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How Lauren Maillian Is Driving Change For Black And Latinx Women Entrepreneurs In The Digital Age

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I cover the female leaders who are shaping the future.

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Lauren Maillian, CEO of digitalundivided

PHOTO CREDIT: COLLETTE BONAPARTE

For 17 years, Lauren Maillian has been defying the odds as an innovative entrepreneur. She cofounded her first business, Sugarleaf Vineyards when she was just 19 years old. That made her the youngest self-made winery owner in the U.S. before she was even allowed to drink. As COO, Maillian led the company to international recognition and awards and an acquisition in 2011.

Sugarleaf is just one brick in the empire that Maillian has built for herself. She runs a marketing and brand advisory company, LMB Group, that supports notable brands like J.P. Morgan Chase, AT&T, Walmart, Estée Lauder, and BuzzFeed. For nearly two decades, she has established herself as a changemaker paving a path to success for other women of colour.

Maillian is also a founding partner and managing director of Gen Y Capital Partners, making her the first Black woman to start an early-stage venture capital fund. Maillian's work with Gen Y was also ground-breaking because they were one of the first funds to support their companies beyond capital. Outside of her investments with Gen Y, Maillian has a personal investment portfolio that represents more than \$1B in revenue and includes several unicorn companies.

Behind Maillian's impressive resume and tireless work ethic is a commitment to advancing people of color as leaders in innovation in corporate America. While people of colour continue to be disproportionately impacted by financial and healthcare crises, Maillian is working to shift their chances of success.

"My personal mission is to break cycles to allow people to be seen, valued, appreciated and respected for who they are and not what someone might think they should be, or stereotypes associated with some kind of further disenfranchisement of our people," Maillian said.

Maillian's latest professional endeavour has given her a unique opportunity to do that work on a large scale. In June of 2020, Maillian became CEO of [digitalundivided](#), a social startup that uses data to create programs and initiatives that support economic growth for Black and Latinx communities and women entrepreneurs.

“This job that I have right now gives me this opportunity to be the change agent who also has the license to sound off the alarm [for change] with an entire team behind me that is putting the data behind my request,” Maillian said.

Maillian, who was the Chair of digitalundivided’s Board of Directors for 3 years prior and an advisor to the organization since it began in 2012, recognized the work the company has been doing over the last decade to address the inequities that Black and Latinx women entrepreneurs experience. digitalundivided has consistently tracked and reported data on Black and Latinx women’s businesses, including metrics like access to funding and the amount of funding raised compared to male and non-minority peers.

In their most recent report, digitalundivided found that while [more Black and Latinx women are building high-growth companies, they are receiving less than half of 1% of total venture capital funding](#).

For Maillian, who has been on both sides of the founder-funder equation, these statistics present an opportunity for a meaningful shift, and she is honoured to act as a change agent.

“I take it as a great honour to be a change agent right now in this moment in time for women of color in the startup world where that change is absolutely necessary and really difficult to galvanize and create unless you have all the connections, the voice, the experience, and the gravitas to do so...I am taking advantage of all those ears that want to hear the solutions and all of those eyes that have been watching,” she said.

As CEO, Maillian has pushed digitalundivided forward with powerful brand partnerships with companies like [Pine-Sol](#) and [Cosmopolitan](#) and innovative programming that meets the unique needs of Black and Latinx entrepreneurs. When she stepped into the role in the midst of Covid-19 lockdowns, Maillian digitized the organization, moving programming and events online.

She also drove the development of digitalundivided’s latest program, the [Do You Fellowship](#). The program is a 12-month fellowship that provides participants access to a \$5,000 investment and mentorship from a council of investors, CEOs, and industry leaders, valued at over \$75,000.

The 12-month fellowship allows the founders to access resources they can implement and benefit from while running their businesses.

“The Do You Fellowship program is everything I wish I knew and had 17 years ago when I started my first business. In less than a year, I mobilized our existing foundation supporters and our new corporate partners and brand sponsors around our mission to launch the Do You Fellowship intended to accelerate business and give leaders lifetime connections to thrive...because these are things that women of color don’t get,” Maillian said.

Many of the mentors and partners for the Do You Fellowship came from Maillian’s own professional network. She doesn’t take for granted the impact and importance of a powerful network who trusts her word and her work.

“Great impact can never be achieved alone. I believe that wholeheartedly. I’m grateful that everyone that I asked to come into this particular program said yes. And they said yes because they know that if I put my name on it, it’s something that I have also put my heart and soul into, and that I have checked every box, crossed every ‘t’ and dotted every ‘i’,” Maillian said.

Maillian’s track record for excellence has earned her network’s trust. It also puts her in a unique position to support and advise women of color who are working to scale their businesses, blaze their own paths, and become changemakers. She had this advice for women of colour entrepreneurs:

Dare to take the risks that scare you

“If you don’t take those big risks that scare the heck out of you, you will never have that big reward and that sustainable generational wealth, the legacy, the homes, the ability to provide for your family the way you want. If you don’t take the big risk, you’ll never get the big reward,” Maillian warned.

Choose investors that match *your* vision

“You don’t have to give your power away just because you want the check. I’m asking more women of color who are contacting me to say, ‘These are my requirements.’ And if they can’t meet your requirements but they want in on your business, then make it a no. But we have power in this moment,” Maillian said.

Use other people’s doubt to engineer your success

“Go back to your drawing board, go back to your strategic plan and chart out why people think you won’t win or why they didn’t cut you the check. You can work backward. You now know all the things you need to solve for or mitigate against or have answers to in order to be a success in their eyes,” Maillian advised.

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