

A N E X T C A N A D A P U B L I C A T I O N

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VISHAR YAGHOUBIAN,
THE RISE OF TOOTHPOD
AND THE POWER OF
BRIGHTER SMILES - pg. 20

Life
Style
Issue



PHOTOGRAPHY BY IASSEN GORTCHOV

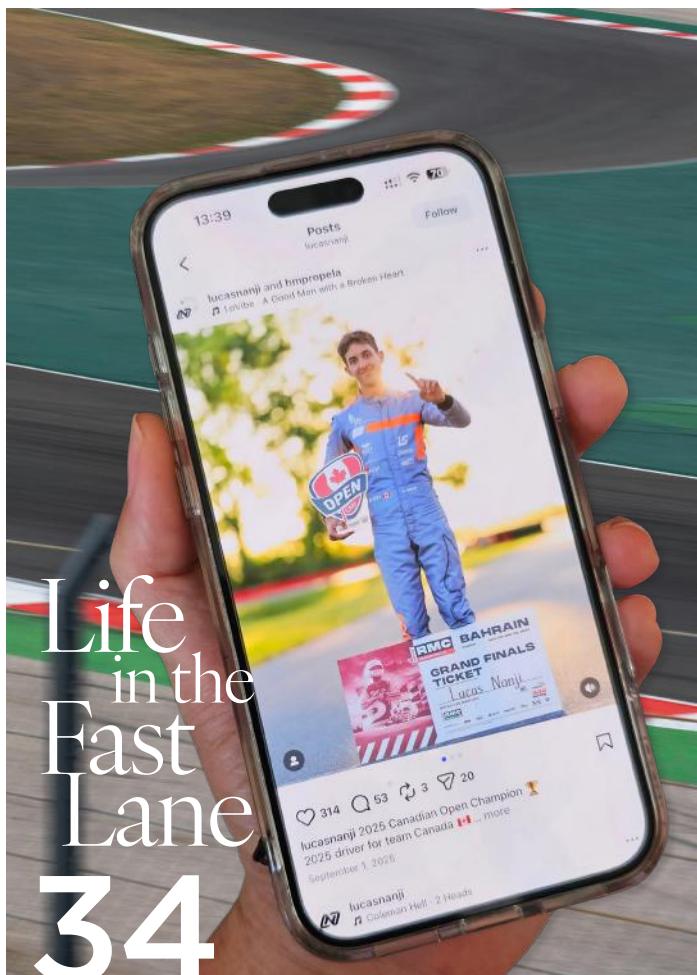
The Art of Leadership

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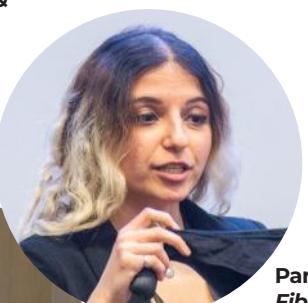
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DEAR GRIT READERS,

Lifestyle is one of those wonderfully expansive ideas

– it's about how we live, what we value, and the choices we make every day, often shaped by the environments, products, and experiences around us. In this issue of GRIT, we had a lot of fun exploring that breadth, meeting founders who are thoughtfully re-imagining the way we care for ourselves, support our families, and show up in the world.

We feature alumni who are building companies at the intersection of innovation and everyday life – **Vishar Yaghoubian** of Toothpod, who is helping modernize dental care; **Parnian Majd** of Fibra, supporting women's health and pregnancy planning; **Mark Coombs** of Sleepout, focused on products that enable truly restful sleep; and **Kevin Huang** and **Anne Hunger** of Glüxkind, whose hands-free baby carriage is redefining mobility for parents on the go. Each of these founders reminds us that lifestyle innovation isn't about trends – it's about improving the moments that make up our days.

One of my personal highlights was sitting down with **John Bianchini**, CEO of Hatch, to talk about a shared love of art – and the powerful role it plays inside an organization. At Hatch, art isn't decoration; it's culture. It sparks curiosity, invites dialogue, and reinforces the idea that creativity belongs at the center of great companies. It was a fitting conversation for this issue, underscoring how founders shape not only what they build, but how their teams experience work itself.

