



Karin Hwang

knowledge, access, resources and direction. REDI's annual women's business plan competition, now in its eighth year, encourages women entrepreneurs to "start correctly with a well-planned business," says Lynn Benzion, associate director of REDI. The competition is open to women entrepreneurs in Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C. whose businesses are less than two years old.

REDI's mission is to "brand Rockville as a place for entrepreneurs,"

Benzion says, noting the city's excellent location for biotechnology startups given its proximity to the National Institutes of Health and a wealth of biotech talent from local universities—talent like Karin Hwang, a graduate of the Bioengineering Innovation and Design program at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, who took first prize in the biotech category of this year's StartRight! competition.

Hwang is the co-founder of CervoCheck, LLC, a Baltimore-based startup developing technology to prevent preterm births. After three weeks in rotation at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, Hwang realized the need for a device to detect the onset of preterm labor. "Technology in preterm labor hasn't advanced in the past 30 years," Hwang says. She hopes to change that with a new biomedical device currently undergoing animal trials. Hwang agrees that the Baltimore-Washington area is great for biotech. CervoCheck benefits from its proximity to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), as well as major hospitals. The area also boasts its share of incubators and law firms—essential for starting a technology company.

With a team of graduates and faculty from Johns Hopkins University and Hospital, CervoCheck is well equipped to bring its device to market. After concluding FDA trials, Hwang hopes to see growth into international markets in Europe and Asia.

## Going High Tech

Founder of Feastie and winner of the StartRight! high-tech category, Valerie Coffman formed her startup with help from the INNOVATE Entrepreneurship Program, a partnership between local universities and economic development programs (including REDI). INNOVATE provides training and advice to post-doctorates starting science-based businesses.

Feastie is a recipe search engine that automatically creates shopping lists and prints coupons for local grocery stores. Its mission is simple: to make healthy meals easier and more affordable. Feastie indexes blogs and recipe websites to find popular recipes and organizes ingredients by aisle, reducing the stress of daily dinners and holiday meals.



Michele Horwitz Cornwell

Coffman, based in Bethesda, says there is a lot of support in the area for entrepreneurship, especially for technology startups. For women entrepreneurs, Coffman offers some advice. "Don't be afraid to learn

## REDI Helps Women Bring Their Plans to Fruition

### Winners of the StartRight! Women's Business Plan Competition

"We had a strong pool of competitors this year," says Lynn Benzion, Associate Director of Rockville Economic Development, Inc. and administrator of this year's StartRight! Women's Business Plan Competition. "A number of this year's entrants have taken advantage of REDI's Rockville Women's Business Center services, including sessions on how to write and how to present a business plan. We are pleased to see so many well thought out business plans, which we know will lead to many successful small businesses. We look forward to working with these companies as they continue to grow."

In the competition, each business plan finalist was judged on both her written plan and an oral presentation. Judges evaluated entrants' management plan, financial plan, operations, market research and marketing plan. When evaluating competitors, judges looked for detailed understanding of the financials, demonstrated passion for the venture and the ability to communicate the business proposition clearly and persuasively. The judges also looked at the company's overall sustainability and likelihood of long-term success.

## 2011 GRAND PRIZEWINNERS

**Shulman, Rogers, Gandal, Pordy and Ecker High-Tech \$5,000 Grand Prize:** Valerie Coffman of Feastie LLC, an on-line recipe and coupon search engine. Coffman is a graduate of the INNOVATE program, which trains entrepreneurs to commercialize technology from federal and university labs.

**Mid-Atlantic Federal Credit Union General Business \$5,000 Grand Prize:** Aliyah Hardy, Pilates Center of Rockville.

**Maryland Biotechnology Center Biotech \$5,000 Grand Prize:** Karin Hwang, CervoCheck, LLC, Baltimore, which is developing a device to detect preterm labor.

In addition to their \$5,000 prizes, each company receives six months of a virtual office solution from Intelligent Office Rockville. The high-tech and biotech winners also receive a one-year virtual membership to the Montgomery County Business Innovation Network.

## 2011 SECOND PLACE PRIZEWINNERS

**Foster, Soltoff & Love High Tech \$2,500 2nd Place Prize:** Marci Harris, POPVOX, an on-line political advocacy tool.

**ActionCoach General Business \$2,500 2nd Place Prize:** Michele Horwitz Cornwell, LLC, a handyman service for seniors.

In addition to their \$2,500 prizes, each company receives three months of a virtual office solution from Intelligent Office Rockville.

