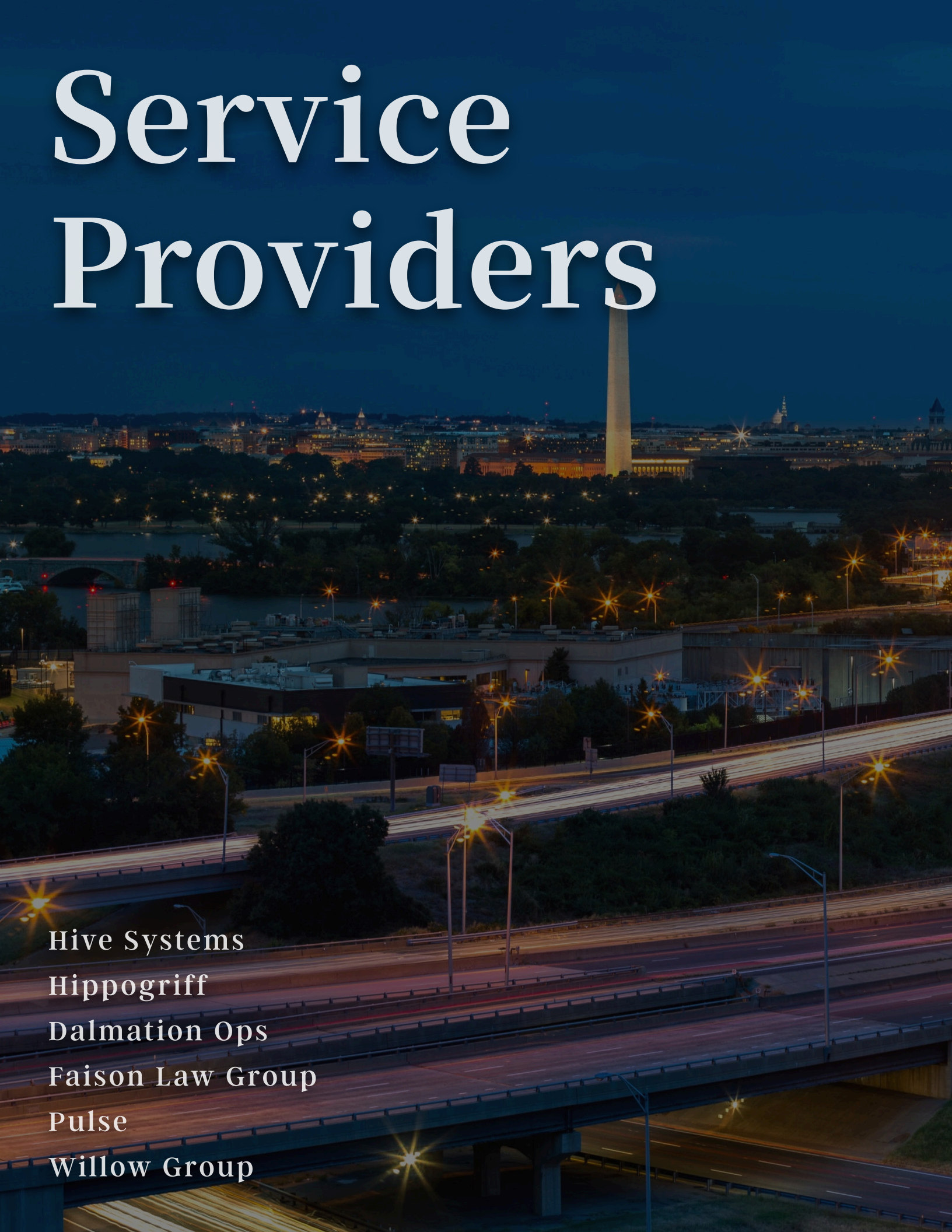
Emma is actively involved in the local startup community, attending events and following up with connections to create lasting relationships. One of her favorite strategies at networking events is organizing business cards in a way that helps her keep track of important follow-ups. She put the cards of people she's especially interested in working with or connecting with again in a specific pocket of her bag, so she can reach out to them afterward with a personal touch.

A Vision for the Future

Looking ahead, Emma sees Cachai becoming a leader in

high-performance distributed computing. The company plans to expand its decentralized cloud offerings, develop private blockchain capabilities, and solidify its reputation as a trusted provider of key cloud capabilities like resilience, consistency, and adaptable collaborative autonomy without dependence on any cloud provider. With a focus on national security and innovation, Emma Bates and Cachai are on track to reshape the future of distributed systems.

Service Providers

A nighttime photograph of Washington D.C. featuring the Washington Monument prominently in the center background. The city lights are visible across the skyline, and a multi-lane highway with light trails from traffic is in the foreground. The overall scene is dark with warm artificial lights from the city and the highway.

Hive Systems

Hippogriff

Dalmation Ops

Faison Law Group

Pulse

Willow Group



Hive Systems

Empowering Startups with Real-World Cybersecurity

Founders on a Mission

Founded by Alex Nette and Michael Cardman, Hive Systems is a cybersecurity firm rooted in a passion for demystifying security and protecting businesses from real-world threats.

