Entrepreneurship Grows at Brown

Debra Bradley Ruder '80

Brown's purpose-driven student entrepreneurs, while juggling academic schedules, build startups to tackle pressing problems.

While traveling together sophomore year, aspiring entrepreneurs Robbie Felton and Evan Jackson, both '21, pondered concepts for possible startups. "We need to get into the geriatric care space," Felton said. "This is a place to push for software innovation."

Three years and lots of hard work later, Felton and Jackson are partnering with two other Brown undergraduates in leading Intus Care, a health care technology company designed to improve elder care and contain costs. Its analytics platform enables long-term care providers to use data to predict their patients' risk of falls, infections and other conditions — and take action to prevent hospitalizations.

"We're now serving providers across five states, with tens of thousands of patients on

the system," says Jackson, an economics and religious studies concentrator who runs the business with Felton, Samuel Prado '22 and Alexander Rothberg '22 (pictured above at left, with Felton and Jackson at right). "I could have never imagined this."

Winner of the top 2020 Brown Venture Prize, a pitch competition to advance high-impact startups, Intus Care joins the impressive list of recent student ventures addressing real-world problems. Brown inventors can build their entrepreneurial skills through a growing array of resources, among them academic courses, a certificate program, student organizations, funding, and invaluable advice from faculty, peers and alumni. The University's Nelson Center for Entrepreneurship, established in 2016, is a hub for these activities.
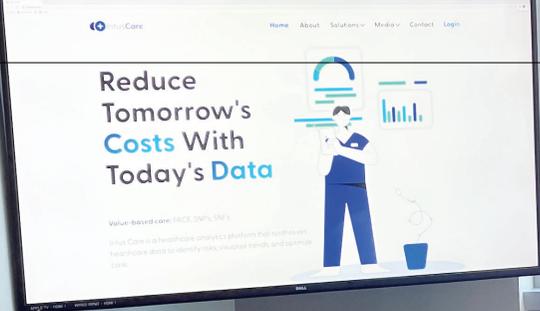
Addressing Educational Disparities

Elvia Perez '22 has tapped Brown's resources to realize her vision: to help high school students from disadvantaged communities attain higher education. She created the EmpowerU app to connect users with information about scholarships, internships and summer programs, and with peers from similar backgrounds.

"I'm passionate about this because I am a first-generation student who did not come from an affluent background, and growing up I didn't really know anyone who had gone to college," says Perez (above).

She developed her concept during an independent study with legendary engineering professor Barrett Hazeltine her freshman year and continued refining it through a Nelson Center summer accelerator program and other Brown courses. Also the recipient of a Brown Venture Prize, Perez is building the EmpowerU prototype with co-founder Meera Kurup '23 and their team of six other Brown students.

"I believe education is one of the best catalysts for social mobility," says Perez, a business economics concentrator. "I want to create something to mitigate educational disparities in the world."

Meeting a Community Need

The COVID-19 pandemic inspired **Bintou Diarra '23, M.D. '27,** to turn her hair-braiding skills into a small business.

Growing up, Diarra learned how to braid while accompanying her mother, an immigrant from West Africa, to work at salons in New York. Once at Brown, she often braided friends' hair but couldn't picture herself in business. But when COVID closed local salons, Diarra (above) opened Bintou's Beauty with an Instagram account enabling Brown community members to book appointments.

Braiding usually takes about four hours, and Diarra enjoys hearing clients' personal stories as she twists, shapes and braids their hair into patterns — including a memorable student who was exploring her Black identity with first-time braids.

"My favorite part of braiding," Diarra says, "is when we finish, you can see their faces light up."

Redistributing Cancer Meds

Eliza Sternlicht and **Jack Schaeffer (above), both '22,** were shocked to discover how much unused medication goes to waste while so many patients struggle to afford health care. "That lit a fire in us," Schaeffer recalls. So the pair founded MediCircle to distribute leftover chemotherapy pills to patients in financial need.

When launched, the company intends to take returned oral cancer meds in sealed packaging from partnering health care organizations, ensure their quality with MediCircle's proprietary technology, and mail them (via specialty pharmacy) to patients referred by the hospital.

"Patients with limited or no health insurance, who typically pay up to $10,000 for cancer medications, can receive them for $20," they explain. Sternlicht and Schaeffer captured first place in the Nelson Center's 2021 Brown Venture Prize competition, used their winnings to pilot the service, and plan to eventually scale up nationally.

"We wouldn't be where we are today without all the support from Brown" in the form of academics, funding and guidance, Sternlicht notes. "They've been instrumental to our progress."

BROWN

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT