

PUBLICATION

Women in Entrepreneurship: Clarity to Execution

Authors: Lisa N. Blitstein

Winter 2026

From guiding CEOs through tough choices to helping mission-driven businesses scale, we sat down with two women entrepreneurs from Baker Donelson's Light of Baltimore Incubator.

These two leaders share a common thread: clarity, courage, and purpose. One draws on decades of experience in consulting, law, and coaching to reveal three timeless principles for making confident decisions – know your values, gather the facts, and trust your gut. The other, a Baltimore-based entrepreneur and "pretty maker," turns vision into reality by optimizing operations for organizations that aim to change the world. Together, their stories offer practical wisdom and inspiration for anyone navigating complexity, whether in the boardroom or on the path of entrepreneurship.

Markia Beckwith – Natural Born Champions

1. Tell us a little bit about your life and growing up in Baltimore. Have you always seen yourself as an entrepreneur, teacher, or both?

Honestly, both. Baltimore taught me hustle early. Whether it was selling snowballs or riding dirt bikes, that entrepreneurial energy was always in the air.

At the same time, I loved teaching. I'd play school with my younger cousins and *had* to be the teacher, grading assignments, planning imaginary field trips, all of it. Even at that age, I paid attention to how people learned and what captured their interest.

That passion followed me into adulthood. Even now, in nonprofit leadership roles, presenting to boards, administrators, or partners, I'm still teaching. I'm still an entrepreneur. I've just learned to channel those gifts differently.

2. In 2012, when you were only 18 years old, you started a summer camp, which eventually evolved into NBC as it is today. What inspired you to start, and what was your experience like breaking into entrepreneurship?

I'm the oldest of seven, and my youngest sibling is 17 years younger than me. After high school, I didn't know exactly what I wanted, so I told my parents I'd babysit for the summer. That summer changed everything.

My baby brother had a speech impediment, and I got curious about how the brain works. That curiosity led me to major in psychology. Working with him, I helped him build phonemic awareness and articulation. By two, he knew all his letters, sounds, and his name, and was basically kindergarten-ready. My baby sister, who came right after him, was the same way, bright and eager.

By 18, I realized I had a gift for understanding how young minds develop. And I loved it. Every summer, my little "camp" grew from my two siblings to 12 kids, then 15 or 16, eventually around 40. One year, my dad asked how many kids I had registered. I told him 25, and he said, "Well, I don't know where *you're* going, but

they're not staying in my basement anymore." That's when he pushed me to market my program to schools, rec centers, and churches. That's when I really started learning business.

The camp evolved from Camp Champions into a full non-profit, renamed Natural Born Champions, in 2018. When COVID hit, I turned my basement into a virtual learning and enrichment space. Kids came for academic support and small field trips. I also picked up website building just for fun, and turned that into another business opportunity. Through it all, youth work stayed at the center. That's where my heart always was.

3. Did you have any teachers growing up who made an impact on you, or who inspired the way you approach your work?

My sixth-grade U.S. history teacher, Mrs. Watson! She was firm, no-nonsense, and incredibly lovable all at once. I was always a strong student, top of my class, but I also had friends who weren't academically strong. Some teachers didn't understand that dynamic, but Mrs. Watson noticed. She taught me that education isn't just academics. It's character, confidence, connection, and intention. That lesson shaped how I move through the world.

4. How has mentorship played a role in your growth as a young woman entrepreneur since starting NBC?

For me, mentorship has to be multi-generational. You need the innovators, the wise elders who've "been there, done that," and the risk-takers who push new ideas forward. I love working with young people because they're bold visionaries. Pair that with wisdom, and you get real growth.

Right now, the oldest staff member on our team is 75, and the youngest is 15. I love that range because it creates such a rich balance of wisdom and perspective. The younger generation helps us tailor our programs to meet their needs. They tell us what's relevant, what's trending, what resonates. Then our older generation brings that grounding wisdom. They've been there before, so they help us connect the dots between innovation and experience.

And I invest in my staff. I try to share everything, the lessons, the challenges, the bureaucracies we face. Because in every system, whether education, nonprofits, or corporate spaces, there's still redlining, gatekeeping, and hidden barriers. My job is to take notes, document everything, and then give my tribe the playbook so they can navigate it more easily when it's their turn.

When it comes to being a young Black woman in this field, I see my role as both a leader and a mentor. I know that my presence as a young Black woman navigating these spaces is representation. I have to model what's possible for the next generation.