Based in the Mid-Atlantic region, Hive Systems supports companies of all sizes, from small startups to Fortune 500 enterprises. With a team of almost 20, Alex and Michael have built Hive Systems into a trusted resource for



Michael Cardman



Alex Nette

“Startups don't need a million-dollar security budget - they need a plan, a few smart moves, and someone they trust to keep the noise out.”

companies that want strong security without falling for industry jargon, "snake oil" solutions, or ineffective quick fixes.

Security Starts Early

Alex and Michael have seen firsthand how startups often rush to scale without thinking about security, leading to vulnerabilities such as unprotected systems, regulatory compliance gaps, and unsecured vendor

partnerships. They emphasize the importance of assessing security needs early, especially when handling sensitive consumer data or pursuing federal contracts. Compliance frameworks like HIPAA and PCI DSS are essential, and startups should work with local

counsel to develop security strategies before they become critical.

Smart Investments, Not Big Budgets

Understanding that many startups operate on lean budgets, Alex and Michael advocate for smart cybersecurity investments, such as risk assessments, third-party audits, rightsized tool selection, and strategic hiring. They stress that cybersecurity doesn't have to be expensive—founders can take simple, effective steps like engaging a cybersecurity architect or integrating security reviews into their development process to prevent costly breaches later on.

Preparing for Growth and Scrutiny

As startups grow, cybersecurity becomes a crucial factor in due diligence for fundraising and acquisitions. Investors and buyers will inquire about past data breaches, making proactive security essential. Alex and Michael encourage startups to balance security with speed by embedding security reviews into their roadmap, ensuring they're prepared for investor scrutiny.

Building a Resilient Community

With deep experience in the DC tech ecosystem, Alex and Michael understand the region's unique cybersecurity challenges, including high hiring costs and complex federal regulations. Many founders assume they're too small to be targeted, but Alex and Michael have seen how even minor security lapses can have major consequences.

Hive Systems isn't just about selling security solutions, it's about empowering founders with the knowledge and tools to protect their businesses. Through meetups, industry events, and leading research, Alex and Michael are building a cybersecurity-conscious startup community, ensuring that companies don't just survive but thrive in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.



Hive Systems

Providing Smarter Cybersecurity Solutions

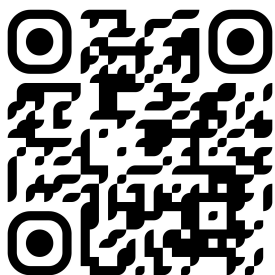
<https://www.hivesystems.com/>





Funding the Future of DC Tech

District Angels is a new kind of investing collective - activating capital, community, and conviction across DC, Maryland, and Virginia. We bring seasoned and first-time angels together to fund the nation's most exciting startups, while building capacity through fellowships, deal flow, and shared learning. **Learn More.**



Learn More, Become a
District Angel



Hippogriff:

Bringing a Human Touch to Startup Hiring

In the often impersonal world of startup recruiting, Alexander Reynolds and his firm, Hippogriff, bring something refreshingly rare: real curiosity, lived-in empathy, and a hands-on approach to matchmaking talent with early-stage companies. A former graphic designer and web developer turned recruiter, Alexander's journey into talent acquisition wasn't planned; it was something he grew into through instinct, conversation, and an innate

“At Hippogriff, recruiting isn't about filling positions—it's about connecting people and opportunities with empathy, honesty, and a human touch. We build trust first, and everything else follows.”

ability to connect the dots between people and opportunity.

Hippogriff was built to serve the kinds of companies that big-name recruiting firms overlook: early-stage and growth-stage startups that need adaptable, emotionally intelligent, mid-level talent who can wear multiple hats. Many of Alexander's clients are



Alexander Reynolds

first-time founders still figuring out what kind of team they need. He works with them from the ground up, often helping define job descriptions, clarify priorities, and identify not just the skill sets but the working styles and personalities that will thrive inside their culture.

Rooted in DC, With a National Perspective

Based in the DMV, Alexander has a unique view of the DC startup market, one that's bubbling with promise but still figuring out how to compete with the likes of New York or San Francisco. He notes that many DC startups are deeply mission-driven, especially

in industries like healthcare, logistics, and govtech, but often make early hiring mistakes, like undervaluing compensation or applying a founder's hustle mindset to salaried employees.

Hippogriff helps founders avoid these traps by getting honest about readiness, compensation, and expectations, all while preserving the ambition that makes startups special.

Unlike firms that rely heavily on automation or AI, Hippogriff is a deliberate and hands-on operation. Alexander's process involves detailed intake conversations, careful sourcing (often from 100+ candidate profiles per role), and thoughtful communication with both candidates and clients. He's less interested in volume than

in nuance, finding that hybrid, mid-senior operator who can both build and speak with investors, who can code and communicate, and who wants to grow with a team rather than just punch in for a paycheck.

People First, Always

What makes Hippogriff stand out isn't a slick platform or proprietary software; it's Alexander's approach. His background in design still shows up in his work: he sees recruiting as creative and human-centered, more about composition and flow than rigid templates. He's candid about fit, willing to walk away from clients who aren't ready to hire or can't offer what the market demands. For him, it's about building trust, not just pipelines.

As remote work and automation reshape hiring norms, Alexander remains committed to keeping the process personal. He uses tools like AI sparingly, preferring real conversations and custom outreach. Whether working with startups in software, logistics, or even construction, his mission remains the same: to help small companies make hires that actually stick and to do it with transparency, empathy, and insight.

