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Celebrating Black History Month: Entrepreneurs Make a Pitch for Funding at Silicon Valley Accelerator Program Graduation

Virtual pitch day on Feb. 25 to spotlight 16 Black entrepreneurs and Black-owned businesses

SILICON VALLEY, CA - In celebration of Black History Month, Silicon Valley-based nonprofit African Diaspora Network (ADN) will honor 16 entrepreneurs from across the nation as the inaugural graduates of their Accelerating Black Leadership and Entrepreneurship (ABLE) program. On February 25, 2022, ADN will partner with the Silicon Valley Executive Center at the Santa Clara University (SCU) Leavey School of Business to host a graduation and “pitch day” to invite the Silicon Valley investment and philanthropic communities to support Black-owned businesses. Details of this online event can be found at bit.ly/ABLE-Graduation-2022.

“We are so pleased to see the missions of ADN and SCU align around social justice to help Africans and the African Diaspora,” said **Agnieszka Winkler**, ADN Board Member and SCU Trustee. “This much needed program will provide mentorship, community building, and access to resources for Black entrepreneurs based in the United States. Congratulations to the inaugural ABLE cohort as we continue to explore ways to strengthen communities of color in the U.S., Africa, and around the world.”

Research shows that Black startups receive only 1% of venture capital funding, at least in part because of systemic inequities and unconscious bias on the part of investors. For example, Black nonprofits receive 8% of the funding compared to their white peers. Yet despite historic disadvantages in building wealth and incomes, Black entrepreneurs have managed to create [4.7 million jobs](#) in the last decade alone.¹

Recognizing a unique opportunity to match this potential with Silicon Valley’s spirit of diversity and innovation, ADN convened a cadre of major stakeholders to launch ABLE, an enterprise accelerator designed to strengthen, energize, and support small businesses and nonprofit organizations led by Black entrepreneurs. Modeled after ADN’s Builders of Africa’s Future accelerator for grassroots African entrepreneurs, ABLE uses a six-month executive education program, mentorship, and networking to expand economic pathways and advance Black-led entrepreneurial efforts.

ADN oversaw program development and implementation in 2021 with help from academic partners at the Silicon Valley Executive Center, lead funding from Bill.com, seed funding from the Silicon Valley

¹ <https://www.sbc.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/minorityentrepreneurs>

Community Foundation and additional funding partners at the California Black Freedom Fund, KLA Foundation, and the County of Santa Clara.

“My admiration for entrepreneurs and the businesses they start began as a kid growing up in and around small and medium-sized businesses,” said **René Lacerte**, CEO and Founder of Bill.com, a Silicon Valley leader in helping businesses streamline their financial workflow. “The risk of putting yourself out there each and every day for others is always present and deserves to be both respected and celebrated.”

A program advisory committee helped select the inaugural ABLE cohort, which is composed of 16 for-profit and nonprofit organizations in diverse sectors, including education, healthcare, finance, renewable energy, and connectivity, and at various funding stages, from pre-funding to series B (see below for a complete list). The initial round of entrepreneurs includes **Shasha Jumbe**, Co-Founder & CEO of Level 42AI, an early-stage digital diagnostics intelligence company.

“Being a startup founder can be very lonely, to say the least,” said Jumbe. “Immediate family and friends find your bodily presence and mental absence disquieting, your target customer feels the pain but does not quite have the process in place to scratch the itch, funders see great potential but don't want to be first, and just to make things interesting, add a dollop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The desire of organizational leaders following a shared calling to deliver a variety of sustainable solutions to our communities is contagious and uplifting, and the intelligence, talent, and determination to push, break, or extinguish personal and societal barriers is invigorating.”

“The ABLE program is a critical step toward creating economic and growth opportunities for Black entrepreneurs in the U.S.” said program advisory committee member **Helen Kim**, who serves as Strategy & Operations for Engineering, Product & Design at Pinterest. “It was amazing to see the innovation across sectors from all of the applicants. I look forward to seeing these entrepreneurs and their businesses flourish and I’m thrilled to be on this journey together with ADN.”