At this stage in my journey, I like to say I'm learning to fly the plane while building it. But I'm doing it with intention, by making sure that as I climb, I lift others with me.

5. What is one lesson or skill you hope kids take into the City of Baltimore and out into the world with them after they leave NBC?

Definitely self-advocacy. Being able to speak up for yourself, ask questions, and create your own opportunities is a skill I want every young person who comes through our program to have. As an entrepreneur, if I hadn't learned to push boundaries or challenge systems, I probably would have given up a long time ago. There were moments when I thought, "Maybe this just isn't for me." But I learned that sometimes you have to be willing to step outside of the lines to find your lane.

6. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

In ten years, I see myself running my own school. I've always envisioned creating a space that blends education, skill-building, and real-world readiness, like an accredited academy or trade school where young people can come in and choose their own path. I want a place where a student can say, "You know what, traditional high school isn't for me. I'd rather earn my GED, learn a trade, and still have access to mentors who truly understand me."

It's similar to how Name-Image-Likeness (NIL) deals work in sports. Athletes get schooling designed around their goals, not the other way around. I'd love to model something similar: a program that's workforce-ready and builds technical skills, soft skills, emotional wellness, and real-world preparation.

The reality is, we have fifth graders who are already taking care of younger siblings, going grocery shopping for the family, or managing responsibilities at home that no child should have to. By the time they reach middle school, their level of self-sufficiency is incredible, but it's also heartbreaking. They're 13 years old, operating like they're 21 years old. They're doing what they have to do to survive, but school often doesn't reflect or support that reality.

I want this school to be a safe haven where young people can explore their talents, whether it's writing, rapping, fixing cars, doing hair, or starting a small business. Those sparks of passion show up early, sometimes as young as five or six, and by the time they're 13, they're ready to express them. So why not give them the space and structure to do that now?

On a personal note, though – I'd also love to be traveling and eating my way around the world! I could see myself being a food judge on a show like *Is It Cake?* Just traveling, tasting, and talking about food. And if that doesn't happen, I'll start my own food vlog. Feed me and I'm happy!

So, professionally, I want to build something transformational for young people. But personally? I want to enjoy life, travel, and eat good food.

7. What do you consider to be the ultimate measure of the success of your work?

For me, the real impact, the real measure of success, is seeing our mentees become mentors.

We've had kids who started with us at six years old and are now sixteen. Watching their growth over the years is incredible. Some of our former mentees who joined the program as teens are now mothers, and their children are in the program, too. It's such a beautiful full-circle moment. It shows the trust and the family we've built. It's not just about them trusting us with their development or career paths; it's about them trusting us with their families. That means everything to me.

8. What is your next project?

Our next major project is our Mentorship Pathways Program (MPP), which serves youth ages 14 to 21. We designed it to guide young people through three key phases of career and personal development.

Phase One is *career exploration*. We introduce participants to six different pathways and students meet real professionals from each field who come in to host workshops, share their experiences, and help participants explore their interests. Phase Two transitions them into *apprenticeship preparation*. Participants interview local vendors and business partners who have agreed to host youth once a week for mentoring and hands-on

learning during a paid apprenticeship. Phase Three focuses on *job readiness and placement*. The phase ends with a showcase where participants present what they've learned alongside their vendors.

This summer, we're expanding MPP with a new initiative called "Champ Tank." The youth will develop a product, service, or idea that strengthens their community or could make a difference in their school, neighborhood, or city. Using the skills from their chosen pathway, they'll learn everything from prototyping and marketing to pitching and business planning. Our goal is to secure funding for their prototypes and also feature the event on a local network. We really want to shift the narrative about youth to show their creativity, intelligence, and leadership instead of focusing only on negative headlines.

Beyond MPP, I'm also working on a deeply personal project, transforming two inherited family properties into transition homes for our youth who are re-entering the community from the detention center on Gay Street. We've partnered with the center for nearly two years now, and the vision is to provide a safe and supportive place where these young people can continue the MPP program after release. One home would serve males and the other females. The goal is to give them structure, mentorship, and community for 8–12 months, and help them secure housing, employment, and a sense of direction before full reintegration.

Between expanding MPP and building the transition homes, our focus right now is on growing our reach with at-risk youth, meeting them where they are, guiding them where they need to go, and reminding them that their journey doesn't end because of where they started.