In five years, he hopes Hippogriff is known not for scale but for quality, a go-to resource for startups who want to grow their team the right way and for candidates who want to find work that feels both meaningful and sustainable.



Strategic Talent Matching

<https://www.hippogriff.info>





BUSINESS LAW | START UP LAW

EXPERIENCE YOU CAN TRUST.
EXCELLENCE YOU CAN RELY ON.



Faison Law Group LLC provides a repertoire of legal support to business leaders in finance, technology, life science, & general corporate work, including dedicated representation for startups, expanding businesses, and changemakers in non-profit organizations. [Get started.](#)

Dalmatian Ops.

Scaling Smarter: How Ann Marie Guzzi Builds Operational Foundations for Startups



Ann Marie Guzzi

Ann Marie Guzzi is the founder of Dalmatian Ops, a boutique operations consultancy that lets VC-backed pre-seed and seed-stage founders focus on sales & product by taking over their operations. She also helps run the DC Tech Meetup, is a co-founder of The Agora Initiative, writes small angel checks (mostly fintech, analytics, and B2B SaaS), and is an amateur potter at the Eastern Market Pottery Studio.

Career Path and Inspiration for Dalmatian Ops

Ann Marie started Dalmatian Ops after spending several years in product roles in other VC-backed technology companies (Applied Predictive Technologies, Koalafi), as well as on the new product development team at

Mastercard. Having consistently ended up on teams launching new products, she found herself being drawn earlier and earlier in the startup lifecycle - ultimately leading to her desire to work with not just one, but many high-caliber pre-seed and seed founders through Dalmatian Ops. Dalmatian runs back office and business operations for founders and helps them navigate key

“I'm not here to write your strategy—I'm here to make sure you have the operational backbone to execute it.”

inflection points in their businesses. Her impact is evident in past engagements, such as a client whose recent successful exit was expedited due to a well-structured finance

and operations system, reducing due diligence time.

Philosophy on Founders' Ownership and Strategic Support

That being said, Ann Marie takes a firm stance on ownership for founders: early-stage founders that she works with must own their sales, go-to-market, and product strategies. Instead of offering direct growth strategy services, she ensures that operational functions, especially customer support, are structured to enhance customer acquisition and retention. Ann Marie is also positioned to serve as an invaluable sounding board to the founders she supports on adjacent topics such as fundraising, storytelling, and

product strategy, given her position within the startups she works with and her past experience.

Building Community and Advocating for Underestimated

As a community builder in the DC tech ecosystem, Ann Marie believes the ecosystem is primed for growth but suffers from a lack of visibility. She sees D.C.'s "big small town" vibe as an advantage, allowing founders to access key connections more easily than they might in New York or San Francisco. She is also a strong advocate for underestimated founders, particularly female entrepreneurs & founders coming from non-traditional backgrounds.

Commitment to Execution and Long-Term Founder Success

Ann Marie started Dalmatian Ops to help founders execute, not just ideate. She takes on a select portfolio of clients at any given time, working with them for 12-18 months before helping them find a long-term operational leader as they scale beyond fractional support. Her success is measured by founders gaining clarity, focus, and more time to build and sell. With a deep-rooted passion for entrepreneurship, Ann Marie continues to shape the startup landscape by providing fractional operational leadership and guiding founders through the complexities of scaling their businesses.

Dalmatian Ops

Stop Fighting Fires. Start Focusing.

<https://www.dalmatianops.com/>



Faison Law

Legal Strategy Grounded in Startup Experience



James Faison didn't come into startup law through the traditional route, he built a venture-backed company first. James learned the startup grind firsthand after launching and leading a consumer packaged goods brand that partnered with family-owned farms and distributed to retailers and restaurants across the East Coast. When COVID wiped out key revenue channels and closed his business, he returned to his legal roots with a new perspective that understood both the emotional toll and operational complexity of growing a business from the ground up.

That lived experience informs everything about Faison Law Group, the boutique firm he founded to support early-stage companies with high-caliber legal services. Built on a

foundation of deep legal training, James is a Harvard College and UVA Law graduate who started his career at global firm White & Case, the firm blends elite legal rigor with startup pragmatism.

Focused, Affordable, and Founder-Friendly

Faison Law Group is designed specifically for emerging

“We're not just another legal vendor; we're a strategic partner for founders who want to build things right the first time.”

companies that need excellent legal counsel without the overhead of a traditional big firm. With a team of attorneys who all bring top-tier credentials and experience, the

firm offers expert advice on matters like business formation, fundraising, contracts, equity structure, and intellectual property, at rates early-stage clients can realistically afford.

The firm doesn't try to do everything. They intentionally avoid litigation, antitrust, and other large-scale corporate practices in order to stay laser-focused on the legal issues that matter most to startups. This targeted approach allows them to maintain long-term relationships with clients, many of whom stay with the firm well beyond their first raise or incorporation.

Deep Roots in the DMV Startup Ecosystem

Operating out of the DC region, Faison Law Group works across

Service Provider

a wide range of sectors, from cybersecurity firms in Northern Virginia to life sciences startups in Baltimore and biotech ventures in Montgomery County. While their reach is national, the firm's presence in the DMV gives them unique insight into the regulatory, fundraising, and intellectual property considerations that often arise for startups in proximity to federal institutions and government agencies.

