

Lauren Maillian Paves The Way For Black And Latinx Female Founders

The powerhouse CEO of digitalundivided is uplifting women and women of color who are just setting out on their entrepreneurial journey.



Photo by Brian Ach via Getty Images

Lots of American children set up lemonade stands, but not many establish a payroll.

Starting from the summer when she was 8 years old, Lauren Maillian launched a lemonade stand at the corner of Madison Avenue and 96th Street in Manhattan, in front of Jerome Florists, a shop that is still there today. Quickly realizing that it was too hot to stand out in the sun, she convinced the mom-and-pop shop owners to “lease” her a space under their awning for \$50 a week—which she could afford because she was regularly pulling in \$300 a summer day in lemonade sales.

“Before I celebrated my 10th birthday, I had my first taste of entrepreneurial success—the rush of accomplishment and independence that comes along with starting a business and making real money,” she wrote in her 2014 book *The Path Redefined: Getting to the Top on Your Own Terms*.

The entrepreneurial jolt she felt was not exactly isolated. Maillian's father made his own fortune and achieved success as an investment banker, and young Lauren grew up wanting to do mortgage-backed acquisitions. But her father also hammered home that hard work was vital—"even an A-would get me into hot water," she recalls—and that whatever financial security she enjoyed could disappear at any moment.

Since establishing her lemonade juggernaut, Maillian has been a fashion model, launched a vineyard while still a teenager, plus a luxury brand marketing firm, a venture capital fund and several advisory firms. Maillian is an entrepreneurial tornado, and almost from her earliest days, her focus has been not merely financial success but profound, difficult social change.

Today, Maillian is CEO of [digitalundivided](#), an incubator for female Black and Latinx entrepreneurs, and she has devoted her career and her organization to empowering female founders of color. Among other things, digitalundivided produces a biennial survey (ProjectDiane) of how many Black and Latinx women have founded companies and how they are being funded. Viewed strictly numerically, the survey tells a positive story. There were 334 startups in the ProjectDiane database in 2018, and in 2020, there were more than 650.

For Maillian, these numbers are not merely data points on a graph that she wants to see go up. These numbers are the crucible of *a cause*, a personal and professional crusade to reshape the world so that it will extend the success she has enjoyed to the population on the other side of the wealth and opportunity divide.

As for how we get there, she is a strong believer in the power of investment capital to propel fledgling businesses to succeed. "The best opportunities come when someone is able to make a direct investment into that company and provide strategic capital," she told *Worth*. "That's where those businesses say, 'Hey, early stage, somebody believed in me,' and it wasn't just their check it was: they gave me access, that gave me the idea."

Maillian makes these points in a forceful, almost mesmerizing style that optimizes for optimism. She encourages her audience to be "serendipitous by design"—to have a plan but to be very open to unexpected opportunities, and she echoes her father's insistence that success depends on hard work. Yet she is also not one to sugarcoat anything, especially the plight of female entrepreneurs of color.

“The problem is not that we aren’t seeing progress, it’s that the progress is slow,” she told *Worth*. “The progress is especially slow in comparison to non-minority counterparts, who are able to leapfrog ahead at the same time when we’re looking at our progress as something that isn’t even something to celebrate, because it’s still a snail’s pace compared to everyone else.”

As if tapping into her own childhood entrepreneurship journey, Maillian has recently embraced mentoring female founders at the earliest stages of business. At a *Worth* event in September, Maillian insisted on **sharing the spotlight** with several founders that she mentors, including Haitian-born Beverly Malbranche, founder of Caribbrew, and Mandy Bowman, founder and CEO of Official Black Wall Street.

“I want the world to keep moving,” Maillian exhorts. “We know that that’s going to happen, that has to happen, but we also need to make sure that these women keep learning and that they can constantly actively implement in real time everything that they are seeing and learning and experiencing.”