As we put this issue together, I was struck again by how fortunate I've been to be part of the NEXT Canada community. For me, it's much more than a network - it's a family. This issue also marks a personal milestone for me, as it will be my final one as CEO and as I step into retirement. I'm delighted to share that **Jennifer Reynolds** will be joining NEXT Canada in mid-February as our new CEO. Jennifer brings deep leadership experience, a strong commitment to founder development, and a values-driven approach that aligns beautifully with NEXT's mission. I couldn't be more confident in the future of the organization under her leadership.

To our founders, alumni, mentors, partners, donors, and the extraordinary NEXT team – thank you. I've enjoyed every minute of the past six years, and I'm profoundly grateful to everyone who makes this place so special. As I turn toward my next chapter – spending more time in Muskoka working with my partner on the nature preserve we're developing there – I do so with immense pride in what we've built together, and deep optimism for what lies ahead for NEXT.

With gratitude,

Kyle J. Winters

CEO, NEXT Canada

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Welcome Jennifer Reynolds

NEXT Canada's incoming CEO



AS NEXT CANADA CONCLUDES ITS 15TH YEAR, we do so with a deep sense of pride – and with real momentum behind us. What began as an ambitious experiment in founder development has become a national platform supporting some of Canada's most driven and high-potential entrepreneurs. Today, NEXT enters its next chapter on exceptionally strong footing: financially, programmatically, and mission-wise.

It is in this context that we are pleased to welcome **Jennifer Reynolds** as NEXT Canada's new Chief Executive Officer.

Jennifer brings a rare combination of experience across capital markets, investment banking, governance, and not-for-profit leadership. She is widely respected for her strategic clarity, operational discipline, and her ability to build institutions that endure. These strengths align directly with NEXT's purpose: to support founders at the earliest and most consequential stages of their journey – and to help them build companies that scale globally, from Canada.

In the weeks ahead, Jennifer will be spending time with our alumni, partners, donors, board members, and team – listening, learning, and helping shape the future of NEXT with intention and ambition. We are confident she will lead the organization with both conviction and care.

We would also like to thank Kyle Winters, our outgoing CEO for his dedicated service. Kyle has guided NEXT through a period of growth and impact, culminating in our milestone 15th year. As he prepares for retirement, we are deeply grateful for his stewardship and wish him nothing but the best.

NEXT Canada's story has always been about people: founders willing to take risks, mentors and partners who generously support, and great leaders who steward the organization forward. With Jennifer at the helm, we are excited for what comes next – and grateful to everyone who continues to help build this community and its impact.

Reza Satchu & Josh Domingues
Co-Chairs, NEXT Canada

“

The most valuable lesson I carried from my NEXT experience into my entrepreneurial journey is the importance of surrounding myself with the right community. The mindset of pushing one another forward continues to guide how I build and lead today.”

NIMA JALALVANDI

(Next AI, Montréal, 2025 | NEXT Canada Donor)



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The Art of Leadership

A photograph of a man with white hair and glasses, wearing an orange jacket, looking at a large painting of a waterfall. The painting is framed in a dark frame and is mounted on a wall. The man is seen from the back, looking at the painting. The painting is a close-up of a waterfall, with water cascading down a rocky cliff. The colors are mostly blues and greens, with some white from the water. The man is wearing a black turtleneck and blue jeans. He is standing in front of a dark wall with a window on the left. The lighting is coming from the side, highlighting the man's hair and the texture of his jacket.

A conversation with **JOHN BIANCHINI**, CEO and Chairman of Hatch –
by **KYLE J. WINTERS**, NEXT Canada CEO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IASSEN GORTCHOV

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Edward Burtynsky –
Thjorsa River #1 Iceland 2012
(Burtynsky was a guest
contributor in GRIT edition 14
The Big Picture)





There are some days

when I really love my job, and December 8th was one of those days.

John Bianchini is the CEO and Chairman of Hatch – one of the world's leading engineering and project delivery firms – and a long-standing supporter of NEXT Canada. He is also the catalyst behind one of the most impressive corporate art collections in the country. His personal collection, built over decades, is equally well known and deeply respected.

Given my own love of art – and with this issue of GRIT focused on lifestyle – it felt natural to sit down with John to explore how art, and more specifically his passion for it, informs his role as CEO and shapes the culture at Hatch. It was a great morning and I'm happy to share our conversation.

KYLE: You've spoken before about the connection between art and engineering. Can you share with our readers how art shows up at Hatch?