## "PICK THE PITCH" WINNER

**Washington Post Capital Business "Pick the Pitch" online competition for best elevator pitch:** Lisa Drouillard, My Hopeful Journey, an online tracker for fertility treatments. More than 1,200 people voted in the "Pick the Pitch" contest.

*Additional information on the competition and REDI can be found at [www.rockvilleredi.org](http://www.rockvilleredi.org).*

## Developing a Game Plan

*Local women entrepreneurs score points—and prizes—in StartRight! Competition*

**A**midst the growing senior population of Montgomery County, Michele Horwitz Cornwell saw an opportunity. With 25 years of experience in commercial development and property management, Cornwell realized that many seniors lack the ability to perform basic maintenance around the house.

"It's really hard for seniors to get up and change a lightbulb," Cornwell says. Her business, Safe at Home, LLC, is a comprehensive handyman service for seniors who live on their own. With the help of Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist and husband Bruce Cornwell, Michele provides repair services, accessibility retrofitting and peace of mind to seniors and their loved ones.

Safe at Home, LLC is one of five winners of this year's StartRight! Women's Business Plan Competition sponsored by Rockville Economic Development, Inc. (REDI). REDI is a non-profit, private-public partnership formed by the City of Rockville, which helps companies grow by providing



Valerie Coffman

about technology,” she says. “Learn how to code.”

In addition to tech-based talent and support, the I-270 corridor provides a unique benefit to its businesses: proximity to the nation’s capital. Marci Harris, a former Congressional staffer and second-place winner of StartRight!’s high-tech category, leveraged the technology resources of the area to support policymaking in Washington, D.C. Her web-based app, dubbed POPVOX, is a “transparent, useful platform” for citizens, advocates and members of Congress to discuss proposed legislation.

POPVOX provides a page for each piece of legislation, where constituents and organizations can support or oppose it. “It’s almost like a Facebook page for a bill,” Harris explains. Working as a congressional staffer, Harris found that communication between constituents and members of Congress needed improvement. “On the inside there were no tools to help Congress get through the influx [of messages],” Harris says. By centralizing messages and sorting them into a searchable database, POPVOX amplifies the voice of citizens and grassroots organizations.

With the upcoming election year, Harris hopes to see POPVOX grow as Congress and constituents shift

their focus toward policy. In the meantime, Harris and her team are working to make POPVOX more accessible to members of Congress by improving the website, growing the user base and developing an iPad app specifically for Congressional use. These tweaks are part of the POPVOX team’s “constant, iterative development process,” Harris says.

Harris maintains that the strengths of her team are



Marci Harris

paramount to POPVOX’s success. “Finding the people you want to work with is key,” Harris says. With technology making startups easier and cheaper, the mental barrier is the only thing stopping budding entrepreneurs. “You can do things now from anywhere,” Harris says. “You can have a company and not have an office.”

### Promoting the Power of Pilates

For Aliyah Hardy, the Rockville area provided ample resources to start the Pilates Center of Rockville.

Formerly the director of Pilates at the American Dance Institute (ADI) in Rockville, Hardy turned her expertise and network of clients into a full-fledged business when ADI’s Pilates program ended.