The ABLE program invites program mentors, ecosystem partners, venture capitalists, angel and impact investors, and leaders of foundations, banks, and other financial institutions to join the February 25 pitch day and learn about the work and impact of the entrepreneurs. For more information, please contact info@africandiasporanetwork.org. Learn more about the ABLE program and the inaugural cohort [here](#).

“I give my heartfelt congratulations to the entrepreneurs on this achievement,” said **Almaz Negash**, Founder and Executive Director of ADN. “Each was selected for their unique solution to a community need and demonstrated sustainability of their enterprise through the pandemic, with goals to scale that aligned with the ABLE program offerings. A special thank you to our funders for making this possible.”

Meet the inaugural ABLE cohort...

- Michael Akindele, Founder, [Surplus](#) (Washington, DC)
- Melanie Akwule, Founder & CEO, [MINWO](#) (Woodbridge, VA)
- Quilen Blackwell, President, [Southside Blooms](#) (Chicago, IL)

- William Bill Coe, Director & CEO, [Green Acres Urban Farm and Research Project](#) (Kansas City, MO)
- Laura Crandon, Founder and President, [Touch4Life, Inc.](#) (Clarksville, MD)
- VanNessa Duckett, Founder, [Polite Piggy's Day Camp, Inc.](#) (Washington, DC)
- Kristal Hansley, CEO, [WeSolar](#) (Baltimore, MD)
- Tonya Hicks, Founder & President, [Women Do Everything LLC](#) (Atlanta, GA)
- Dr. Christophe E. Jackson, CEO, [Gideon MedTech](#) (Atlanta, GA, Birmingham, AL & New Orleans, LA)
- NL. Shasha Jumbe, CEO & Co-Founder, [Level 42 AI, Inc.](#) (Mountain View, CA)
- Dr. Nehemiah Mabry, Founder and CEO of [STEMedia](#) (Raleigh, NC)
- Akissi Stokes, CEO & Co-Founder, [WUNDERgrubs, LLC](#) (Atlanta, GA)
- Mike Tadesse, Founder, [HappyPlate](#) (Washington, DC)
- Jay Veal, M. Ed., CEO, [INC Education](#) (Frisco, TX)
- Dana Weeks, Co-Founder & CEO, [MedTrans Go](#) (Atlanta, GA)
- Jared Wilson, Chief Innovation Officer, [ABCD & Company](#) (Rockville, MD)

What ABLE Entrepreneurs are saying...

“It is showing me how to craft my business into a form that is taken more seriously and highly fundable.”

- Dr. Nehemiah Mabry, Founder and CEO, STEMedia

“Being a member of the inaugural ABLE cohort was serendipitous. The program surfaced at a time we were evaluating how we could become more impactful domestically and more intentional globally as a company. From reading materials, workshops, and live exercises to mentoring, 1:1s, and peer exchange, we gained invaluable experience and gleaned vital expertise on how to pivot our business for success. Our company being selected as a 2022 backed Techstars Social Impact Accelerator was evidence of the effect the program had.”

- Akissi Stokes, CEO & Co-Founder, WunderGrubs

“ABLE was the missing link for me. I realized that I know children and programming on the professional level, but I am a novice at business. I absorbed so much in our sessions that will help my organization evolve and me as a business leader.”

- VanNessa Duckett, Founder, Polite Piggy's Day Camp, Inc.

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About African Diaspora Network (ADN)

Founded in 2010, African Diaspora Network promotes entrepreneurship and economic development on the African continent and in the communities in which we live. ADN brings together Africans on the continent, in the diaspora, and friends of Africa to actualize their full potential, activate their entrepreneurial spirit, and strategically mobilize financial and intellectual resources to ensure a brighter future for the African continent. Learn more at www.africandiasporanetwork.org

About the Silicon Valley Executive Center at the SCU Levey School of Business

The Silicon Valley Executive Center partners with a number of companies and universities to create custom learning experiences. Their high-impact programs help business leaders, managers, and professionals become better equipped to tackle the speed and complexity of growth in today's business environment. Learn more at www.scu.edu/execed