JOHN: We try to do art-and-engineering evenings all around the Hatch world. We really believe there's a strong connection between the two. We involve our whole ecosystem in exploring that connection – our employees, our customers, and the community. Community is very important to us, and art can bring our communities together.

So is the entire collection primarily Canadian, or is there an international component?

It started as a purely historic Canadian collection. My wife Katia and I have been collecting personally for over forty years, and it began with a shared love of Canadian art. Over time, as our exposure and understanding evolved, we added post war modern art. We're especially drawn to abstraction and the emotion it evokes.

More recently, we've come to value relationships with living artists. Meeting them, talking with them, and understanding how they think adds an entirely new dimension to collecting. And these relationships aren't restricted to Canadian artists by any means.

One of the things we care deeply about is showing that Canadian art is equal to any other art in the world – it's just not always appreciated the same way. We often place Canadian artists alongside international contemporaries of the same era and genre so they can speak to one another. In our view, they're equally strong.

Fast Facts:

HATCH

AT A GLANCE

FOUNDED: 1955

GLOBAL DELIVERY CENTER: Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

WHAT THEY DO: Engineering, project delivery, and professional services across metals, energy, and infrastructure

GLOBAL FOOTPRINT: 65+ offices, projects in 150+ countries

PEOPLE: ~11,000 employees worldwide

SCALE: \$75B+ in active projects

EXPERIENCE: 7+ decades of global expertise

Do you see that courage to innovate – something artists are known for – translating into your work as an engineer and leader?

One hundred percent. Engineering is deeply creative work. What we do at Hatch is often bespoke and complex. Like an artist approaching a canvas or a sculptor approaching stone, every project is an act of creation. There's a reason artistic and scientific revolutions often happen together.

Would you say engineering solutions can be beautiful?

Absolutely. Engineering solutions can be just as beautiful as sculptures or paintings. As a matter of fact I greatly enjoy witnessing someone within my team who takes great pride in the beauty of an engineering solution.

How does creativity show up in your own personal leadership as CEO?

Well, it starts with curiosity. Curiosity is the beginning of creativity. I personally ask a lot of questions – sometimes to the annoyance of people around me – but provoking new ways of thinking is an important part of leadership. I think I am known for this, and I think it makes me a better leader.

As you look ahead to a potential retirement on the distant horizon, do you imagine your philosophy around art carrying forward at Hatch?

I hope so. The next generation at Hatch has been immersed in this way of thinking for years. I believe they'll carry it forward – because it's relevant, and because it helps us.

As I always say, art makes us better engineers. That's as true today as I imagine it will be years from now.

Art, as John Bianchini reminds us, doesn't sit apart from the work of building the world. At Hatch, it helps define how that world is imagined – and how responsibly it is brought to life.





Art & Engineering: Selected works from the Hatch collection



NICOLAS BAIER — Deep Learning (left) and Retro (right)

These pieces are by Nicolas Baier, a Montréal-based artist. The piece on the right was actually commissioned with Hatch technology in it, whereas the piece on the left is as the artist originally developed it. Many people will recognize his work from Place Ville Marie or the white marble installation on the Scotia Bank Tower.

We asked Nicolas to explore the relationship between the natural world and the built world. The landscape is intentionally surreal, composed of vegetation from all six continents where Hatch does business. The built world is created through a dense digital montage – Opixel-level imagery sourced and reassembled by computer.

The manipulation of scale is deliberate. Tiny objects are enlarged; massive systems are reduced. We also asked Nicolas to subtly include Hatch technology within the composition, placing the firm inside the systems it helps design. That inclusion raises an important question: where are we headed?

Everything in the built world originates in nature. The longer you stand with this piece, the more you see – a rose beside a satellite, a highway-like perspective, points of light. It's beautiful, but challenging – a meditation on balance, responsibility, and the future we're shaping.

JOHN SCOTT — Dark Commander

This is a work by John Scott, one of Toronto's most distinctive and psychologically complex artists. Some people initially mistake it for Michael Snow, but the silhouette gives it away – this is unmistakably John Scott.

Throughout his career, Scott returned to two archetypes: Dark Commander and Bunny Man. Dark Commander represents authoritarian power; Bunny Man embodies empathy and vulnerability. John spoke openly about wrestling with these forces within himself and seeing them reflected in society.

This Dark Commander was discovered after his death, rolled up in his studio by his gallerist and executor, Nicholas Metivier. It's believed to have been painted roughly fifteen years earlier and then set aside. A month later, a companion Bunny Man painting of the same scale surfaced, likely created around the same time.

Seen together, they form a yin and yang – the light and the dark, the empathetic and the authoritarian. They reflect Scott's belief that individuals and societies are shaped by the tension between opposing forces.



SEBASTIÃO SALGADO — GENESIS

This photograph is by Sebastião Salgado, one of the most important photographers of the last century and arguably the most influential to come out of South America. This image appears on the cover of *Genesis*, one of his most celebrated books.

Salgado spent much of his life documenting the natural environment and the people who live closest to it. When I met him through a mutual friend, I was struck not only by his work, but by his story. He grew up in southern Brazil on a ranch carved out of rainforest land. Over time, he came to understand the ecological cost of that deforestation.

In the late 1970s, he and his wife founded Instituto Terra, committing to reforest the land and surrounding properties. Over 35 years, more than 8 million seedlings have been grown and over 3 million of them planted in 2,300 hectares, restoring degraded land into rainforest. Today, it's one of the most significant rainforest rehabilitation projects in the world.

At Hatch, we partnered with Instituto Terra to support its education programs, involving employees and clients along the way. For me, this image is a reminder that creativity, responsibility, and long-term thinking can – and should – coexist.



ABRAHAM ANGHIK RUBEN — Odin in the New World

This work is by Abraham Anghik Ruben, an Inuit sculptor now living on Vancouver Island. This piece was central to our very first art-and-engineering evening at Hatch.

Abraham's work draws from Inuit origin stories and oral history, including accounts of encounters between Inuit communities and Scandinavian explorers – the Vikings. While Western written history offers little documentation of these meetings, Inuit storytelling preserves them. Abraham gives those stories physical form.

Carved from Brazilian soapstone, the piece depicts Vikings and First Nations imagery side by side, speaking to coexistence and mutual survival. The raven – a symbol of Abraham's Raven clan – appears prominently, as does Sedna, the sea goddess of Inuit mythology. Interestingly, the name Sedna also appears in Scandinavian languages, reinforcing shared iconography.

Abraham often talks about letting the stone guide him. He embraces negative space, allowing lightness and movement to emerge naturally. We brought him to Hatch not only because of the work itself, but because it opens conversations about Indigenous reconciliation – asking how coexistence was possible a thousand years ago, and how we might move toward it again.

Lifestyle Makers

The founders behind what we wear, use, and live by.



Vishar Yaghoubian,
Toothpod



Parnian Majd,
Fibra



Anne Hunger & Kevin Huang,
Clüxkind



Nadia Ladak, Kiara Botha & Harit Sohal, Marlow



Max Clark,
Icarus



Jia Xi Chen'
Morphace



Mark Coombs,
Sleepout



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Toothpod and the Art of the Everyday Ritual

Vishar Yaghoubian

Toothpod (NEXT 36, 2024)

SOME OF THE MOST MEANINGFUL lifestyle changes don't come from bold reinventions, they come from the quiet decisions we make every day. The objects we reach for in the morning. The routines we repeat without thinking. The small rituals that, over time, shape not just our schedules, but the way we move through the world.

For Vishar Yaghoubian, founder and CEO of Toothpod, oral care belongs firmly in that category. Brushing your teeth is one of the most universal daily acts, and yet, it's rarely treated with the same intentionality we bring to other parts of wellness and lifestyle. Vishar saw an opportunity not just to improve the function of an everyday routine, but to elevate the experience of it: to make it feel more refined, more thoughtful, and more aligned with modern values like sustainability and mindful consumption.

That perspective starts with Vishar herself. She describes her personal style as minimalist and intentional, drawn to objects that are simple, functional, and quietly beautiful. That design sensibility became the foundation of Toothpod. Rather than building something flashy or complicated, she focused on what she believes matters most in daily living: small details that meaningfully improve the rhythm of life. Toothpod, she says, is an expression of that philosophy – purposeful, refined, and designed to make a routine moment feel better.

Toothpod's product offering reflects today's increasingly mobile, fast-moving lifestyles. At its core, the brand offers portable dental smart chewables designed to support oral hygiene when brushing isn't convenient – during travel, between meetings, after meals, or on long days when routines become fragmented. Toothpod uses ingredients like hydroxyapatite (for enamel support), resveratrol (for gum health), xylitol, and botanicals including magnolia bark.

But Toothpod's story isn't only about what's inside the product, it's about what the product represents. Vishar's inspiration came from noticing how many everyday rituals feel disposable and uninspired. So many wellness products are designed for quick consumption rather than lasting value. And oral care, in particular, has long been treated as purely functional: something to complete rather than something to consider. Vishar wanted to reimagine brushing not as a chore, but as an elevated ritual, one that brings design, calm, and sustainability into a moment most people rarely stop to appreciate.

That sense of intention is exactly what makes Toothpod resonate as a lifestyle brand. Vishar understands that modern customers



“When a product is built to last and designed with intention, it naturally becomes both elegant and responsible.”

aren't simply buying products – they're buying meaning. They want to feel that what they use daily reflects who they are and what they value. Toothpod achieves that emotional connection through “the details”: the simplicity of the design, the tactile feel, and the sense that it belongs in a curated life rather than adding clutter to it. Toothpod is not just a tool; it becomes a subtle reminder to slow down and treat daily care with more presence.

Equally important is Toothpod's commitment to sustainability, not as a marketing layer, but as a core design principle. Vishar explains that for Toothpod, beauty, practicality, and environmental responsibility work together rather than compete. Every product decision is guided by longevity, simplicity, and a reduced footprint. When something is built to last and designed with intention, it naturally becomes both elegant and responsible. It's a mindset that mirrors broader lifestyle shifts happening across consumer culture: fewer items, better quality, and more mindful use.

Ultimately, Toothpod encourages people to rethink the personal care tools they rely on every day. It doesn't replace brushing, it enhances oral health by making the routine feel more hygienic, intentional, and long-lasting. In doing so, Toothpod sits comfortably within a new definition of lifestyle: one rooted not in excess, but in purpose. Because sometimes the most powerful design statement isn't what's loudest – it's what quietly makes your everyday life better.



Sleepout: Best in Blackout

Mark Coombs

Sleepout (NEXT Founders, 2023)

SLEEPOUT STARTED THE WAY many truly lifestyle-defining brands do: not with a trend forecast or a product brain-storm, but with a deeply personal problem, and the stubbornness to solve it properly.

For founder Mark, sleep has been a lifelong struggle. Long before Sleepout existed, he remembers growing up in apartments with a mom who worked night shifts as a nurse, doing whatever the family could to block out windows and create darkness. Sleep wasn't just a "wellness goal." It was something fragile – something you had to fight for.

That fight came roaring back during the pandemic. Like many people, Mark's sleep deteriorated, and when daylight savings shifted forward, he began waking every morning around 5:00 or 5:30 a.m. Without any real solution, he did what exhausted people often do: improvised. Blackout fabric. Tin foil. Whatever could keep light out long enough to feel human again.

But Mark also had something else: time, curiosity, and the willingness to go further than most would to solve the problem. He started prototyping a curtain that could install easily, fully block out a window, and genuinely improve sleep. What he created worked. And once it worked for him, he quickly realized he wasn't alone. When Sleepout went to market, the response confirmed it: there were countless others facing the same issue, especially parents of young children, travellers, renters, and anyone trying to protect their rest in unpredictable environments.

The early version of Sleepout was unapologetically functional, a true problem-solution product. It needed to stick to glass, fully block the window, and never fail. For nearly two years, Mark focused on getting the mechanics right: suction cups strong enough to hold, secure enough to stay, and simple enough to install quickly. That commitment led to what Sleepout describes as its patented locking suction cup system, enabling blackout without drilling, curtain rods, or permanent installation.

Only once the function was perfected did the brand begin moving into something bigger:

Disrupting the blackout curtain industry by creating a new class of blackout curtains.

As Mark and his team dug deeper into the curtain industry, what they found surprised even them. Much of what's marketed as "blackout" isn't truly blackout – it's often "dim-out" fabric that still lets light seep through. And many fabrics that are genuinely blackout rely on chemical coatings, including formaldehyde and other substances that can off-gas into the room.

That discovery became a defining moment for Sleepout. Over the last two years, Mark explains, they developed their

own exclusive Sleepout® fabric: 100% blackout, high quality, and completely non-toxic, including formaldehyde-free. The company positions itself as the only blackout brand with GREENGUARD® Gold certification for its curtains, a certification earned from extensive chamber testing, proving their curtains' benefits for cleaner indoor air.

This is where Sleepout's lifestyle relevance becomes undeniable: it's not just about darkness. It's about trust. Sleep is deeply personal, and the bedroom is one of the most intimate spaces in a home. When you've been struggling – when you walk into a room already expecting bad sleep – the stress becomes part of the problem. Mark understands that intimately, and Sleepout's brand experience is built around confidence: third-party testing, authentic reviews, awards, and consistent customer service. Their motto captures it simply: "Best in Blackout."

As the brand has grown, Mark says Sleepout has expanded from a portable fix – for parents, travel, moving, or temporary needs – into something broader. Customers buy one set, feel the difference, and then message saying: "I want every curtain in my house to be from you." That's not just customer satisfaction, it's lifestyle adoption.



We want customers to know that if they buy from us, they're getting the best – backed by testing – and that there are real people behind the company who genuinely care."

And as wellness becomes increasingly central to modern life, Sleepout fits naturally into the conversation. Hustle culture is fading, and sleep is no longer framed as weakness, it's performance, mental health, stability, and joy. Mark puts it simply: when he protects his sleep routine, he becomes a completely different person than when his sleep is chaotic. And if that's true for one person, he can only imagine what it means for families, parents, and anyone living under stress.

Sleepout's bigger vision, then, isn't just blackout curtains. It's a design-led, trust-driven wellness brand built around one of the most essential lifestyle upgrades available: creating an environment where rest becomes possible, and where darkness is not a compromise, but a standard.



Find better products by knowing What and When



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Morphace

Skincare, Measured

Jia Xi Chen

Morphace (NEXT 36, 2023)

FOR JIA XI CHEN, Morphace started as a personal rebellion against a beauty narrative built on anxiety.

She grew up surrounded by messaging that framed women's bodies, and especially women's skin, as something perpetually in need of fixing. The kind of marketing that turns "self-care" into fear management. Jia remembers that by 21, she had already bought an at-home anti-aging device "to prevent wrinkles before they appear." Looking back, it wasn't empowerment, it was pressure, packaged as prevention.

That mindset began to shift when she started working out consistently. For the first time, caring for herself felt energizing rather than anxious. Fitness made progress visible: you can track strength, stamina, recovery. You can measure. You can learn. Jia began to notice something strange – skincare is one of the only wellness categories where we rarely measure anything, unless there's a medical issue.

And when there's no measurement, there's guesswork.

So decision-making gets outsourced: to insecurity-driven ads, trend-chasing influencers, or well-meaning friends whose biology is completely different. Jia saw how deeply broken that system is, and how much money and emotional energy it costs people.

Morphace was born from that insight: if the skin is a living, dynamic organ, why are we treating it like a static surface? Why are we trying to "improve" it without any feedback loop?

Morphace is designed to make skincare measurable, personalized, and motivating. The company is building an at-home wearable mask that combines sensing and treatment, measuring key skin health metrics in about a minute, including deep hydration, epidermis barrier strength, and inflammation markers. Morphace describes its sensing system as capturing electro-physiological signals from the skin, including impedance-based measurements used to estimate hydration beneath the surface.

But the technology isn't there to replace intuition – it's there to restore it.

Jia believes there's power in capturing the right data and letting intelligence emerge from patterns. She saw AI being used to predict patient responses to medication and connect lifestyle behavior to mental health outcomes, and asked a simple question: *Why not skincare?*

The leap made sense, especially given Jia's background. During her PhD, she often had to build tools that didn't exist yet, translating research into real-world use. Meanwhile, beauty and wellness was always her personal passion, the "spending-two-grand-a-year" kind. And yet, like so many people, she still had no reliable way to know what truly worked. For Jia, technology wasn't an add-on – it was the missing link.

It's easy to forget how much consumer behavior changes when

tracking enters the picture. Heart-rate monitoring changed the way we exercise. Sleep tracking changed how we treat caffeine and rest. Nutrition tracking changed how we think about food. Morphace is applying that same framework to skincare: shifting it from brand-based consumption to *informed experimentation*. Users should be able to test products, compare results, and choose what works based on their own body, not marketing claims.

Crucially, Morphace is built to keep the human element front and centre. Jia describes skincare as more like caring for a pet than solving a one-time problem: your skin can't talk, but you can sense when something's off. The goal is to deepen that relationship, to make people feel closer to their bodies, not more alienated by screens and numbers.