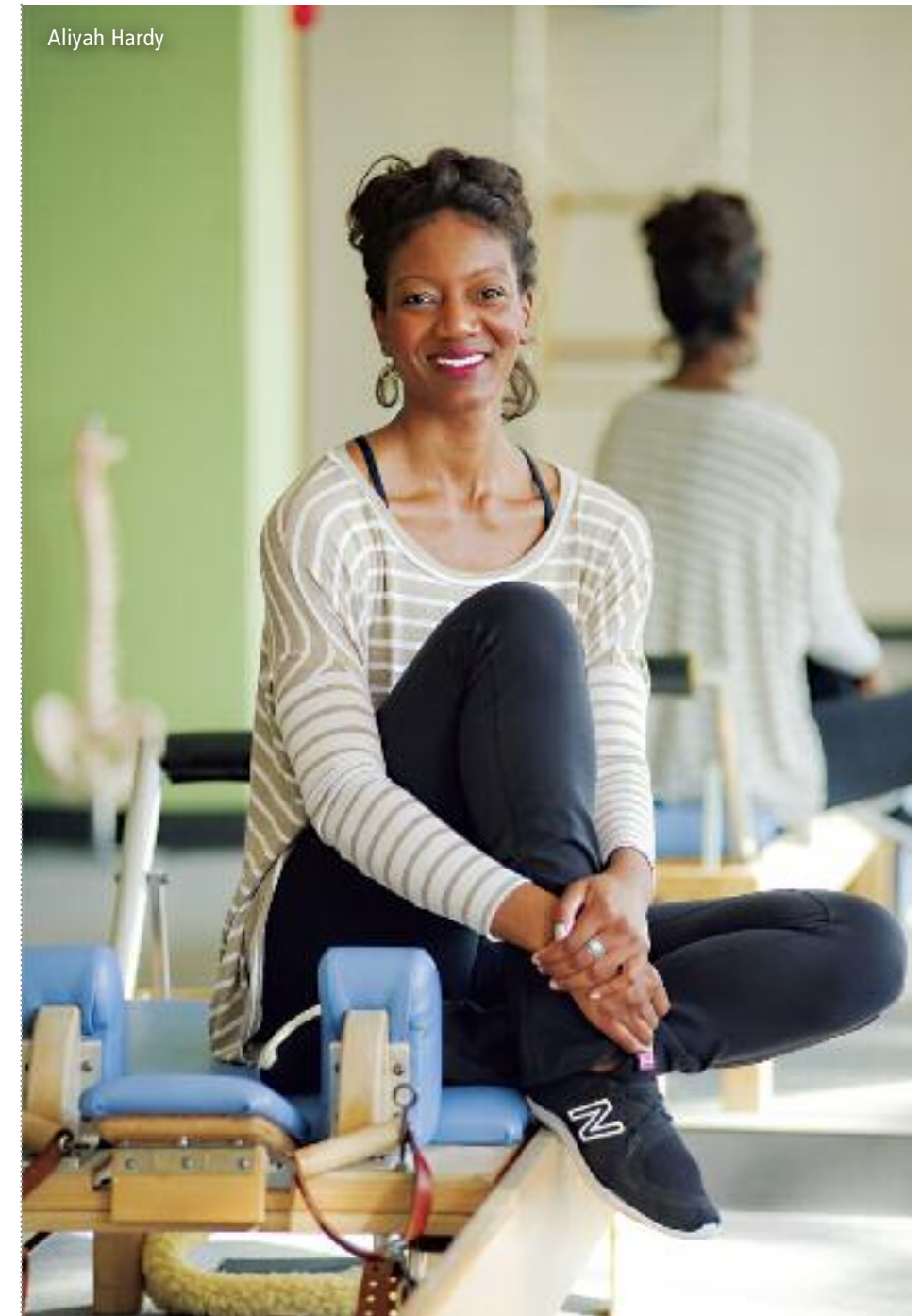
“Sometimes an opportunity presents itself,” says Hardy, winner of the StartRight! Competition’s general business category.

The Pilates Center of Rockville is a fully-equipped Pilates studio providing fitness, toning, performance and rehabilitation through Pilates, with instructors certified by the Pilates Method Alliance.

Originally a civil engineer with Exxon Mobil Corp., Hardy used her strategic and financial planning expertise to get the Pilates Center of Rockville running on short notice, acting quickly to fill the gap after ADI’s Pilates program ended. Rockville’s wealth of business counseling and advisors smoothed her transition into entrepreneurship. “Rockville is an excellent place to start a business,” Hardy says, citing the community as one of Rockville’s greatest resources. She hopes to give back to the community by “sharing everything Pilates has to offer.”

Hardy’s advice to entrepreneurs? “Use all of the tools that you have personally,” she says, citing her previous experience in the corporate world as an essential factor in her success. Another important element, Hardy says, is to “know your purpose.” An integral part of the Pilates Center mission—that also distinguishes it from its competition—is its Pink Ribbon Program, designed to help breast cancer survivors regain a full range of movement through Pilates.

Even with a strong business plan, entrepreneurship is full of challenges that continue long after a business is established. Safe at Home is currently rebranding after the certification organization SeniorChecked changed hands. Cornwell and her husband can no



Aliyah Hardy

Even with a **strong business plan,** entrepreneurship is full of challenges that *continue* long after a business is established.

longer use the SeniorChecked designation or logo—which means a redesign of marketing materials and Safe at Home’s website. To replace the certification, Cornwell turned to

using the Grass Roots Organization for the Well-Being of Seniors (GROWBS) to connect with service providers and clients.

Networking is essential for startups, says REDI’s Benzion.

“We can connect business people with mentors [and] customers,” she says. She encourages women in business to make use of local resources. “There’s an awful lot of business help out here.” CervoCheck’s Hwang agrees. “I think there are more resources available to women than there are to men,” she says. As the winners of the StartRight! competition can attest, the key is using them. ■

*Brendan Clune is a freelance writer based in Maryland.*