



# Women of Color in Tech

## How Can We Encourage Them?

By Vivek Wadhwa

Over the last five years, I have taught more than 300 really smart students. One of the smartest, at the Master's of Engineering Management program at Duke University, was Viva Leigh Miller, a young black woman whose ambition, after graduating last year, was to move to Silicon Valley. I expected her to become a hotshot CEO.

But Viva couldn't get a job in the Valley – despite solid introductions to leading venture capitalists. I've never understood why. During my tech days, I'd have hired Viva in a heartbeat. She had the determination, drive, and education that all tech companies look for.

It raised a red flag in my mind. But one mustn't take extrapolate unduly from one anecdote. Maybe Viva just didn't connect with the right companies at the right time.

Still, clearly, there is a shortage of women of color in the tech industry. In Silicon Valley in general, one sees few blacks, few Hispanics. One

rarely meets a black woman CEO (although one or two are rumored to exist). It's true that women and minority students tend not to pursue engineering; that some women can't deal with the stress and just want to raise children; and that this is not Mike Arrington's fault. Note, too, that blacks and Hispanics constitute only 1.5 percent and 4.7 percent, respectively, of the Valley's tech population – well below national tech-population averages of 7.1 percent and 5.3 percent.

At an event called “Alley to the Valley” recently held in Menlo Park, I discussed this subject with 50 very successful women, half of them from the East coast, and half from the West coast. The best way of supplying this shortage, we agreed, is first to recognize that a problem exists; then provide mentoring, encouragement, and assistance to all aspiring women entrepreneurs; and showcasing the successes.

Here, then, are the stories of three black women CEOs who graduated from Founder Labs, which is a pre-incubator for emerging entrepreneurs, and from a related organization, Women 2.0.



**Raissa B. Nebie** is the CEO of Spoondate, which allows food enthusiasts to meet and connect over a meal.

Raissa was born in Paris, where her father was pursuing a PhD in linguistics. Her family later moved to the Ivory Coast, where she lived most of her life. Her parents have since returned to their home country of Burkina Faso, where her father is a university professor, and her mother, the mayor of her home town. Raissa studied finance in college and started her career on Wall Street at firms that include JP Morgan,

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Lehman Brothers, and ICV Capital.

Raissa's parents valued academic excellence and wanted a traditional career for her, not entrepreneurship. Her role models were her mother, who dedicated her life to community service, and her grandfather, who was the first black doctor of pre-independence Burkina Faso. Raissa credits her drive and tenacity to her mother, whose determined recovery from a 10-year illness was an inspiration.

Working in investment banking, Raissa longed to become an entre-

preneur and pursue her passion for food. So she quit her job and attended culinary school; while training at a high-end restaurant in Paris, she decided to take her passion for food to the Web, and booked a one-way ticket to San Francisco. Networking around the Valley, she heard about the program at Founder Labs, and applied there to learn the basics of tech entrepreneurship. Founder Labs helped her validate her idea, find a co-founder and, ultimately, secure angel funding.

She says that entrepreneurship has been a great experience. There's

always something to learn, more ways to make her products better.

Raissa's advice to start-up executives: Identify a problem you want to solve, and talk to potential customers. Be creative, and find ways to validate your idea without building any complex technology. (Before writing any code for Spoondate, she operated a dating concierge that manually matched like-minded eaters and sent them out on food dates.)

Get out of your house and become a part of the startup scene. Go to events. Be seen. Attend your local Startup Weekend, hackathons, pitch contests, etc. These are fun learning experiences and also great ways to meet potential co-founders. Take advantage of these events to build your network.

Watch, listen, learn, and understand that anyone who takes the time to give you constructive criticism on your idea is not the enemy but, rather, is doing you a favor.

“Be humble. Be polite. Be charming.” No matter what your gender or race, people like to be around nice, pleasant people.

Do it! But do it with passion and commitment.



**Kimberly Dillion** founded House of Mikko, a social commerce site that recommends beauty products based on ratings and reviews by women who use them. Launched only months ago, the site is gaining momentum.

Born in California and raised in Colorado, Kimberly has been a

competitive figure skater for most of her life. Kimberly's skating skills won her a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, where she earned her degree in Marketing and in Anthropology, then attended business school in Michigan.

Her mother was the deepest influence on her, and taught her to express herself freely and use her talents. At age three, Kimberly saw a TV show and decided to become a figure skater. Skating is an expensive sport, and her mother couldn't afford much practice time. So Kimberly practiced her routines on a tennis court at night, wearing special roller blades fitted onto to skating boots. She says that falling on concrete is a lot worse than falling on ice, so it actually made her a better skater. She learned that there wasn't anything she couldn't do.

Kimberly says she became an entrepreneur because she wanted to solve a problem that no one else was solving. At Founder Labs she got to

know the Bay Area tech scene and made valuable contacts. She says she's glad there were also men in the program; that it's much better than being all black or all female.

Why aren't there more women of color in the tech world? Kimberly believes it doesn't offer them an equitable path to success – because of which, most educated African-Americans go into law or medicine. Her advice to entrepreneurs: go to as many networking events as you can – particularly the inexpensive ones. Meet others, exchange ideas, and learn to pitch your ideas. And, she cautions, get used to rejection: “If you aren't getting rejected, you aren't playing the game right.”



**Arielle Patrice Scott** and her partners, Gleb Podkolzin and Danielle Leslie, recently launched a company called GenJuice, which creates products to help young up-and-comers build followings and audiences online. GenJuice started as a thesis that Arielle was writing on how Gen Y builds personal brands. This led to a national tour bringing 35,000 young influencers together. She has since built this network of contributors to 300,000. (*Inc.* called GenJuice one of 2011's “coolest startups.”)

Arielle grew up in Vallejo, CA. Her mother was a single parent, working as a customer-service representative while she raised two children. Growing up was a little difficult, says Arielle, because she and her brother had to stay in foster care at times. When she won a scholarship to study Information Technology & Media at UC-Berkeley, she was determined to make the most of it.

She says her mother was her role model because she is very passionate and independent. Arielle learned early how to make something out of nothing, how to start at the bottom

and solve problems through technology. She realized that entrepreneurs could impact people for the better, which made her want to become one.

As a volunteer with the organization Women 2.0, Arielle built a network and connected to role models, investors, customers, and partners. She met her co-founders through the Women 2.0 network, and felt empowered and encouraged as an entrepreneur, even while still in college.

Arielle's advice for starting a business: Solve your problems. If a particular problem is driving you crazy, it probably drives thousands of other people crazy, too. Build your company upon solving the problems you face every day.

Never quit the problem, but don't worry about quitting the product. Some entrepreneurs are afraid of pivoting if something isn't working. It becomes more about

protecting their own egos and being portrayed as quitters, than about solving the problem. Focus on the problem you're solving, and everything will fall into place.

All three of these women defied the odds and became entrepreneurs. With a bit of luck, they will achieve big success and help others behind them.

It doesn't take much to fix an entrepreneurial imbalance. We just need to recognize the reality, then provide a little bit of mentorship – and a lot of encouragement. **N**

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