9. Is there anything you need right now to get to the next level in your business?

Ultimately, we need funding, space, strategic partnerships, and marketing support. The biggest need is capital funding. We need financial support to fully develop those properties, including help with zoning, permits, and licensing. That initial startup capital would really help us bring those ideas to life. I would love for us to have our own combined office and programming space that reflects our mission and gives our youth room to grow. And I'd love to bring on a marketing manager or mentor to help us elevate our social media and communication strategy. More than anything, we need continued belief in our mission and in the young people we serve.

10. What advice would you give to aspiring women entrepreneurs?

Don't wait for validation. Validate yourself first. What you're looking for is already looking for you.

Discipline will take you further than motivation ever could. Trust your gut, stay focused, and remember that you are your brand. People don't just buy your product or service; they buy into you, your story, your authenticity, your energy. So, keep showing up as yourself, even when it's hard.

11. How has your experience been working with the Light of Baltimore Incubator?

It's been amazing. This is a true mentorship hub and a place where you build your business from the inside out. It removes the barriers and degrees of separation you often face as an entrepreneur.

If I'm looking for an arts program, a caterer, or a consultant, they're right here in the building. It's such a supportive and collaborative environment. The incubator is incredibly valuable, not just for resources, but for relationships.

12. Where can people learn more about your organization?

You can find us at <https://www.naturalbornchampions.com/>, and on Instagram and Facebook at @NaturalBornChampions.

Delshan Baker, Endeavor TBD

1. Tell us about your business, Endeavor TBD. How did it start, and what does an Operations Firm do?

Endeavor TBD is the operations firm for social enterprise. We started about six years ago now. I was in the social sector as an executive for about 20 years before I started the firm, and I was doing, like I like to say, everything that you need to do to run a business, whether you're selling umbrellas or trying to save the world.

At Endeavor, we work with both for-profit and non-profit businesses that are trying to do something good in the world, people, planet, and prosperity, and we give CEOs and COOs breathing room. We install tech, systems, practices, and people that make things work. So, we're really an optimization firm.

The way that you know you need us as an operations firm is if you're so busy that you can't schedule anything, you're sleeping under your desk, and you want to be focused on the vision, but you're wading through tons of emails. We will come in, and when we say optimize, we will install a project management system or customer relationship management system so you can actually track your people and connect with them. Or if you need more operations staffing, in the interim, we will give you that staffing while we help you hire somebody permanent.

2. You're a Baltimore native, but you've spent time in other places and got your B.A. at Stanford. What inspired your decision to return to Baltimore to grow your business?

I love Baltimore. This city is artsy, musical, creative —every couple of blocks, there's a new neighborhood with its own Halloween parade, local bakery, street fair, even its own little dialect. It's magical. I also love how diverse it is across every parameter of diversity.

I was born here, left for school at Stanford, stayed for a while, then came back to finish undergrad. After that, I lived in D.C., then moved to New York, and I also spent a couple of months living in Barcelona. After that, I felt ready to find "home." I didn't know where home was at first, but after some soul-searching, it led me back to Baltimore.

Some places just have "warm soup" energy, with familiar people, familiar places, red cups in the yard. That's Baltimore for me. I chose Baltimore again, intentionally. I want to be here. It's home, and it's where I want to grow my business. Baltimore has so many entrepreneurs and so much opportunity. It's a place where you can explore whatever makes you unique and turn it into a concrete offering. If you can't do it here, I don't know if it can be done. This environment is ripe for innovation.

3. Your bio describes you as a "Pretty-Maker." What does that mean?

I went to school majoring in computer science, and I was really good at physics and math in high school, so I thought I wanted to be an engineer. But I'd been drawing my whole life, and I eventually shifted to computer graphics and then to studio art. I ended up graduating from Stanford with a studio art degree. I like to say I painted my way out of college.

Art is still something I do today. It's not my full-time career, but I share ink drawings and sustainable art on Instagram. And for me, art tells a story. But to get people to listen, it has to be compelling and beautiful. That's why I call myself a "pretty maker." Even if I'm dealing with a difficult topic in my work, I'll put butterflies on it. The message stays the same, but the beauty draws people in.

My business is technical in two ways: we use technical systems and technology, but we also deal with the technical side of organizational change by helping people shift, grow, and adopt new cultural practices. Whether it's engineering, operations, or art, it's all design. I use my engineering background to design the "algorithm" that helps people move through a process. And I use my art background to consider what something needs to look and feel like to motivate people to actually move.