The firm also offers guidance for founders who don't intend to raise venture capital. Many of their clients are building strong, cash-flow-positive companies that won't follow the traditional VC path. Faison Law Group helps these teams navigate structure and growth in a way that's tailored to their business model, not someone else's blueprint.

Built For Scale, Not Size

Rather than chasing headcount, Faison Law Group focuses on high-value work per attorney. With a lean, remote-first team of seven, they emphasize quality over volume, leveraging technology, efficient processes, and deep experience to take on large transactions and complex legal needs without adding unnecessary overhead.

The firm is increasingly expanding into areas like crypto, NFTs, and digital assets, anticipating a resurgence in demand as regulatory landscapes shift. But at its core, the mission remains

consistent: deliver clear, candid legal support that helps startups grow with confidence.

Faison Law Group isn't just another legal vendor, it's a strategic partner for founders who want to build things right the first time.



Excellence You Can Rely On.

<https://faisonlawgroup.com>



James Faison

Pulse Marketing

Washington DC's Premier Marketing & Design Firm

Founders and Philosophy

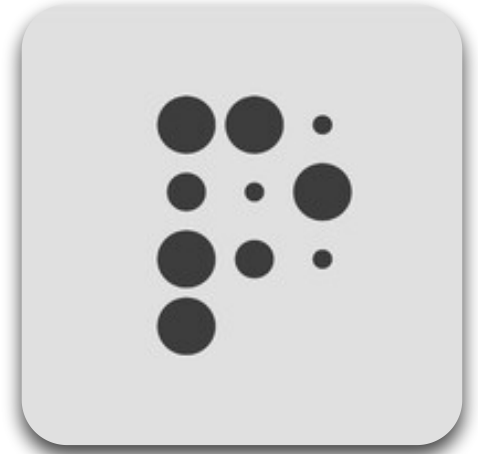
Founded by Kevin Lee and Austin Sandler, Pulse is a strategic marketing partner for early-stage and scaling tech startups, helping them define their brand, refine their positioning, and build demand-driven growth strategies. Pulse specializes in turning complex technology into compelling, scalable marketing narratives.

Kevin, a branding and business strategist with a background from the Parsons School of Design, brings a creative yet data-driven approach to marketing. Austin, an entrepreneur with a decade of experience in digital marketing and business development, has been actively involved in the D.C. tech ecosystem, fostering growth and community engagement. Together, they have built Pulse for startups looking to establish strong market positioning and sustainable growth.

Solving Strategic and Operational Marketing Challenges

Many tech startups struggle with unclear messaging, over-reliance on paid ads, misalignment between sales and marketing, and a lack of SEO and content strategy. Pulse helps startups avoid these pitfalls by refining value propositions, optimizing branding consistency, and ensuring marketing aligns with business goals.

Pulse takes a research-driven



approach to helping startups differentiate themselves in competitive markets. Through customer insights, positioning workshops, and brand narrative development, they craft messaging that resonates and scales. They also guide startups through different growth stages, from early traction to enterprise expansion, ensuring marketing evolves alongside the company.



Washington DC's Premier Marketing Firm

<https://wearepulse.com/dc/>

Positioned for Growth in a Competitive Market

Washington, D.C. presents unique opportunities for tech startups, particularly in government, enterprise solutions, and policy-driven innovation. Pulse understands the advantages of operating in D.C., from access to federal contracts to a thriving B2B environment, and helps startups navigate the long sales cycles and investor landscape of the region.

As startups grow, Pulse ensures marketing strategies support not only customer acquisition but also investor confidence. By tracking key financial metrics (CAC, LTV, retention), developing investor-focused messaging, and integrating organic and paid marketing efforts, they help startups build brand equity and position for acquisition.

“Pulse ensures marketing strategies support not only customer acquisition but also investor confidence.”

Pulse continues to evolve its marketing approach, emphasizing data-driven strategies, omnichannel demand generation, and brand storytelling as a competitive advantage. Whether through thought leadership, community engagement, or scalable digital campaigns, Pulse ensures that tech startups stand out in a crowded market and achieve long-term success.



Kevin Cezar Lee



Austin Sandler

Dennis Quinn & the Willow Group

Bridging AI, Insight, and Infrastructure

Dennis Quinn's path into AI entrepreneurship doesn't follow the typical Silicon Valley blueprint. With a background in Arabic, political science, and data science, his career has spanned academia, global development, and large-scale research initiatives. After leading innovative data projects at the Pew Research Center, including a nationwide machine learning initiative to analyze live-streamed sermons, Quinn took a detour through the venture capital ecosystem in Jordan, then came back to the States to launch something of his own.

That "something" is the Willow Group, an AI software studio providing fractional access to machine learning engineers and data scientists. Founded to serve an unmet need, Willow helps both pre-seed startups and mid-sized companies integrate meaningful AI solutions without hiring full in-house teams. The company's success stems not just from its technical prowess, but from Quinn's

deeply practical understanding of how founders think and what keeps them up at night.

Fractional, Flexible, and Founder-Friendly

Unlike his previous ventures, which faced long sales cycles and unclear markets, Quinn knew Willow would solve a specific, urgent problem. "I started a business that solves a problem people stay up at night worrying about," he explained. Many of Willow's



Dennis Quinn

“As the technical side becomes more commoditized, the real differentiator is trust, product sense, and relationship-building.”

clients are startup founders sitting on mounds of valuable data but lacking the technical firepower to act on it. Others are mid-sized enterprises, founder-led companies in the 100–500 employee range, ready

founder-led companies in the 100–500 employee range, ready to embrace AI but unsure where to start.

The Willow model is intentionally lean and accessible: teams are remote, spread across Latin America and Eastern Europe, and projects are structured to give clients flexibility, whether they need ongoing engineering help or short-term strategic advice. The firm's flat-retainer approach allows its engineers to invest extra time and creativity without red tape, building high-impact tools while staying agile.

The Right Size for Scale

Quinn isn't chasing scale for scale's sake. Willow maintains a core portfolio of three to five clients at a time, prioritizing quality over growth. That's intentional: Quinn envisions the Willow Group as a long-term platform that provides autonomy, freedom, and optionality, especially if he decides to return to building a startup of his own. Most clients stick around; roll-offs are rare. It's a dynamic that speaks to Willow's value

and Quinn's ability to plug in at critical stages of a company's lifecycle.

Building AI in the Capital

While Willow is headquartered in D.C., Quinn admits the nature of AI work often transcends geography. Still, he's deeply embedded in the local tech ecosystem, attending events, investing as an angel, and advising founders across the region. D.C., he says, is tightly connected, even if it's not yet a primary tech hub. That intimacy is an advantage for those who know how to tap into it.

The policy landscape, however, remains uncertain. Quinn notes that recent budget cuts and financial retrenchments are reshaping the environment for tech companies, especially those reliant on government funding. Still, he sees talent flowing from public to private sectors, bringing valuable experience into the AI startup space.



We Get You from Zero to One

<https://willowgroup.ai/>

The Future of AI, According to Willow

As AI tools become easier to use, Quinn sees a shift: the technical barrier is falling, and the real premium is now on product leadership and creative application. Anyone can now spin up an AI prototype, but the challenge is finding the right problem to solve and having the trust to move quickly. That's where Willow thrives.

In the years ahead, Quinn expects the firm to expand its focus into middle-market companies and more complex data challenges, including geospatial analytics and probabilistic modeling. He's also excited about using AI for go-to-market strategies and lead generation, areas where automation can directly influence revenue and growth.

Willow Group

agora

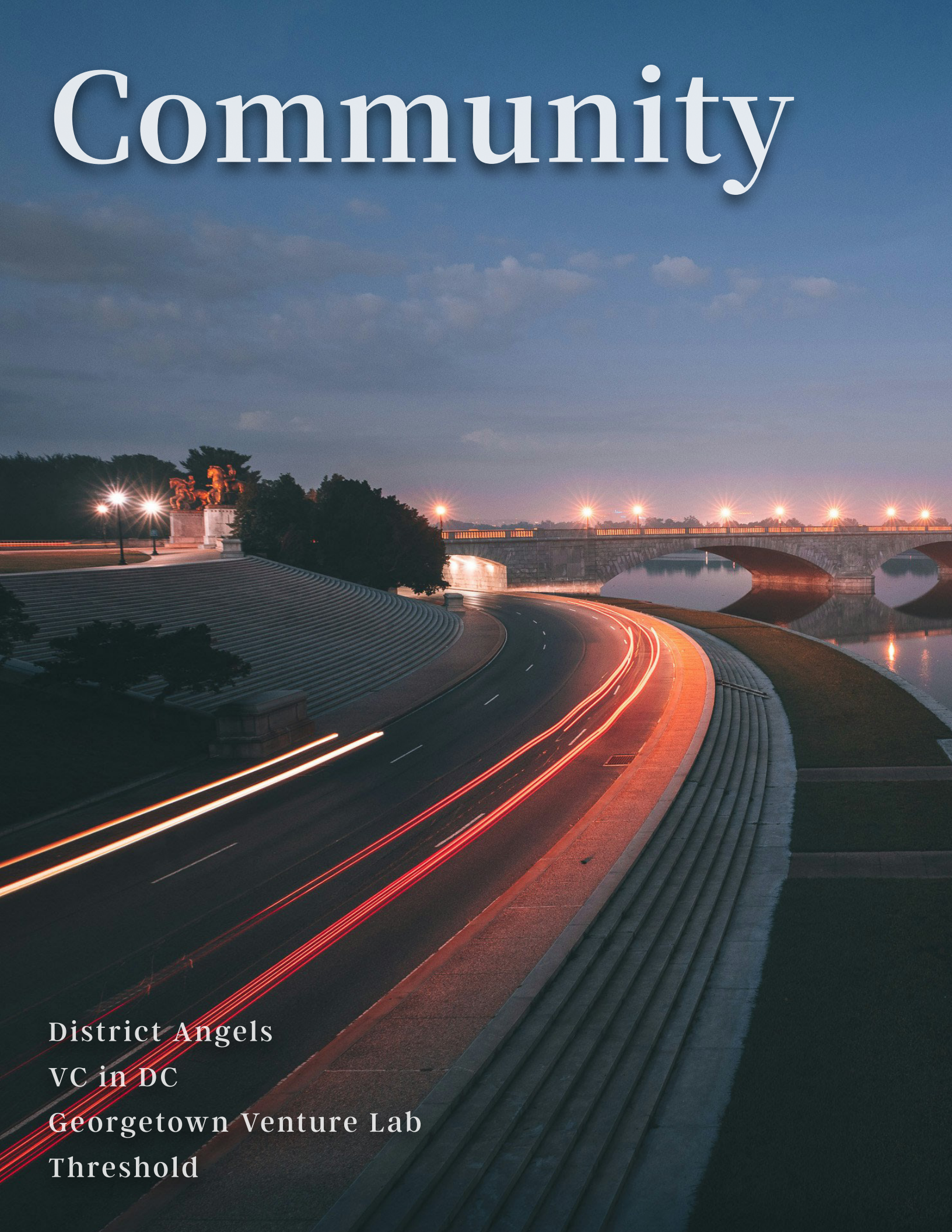
Where female founders in the DMV meet to access capital, community, and connections



