

TECHNOLOGY

STARTING UP, REACHING OUT

Hillman Accelerator finds success focusing on equity for startups run by underrepresented groups. —AIESHA D. LITTLE



If you're in the business of startups in the Midwest, you've probably come across Candice Matthews Brackeen. As cofounder and executive director of Hillman Accelerator, the University of Cincinnati graduate has spent the last three and a half years making sure her investment company provides underrepresented tech-enabled startups with the mentorship, curriculum, investment, opportunities, and resources they need to scale, grow, and thrive.

The nationally recognized accelerator takes its name from the fictional college that served as the sitcom setting for *A Different World*, a television beacon of Black excellence in late 1980s and early '90s. Brackeen cofounded Hillman with Dhani Jones and Ebow Vroom

in 2017 after seeing little to no diversity among the founders of companies accepted into other local accelerators, and she focuses on startups whose founders “identify as part of a minority group which has traditionally been outside of access to funding.”

“In my own experiences starting businesses, I've celebrated successes, faced failures, and felt all of the *everything* that comes with being an entrepreneur—in addition to the *extra everything* that comes with being a female founder of color,” Brackeen wrote on *Found*, the blog of venture capital firm Lightship Capital, which she and her husband Brian (*pictured above*) founded in 2018 as the investment arm of Hillman. “It didn't take very long for me to

realize that finding the funding and support necessary to simply exist—leave alone scale—was like *Hunger Games*-level hard.”

The numbers back her up. According to Morgan Stanley's 2019 *Beyond the Funding Gap* study, only 29 percent of 200 U.S.-based venture capital firms surveyed had at least one female partner. Only 2 percent of investment professionals were Black and only 1 percent Latinx. In addition, the report found that only 13 percent of the white male venture capitalists surveyed said they prioritized investments in companies with multicultural founders. Stats like these are what make the knowledge, expertise, and exposure that Hillman offers so crucial to companies run by women and people of color.

From peer-to-peer lending platform Solo Funds to labor-tech startup The Home Team to non-electric warming technology company Warmilu, Hillman's graduates are making moves. In 2018, the three companies that participated in first Hillman cohort raised \$3 million in capital and generated \$3 million in revenue. In June, Lightship Capital announced plans to partner with the “impact and innovation company” SecondMuse to create a \$50 million fund to back Midwestern minority-led startups in the healthcare, consumer package goods, sustainability, artificial intelligence, and e-commerce sectors, purportedly making it the largest fund of its kind.

“The venture capital market has failed BI-POC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] and ultimately itself,” Brackeen said in announcing the new fund. “Venture capitalists who aren't intentionally diversifying their portfolio, who are skipping out on exploring deals in every community, are simply not going to see outsized returns.”