4. How have your perspective and goals for your entrepreneurship evolved since the beginning of your career?

Wildly. I come from a modest background, and entrepreneurship was not something anyone talked about in my family. The message was: Go to school, get educated, get a good job. Starting something of my own never occurred to me until much later, after I was well into a career.

And I was a reluctant entrepreneur...I didn't even set out to start a business. I just didn't want to go to work anymore and thought, "I can do something on my own." But as I leaned into being a business owner, I learned so much.

Small businesses account for 73 percent of the workforce, with firms hiring one to four people. That's where people work in America. Now I can say, "Oh yes, I am a business owner," and understand the impact of that. I never would have predicted this – I wanted to be an astrophysicist when I was younger! But here we are.

5. What has been the hardest challenge, and what has been the greatest reward of your career?

The hardest challenge is that you never know if you've made the right decision until you're on the other side of it. There's no manual. I read constantly, but everything is retrospective. When you're moving forward, there's no teacher giving you an 'A' for making the right call. You just have to decide.

Autonomy to design my life, to choose my own course, is the greatest reward. I meet monthly with a group of women entrepreneurs here in Baltimore, and we were just talking about this. The freedom to choose what you do, how you do it, and who you work with is priceless.

6. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Honestly, close to where I am now. I expect the business to grow and scale, and I hope to have even more autonomy. I take two months off in the summer now, and I'd love to keep that up or extend it eventually. My hope is that the business reaches a point where it can operate without my day-to-day leadership. That would be amazing. That doesn't mean I'd disappear, just that I'd have built something that persists.

7. What do you consider to be the ultimate measure of the success of your work?

Our mission is tied to our clients' success. If our clients make education more accessible, success is seeing them reach more young people and help more students graduate. If our clients are in environmental sustainability, success is seeing their sustainable products or services reach more people because we helped optimize their systems and free their time so they could focus on the vision. Our impact is our clients' impact. If they can do more good because we made their work easier, that is success.

8. What is your next project?

Storytelling. We've served more than 40 businesses and completed about 90 engagements. People often ask, "What have you actually done? What's the impact?" So, our next initiative is to tell those stories and position

ourselves as thought leaders in operations architecture, and what it takes for businesses to be sustainable in tough environments and to scale successfully.

9. Is there anything you need right now to get to the next level in your business?

Awareness! The more potential clients know about us, the better. If you know an organization that's doing meaningful, world-changing work and could use support, introduce us.

10. What advice would you give to aspiring women entrepreneurs?

Just do it. I've never been big on the traditional idea of a "career ladder." Even when people asked about my dream job title, I just said "happy." I focused instead on designing my life, what I wanted it to look and feel like, what flexibility and stability I wanted. And throughout that process, I had to take risks. Every time I jumped, it turned out OK. My advice: At some point, you have what you need to leap. And it's going to be okay.

11. How has your experience been working with the Light of Baltimore Incubator?

It's been amazing. It's more than just space. It's a cohort, connections, exposure, and opportunities I never would have known existed. I've had countless opportunities through LOB, including this interview. I even did a panel for international visitors that led to conversations with small businesses as far away as Sri Lanka. My cohort members and I refer business to each other. It's been a great experience.

12. Where can people learn more about your organization?

You can find us at <https://www.endeavortbd.com/>.

About "The Light of Baltimore" Incubator at Baker Donelson

Launched in 2022, the Light of Baltimore Incubator at Baker Donelson is a partnership with Johns Hopkins University, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses to support local businesses in Baltimore. As part of this initiative, Baker Donelson dedicated the entire 23rd floor of its Baltimore office as a collaborative workspace, offering resources and strategic guidance to a diverse group of small businesses across multiple industries.

The incubator was born from a visionary conversation between two women leaders, Jennifer Curry, managing shareholder of Baker Donelson's Baltimore office, and Alicia Wilson, former managing director of JPMorganChase's North American Regional Philanthropy Team, to encourage economic development and entrepreneurship in Baltimore.

In June 2024, Innovation Works was invited to lead the launch of the 2025 Small Business Incubator Cohort, further expanding the incubator's impact. Through this collaboration with Baker Donelson and JPMorganChase, Innovation Works will integrate its proven model of business development into the program, helping local entrepreneurs access targeted resources, mentorship, and a supportive workspace to strengthen their enterprises.