The Agora Initiative puts female founders at the center of the conversation, gathering the top business and tech influencers in the DMV to help women found, fund and scale their startups. [Get involved.](#)



Community

A long-exposure photograph of a city street at night. The foreground shows a curved road with bright orange and red light trails from moving vehicles. To the left of the road are wide, curved concrete steps. In the background, a stone bridge with multiple arches spans a body of water, illuminated by streetlights. The sky is a deep blue with some clouds.

District Angels

VC in DC

Georgetown Venture Lab

Threshold

District Angels

A New Kind of Investing Collective

District Angels was born out of a realization that the DC startup ecosystem needed a new kind of energy, one that could awaken the regions dormant capital, support early-stage founders with more than just checks, and make angel investing more accessible to new investors eager

to get involved. The syndicate was co-founded by Naviya Kothari and is co-led by Blaire Rowe Rakowicz, both of whom bring deep experience in finance, impact investing, and venture communities.

Their shared vision was simple but powerful: to

Virginia, and to create a cohesive network that supports innovation across the DMV with intention and infrastructure.

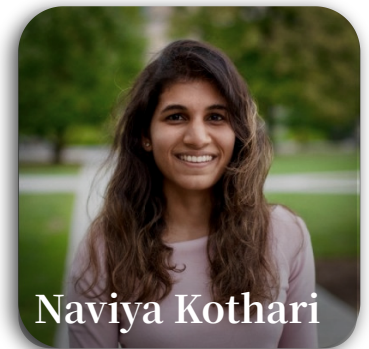
A Syndicate Built on Access and Community

Blaire, who moved to the area after years in global finance, quickly recognized both the talent and the gaps in the local venture landscape. She saw that while the region had many smart, hungry founders and a growing tech scene, it lacked a strong, connected angel community to support them.

After discovering an emerging group of DC-based angels through an online search, what began as a

group of DC-based angels through an online search, what began as a curiosity turned into a leadership opportunity. Rather than simply joining the community, Blaire leaned into helping Naviya build District Angels. Together with Founding Managing Director, Sriram Gollapalli, and their team, they are creating a syndicate that would not only fund startups but also serve as a connective hub for for talent, capital, and knowledge.

What sets District Angels apart is its approach to who gets to be an investor. The team is committed to democratizing angel investing by welcoming



those who are just getting started. Rather than gatekeeping, they focus on education, support, and community. Newer investors are supported by a network of seasoned angels and a standout fellowship program. The fellowship draws in ambitious, research-driven young professionals, often recent grads or industry-switchers, who support the diligence process while building their own investing chops. It's a system that benefits everyone: Angels get detailed insights without needing to spend hours on research, and fellows gain access, mentorship, and experience.

Flexibility for Angels, Access for Founders

The syndicate is also deliberately structured to be flexible and low-pressure. With many members juggling demanding careers and life responsibilities, the group leans on virtual meetings, asynchronous deal reviews, and a strong culture of collaboration. For founders, this flexibility means they can pitch and connect without needing to travel, and for angels, it offers a way to engage asynchronous deal reviews, and a strong culture of collaboration. For founders, this flexibility means they can pitch and connect without needing to travel, and for angels, it offers a way to engage meaningfully without overcommitting. This model has proven especially valuable in the DMV, where traffic, time zones, and the demands of return-to-office culture can otherwise limit participation.

Though District Angels is industry-agnostic, they're drawn to problem-solvers, founders with grit and clarity who are building businesses with long-term potential. There's a strong appreciation for DC-based companies, but the group's network is increasingly national in scope, with relationships spanning the country and growing interest from global investors.

The syndicate's internal newsletter and ongoing events keep the broader investor community in the loop and drive momentum around their

“There's so much untapped energy in this region. We're here to connect it - capital, talent, and vision - all in one place.”

work. The team has also started exploring opportunities to expand their virtual programming and deepen relationships with other syndicates, accelerators, and funds.

Meeting the Moment in a Changing Market

As the DC innovation economy continues to mature, District Angels is seeing notable shifts in founder behavior. Startups are staying leaner for longer, often bootstrapping or turning to non-dilutive capital before approaching angels. With AI and blockchain tools becoming more

accessible, teams are able to stretch their resources and reach early traction before raising. The bar for angel investment has shifted, with many investors now looking for post-revenue companies and more solid traction. But rather than deterring activity, these shifts have clarified what it means to back a good founder early: the emphasis is on clarity, capability, and commitment, traits that District Angels is well positioned to identify.

Advice for New Angels: Start Together

For first-time angels thinking about jumping in, both Blaire and Naviya offer simple advice: start with people you trust. It's okay to begin cautiously and build conviction slowly, but you won't learn without doing. Investing alongside others provides a sounding board, shared diligence, and emotional confidence, especially in a space where risk is inherent.

District Angels creates that space. It makes angel investing more transparent, more collaborative, and ultimately more fulfilling.

Looking ahead, the team sees a strong opportunity to continue shaping the DMV's startup scene by not only deploying capital but by anchoring a real community. As more startups emerge and investors take notice, District Angels is committed to remaining a steady, intentional force, building bridges, backing builders, and helping turn this growing ecosystem into one that's sustainable, inclusive, and thriving.



Funding the Future of DC Tech

<https://www.districtangels.com>



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Pulse is a branding and marketing agency built for visionary brands ready to make their mark. We work at the intersection of identity, strategy, and execution, helping businesses create meaningful brand foundations and marketing systems that drive measurable results.

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DC Tech and Venture Coalition

Building the Backbone of D.C.'s Tech Future

Kevin Morgan's path to becoming a central figure in Washington, D.C.'s innovation ecosystem has been anything but conventional. With experience spanning entrepreneurship, economic development, and consulting on Capitol Hill, Morgan brings a systems-level perspective to tech community building in the District. Today, he serves as Vice President of Tech Sector Attraction and Retention at a public-private economic partnership, while also leading one of the city's most ambitious innovation initiatives: the DC Tech & Venture Coalition (DCTAV).

Empowering the Ecosystem, Not Controlling It

The idea for DCTAV was born

from years of grassroots engagement. After countless conversations with founders, investors, and ecosystem players, Morgan saw a need for a unifying force that wouldn't centralize control but enable others to lead. DCTAV was created as a nonprofit "venture studio" for ecosystem builders, providing backend support like legal services, accounting, marketing, and fundraising. Rather than direct every

“Our motto is simple: You succeed, we succeed. We exist to elevate the people and initiatives that make this ecosystem thrive.”

initiative, it partners with those already doing good work to help them scale or fills critical gaps by launching new programs.



Rebuilding Community and Culture Post-Pandemic

One of DCTAV's flagship efforts has been reviving the once-thriving DC Tech Meetup, which had gone dormant since 2019. Relaunched in 2023 under the coalition's guidance, the meetup is now a symbol of accessibility and community rebuilding. It serves as a space where anyone, from first-time founders to seasoned investors, can plug into D.C.'s growing innovation scene. This kind of inclusive infrastructure is

innovation scene. This kind of inclusive infrastructure is central to DCTAV's approach.

A Regional Anchor with Global Vision

Though DCTAV is rooted in Washington, D.C., its ambitions stretch far beyond city limits. Morgan envisions the region as a unified tech hub capable of competing with Austin, Atlanta, and New York. By breaking down barriers between the District, Maryland, and Virginia, DCTAV seeks to foster regional cohesion and amplify collective impact. The coalition itself is not designed to expand nationally but to support companies and initiatives that do, with D.C. remaining their home base and launchpad.

Strategic Growth in a Shifting Landscape

With changing public funding priorities and rising interest in dual-use technologies, Morgan sees significant opportunities and challenges ahead. DCTAV is doubling down on identifying sustainable, non-dilutive funding streams and building strong public-private partnerships, especially in sectors like national security, frontier tech, and digital

innovation. At the same time, the coalition works closely with universities and student-driven initiatives to nurture the next generation of leaders.

A Startup for Startups

In many ways, DCTAV is still a startup itself. Morgan readily admits they're experimenting, learning, and evolving. Some initiatives work well; others require adjustment. But through it all, the coalition stays focused

on long-term impact, community empowerment, and thoughtful scale.

His advice to entrepreneurs in D.C. reflects that same balance of idealism and realism: build relationships, protect your reputation, and stay focused on value. In a city where the tech community is small but interconnected, the way you operate matters, and DCTAV is quietly but powerfully shaping the space to help everyone win.



For DC Tech, By DC Tech

<https://www.dctav.co/>



Dalmatian Ops

Stop fighting fires. Start focusing.

We help early-stage startup founders stay focused and move faster by taking care of business. Startups are stressful - stress about the right stuff. **Get in touch.**



Ann Marie Guzzi

Dalmatian Ops' founder has experience in high growth start-ups, product management, B2B and B2B2C environments, & angel investing

Leonsis Venture Lab - Georgetown Entrepreneurship

Ready to Help You and Your Startup Create the Future

Coaching the Next Generation of Mission-Driven Founders

Jacob Stiglitz has spent his career at the intersection of entrepreneurship, education, and global impact. Before landing at Georgetown's Leonsis Family Venture Lab, his journey spanned continents, working with startups, edtech ventures, and nonprofits across Mongolia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand.

His roles ranged from co-founder to strategist to researcher, but the common thread was

always the same: building systems that empower others to grow. Today, he applies that same mindset to advising founders, running incubator programs, and building community inside Georgetown's downtown Venture Lab. As Director of Venture Development, Jacob leads the programming that supports early-stage founders

across the Georgetown network. Housed in a WeWork near Capitol Hill, the Venture Lab is part incubator, part co-working space, and part community. It currently supports around 20 startups at varying stages, each tackling various problems, from health equity and ethical sourcing to AI-powered podcasting. Most have a strong social or civic

lens, a reflection of Georgetown's mission and the kind of founders the lab attracts.

An Operator's Perspective on Startup Growth

Jacob's own startup experience deeply informs how he advises the Lab's entrepreneurs. Whether helping founders validate their ideas, build MVPs,



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
LEONSIS VENTURE LAB

“Empowering founders to tackle real-world problems with persistence, collaboration, and a clear sense of purpose, while building a community that supports meaningful growth.”



Create the Future

<https://eship.georgetown.edu/venture-lab/>



or prep for pitch competitions like Bark Tank, his coaching style is practical, honest, and human. He encourages founders to start with problems, not solutions, and emphasizes the importance of testing early, asking for help, and avoiding perfectionism. In his words, the most successful founders are persistent, collaborative, and unafraid to admit what they don't know.

The Venture Lab's layered mentorship model includes Entrepreneurs in Residence (experienced operators who offer ongoing coaching) and Experts on Call for targeted, one-off advice. Jacob sits at the center of it all, offering founder support, managing programs, and serving as a connector between Georgetown, the DC tech ecosystem, and a growing bench of alumni founders.

Scaling Support, Not Just Space

While Georgetown isn't known for technical entrepreneurship, the Lab has steadily grown its reputation for values-driven innovation. Jacob is focused on deepening this impact, curating a tighter, more milestone-oriented community of startups and increasing collaboration across universities and accelerators in the region. As demand grows, the Venture Lab is also refining how long companies stay, ensuring the space continues to serve early-stage founders in active development.

Looking ahead, Jacob sees AI as a game-changer, particularly for young, resource-limited entrepreneurs who can now prototype and test faster than ever. He expects a new wave of builders to emerge in the coming years, as tools become more accessible and startup barriers drop. But for now, the Venture Lab continues to be a hands-on, founder-first space, committed to helping good people build impactful companies and offering the guidance, community, and momentum they need to do it well.

Find Your Threshold

Rethinking Startup Leadership in the Nation's Capital

Brendan Whitaker didn't set out to build a leadership platform in Washington, D.C., but after years of working in foreign direct investment consulting with municipalities, he began to notice a disconnect: while most cities around the world focused on technical, on-the-ground support for founders, D.C. startups were operating in a politically saturated but structurally misaligned environment.

It lacked the kind of leadership development infrastructure that aligned with its unique advantage as the nation's capital. That's where Threshold was born.

A New Kind of Founder Support Platform

Threshold, formally launched in January 2025, is an emerging leadership and ecosystem support platform designed specifically for early-stage tech founders navigating the complex, multi-jurisdictional world of D.C. and the broader DMV region.

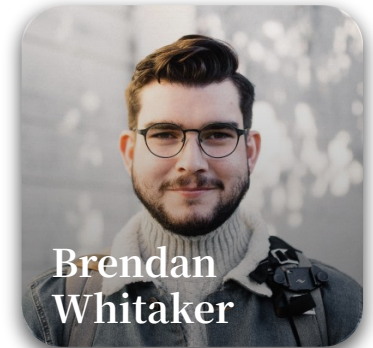
With its tagline, Step Beyond the

Status Quo, the organization helps founders identify and overcome the unseen barriers—structural, political, or relational—that often hold back high-potential ventures.

“We're not here to help founders just scale vertically, we help them unlock opportunities that didn't exist before by leveraging the unique political and relational dynamics of D.C.”

Navigating the Political Gameboard

For Whitaker, D.C. is more than



Brendan
Whitaker

a tech hub; it's a stage for influence. While other cities focus on vertical scaling, he believes founders in D.C. must learn to operate in three dimensions: growing their business, managing local policy landscapes, and positioning themselves for regional and national impact.

Threshold helps its members navigate this gameboard by guiding them toward high-leverage relationships, ecosystem partnerships, and stakeholder engagement opportunities that wouldn't be obvious on a traditional startup playbook.

Breaking Down DMV Fragmentation

Threshold also tackles one of the DMV region's most persistent challenges: fragmentation. With startups often siloed within the boundaries of D.C., Maryland, or Virginia, many founders find themselves isolated from valuable resources or investor networks just a few miles away. Whitaker believes these silos weaken D.C.'s potential as a globally connected innovation capital, and Threshold's model is explicitly designed to bridge them.

A Mindset of Stakeholder Capitalism

The platform emphasizes what Whitaker calls "stakeholder capitalism," a mindset that encourages founders to consider the broader network of actors who influence their success—from regulators and nonprofit partners to city agencies and advocacy groups. Startups in D.C., he argues, can't afford to ignore this reality, and those who learn to engage it effectively will be the ones that endure and scale.

Early Momentum and Grassroots Growth

Currently, the team is organizing a DMV-wide Small Business Week initiative and preparing larger public activations that will raise the profile of the region's tech leaders while deepening local engagement. Much of the early traction has been through word-of-mouth and grassroots partnerships with groups like US Ignite and the DC Public Library, reflecting the platform's coalition-building ethos.

The logo for Threshold, featuring the word "Threshold" in a bold, sans-serif font with a trademark symbol, set against a yellow square background.

Threshold™

Building Entrepreneur Community

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/findyourthreshold/about/>



Want to be featured?

Beltway Bits is a quarterly digest of the DMV's thriving tech scene.



We're always looking to spotlight local innovators, startups, developers, and ideas shaping the region.

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