That's also why community is part of the experience. Morphace has created a user forum where people can share outcomes, and where even those without the device can filter posts by relevant variables like skin type, climate, or habits. The effect is subtle but powerful: skincare becomes a collective learning experience instead of a lonely trial-and-error loop shaped by trends.

Even in manufacturing, Jia is thinking long-term. Morphace is intentionally positioned as a reusable device, more like an electric

When you can see the impact of your choices, self-care becomes less about chasing perfection and more about understanding your body's user manual."

toothbrush than a disposable routine of sheet masks and repeat-purchase treatments. She's candid that Morphace is still early-stage and producing small batches, but the principle is already embedded: if we care about skin health, we should care about the environment skin lives in.

Morphace reflects where lifestyle is heading next: toward beauty that's body-aware, tech-enabled, and grounded in feedback rather than fear. Jia doesn't see the brand as driving a trend so much as responding to one already underway. At pop-ups, people aren't asking for miracle claims, they're asking smarter questions: *What's the difference between a \$50 and \$500 serum? How often should I exfoliate? Which LED colours actually have evidence behind them?*

In Jia's eyes, if the last decade was about clean beauty, the next chapter is intelligent beauty, caring for yourself with awareness, data, and a deeper connection to the body. Morphace is building the tool to make that shift real.



Period Care, Reimagined

Nadia Ladak

Marlow (NEXT Founders, 2025)

FOR FAR TOO LONG, period care has been treated as an afterthought – a category where discomfort is normalized, innovation is rare, and stigma still shapes both product design and public conversation. Marlow, founded by Nadia Ladak, exists because of a simple but radical belief: *comfort is a right, not a luxury*.

The brand was born directly from lived experience. Nadia recalls years of unnecessarily painful, awkward, even embarrassing moments around menstruation, and a growing frustration that the industry hadn't meaningfully evolved in close to a century. Something as basic as inserting a tampon shouldn't stand between someone and their confidence, their comfort, or the activities they love. Yet for many people, it does.

Those experiences didn't just shape what Marlow created, they shaped what Marlow stands for. From the start, the company has been built on transparency, dignity, and equity. Nadia and the Marlow team believe people deserve to know what they're putting into their bodies, and that women's health should receive the same level of investment, innovation, and respect as every other category.

That commitment to change is most visible in Marlow's headline innovation: a first-of-its-kind lubricated tampon experience designed to reduce friction, literally and culturally. The inspiration traces back to Nadia's teenage years as a competitive swimmer, when pads felt bulky and limiting, and tampons often felt uncomfortable to insert. That tension, wanting freedom of movement but having no product that truly supported it, stayed with her.

And she wasn't alone. As Nadia points out, many menstruators struggle with tampons: Marlow cites that 54% of women struggle to use tampons, and that 1 in 2 teens drop out of sports because of their period and a lack of products that work for them. Those figures illustrate what's often missing from period care conversations: pain and discomfort don't just affect wellbeing – they affect participation in everyday life.

Marlow's answer is refreshingly practical: an easy-glide approach that makes insertion smoother and more comfortable through a water-based tampon lubricant, designed to be used alongside their tampons. The product itself is also held to a higher standard, featuring 100% organic cotton tampons, described as free from fragrance, dyes, synthetic materials, and chlorine bleaching. Marlow also notes its products are third-party tested for 1,000+ substances (including metals).

What's especially striking is that Marlow didn't simply create a new product, it navigated a space long underserved and stigmatized to bring it to life. Nadia describes the hurdles candidly: pitching in predominantly male investor rooms, securing Health Canada approval, and finding manufacturing partners willing to develop an entirely new type of tampon from scratch. The

breakthrough came through persistence, resourcefulness, and community – listening closely to early users, iterating quickly, and surrounding the company with experts and women's health leaders who understood the need.

That community-building mindset has become central to Marlow's identity. From day one, Nadia viewed Marlow as more than a customer base – it had to be a space for honest conversation. Menstrual health has been stigmatized for generations, so Marlow actively works to normalize the topics other brands often avoid: painful insertion, first-time tampon anxiety, pelvic discomfort, reproductive health, and period pain. Their community, aptly named "The TMI Club," reframes "too much information" into something empowering, an invitation to ask questions and speak openly. (And just as importantly, the Marlow team listens back, treating its users as co-creators.)

Responsibility also shows up in the details. Marlow emphasizes sustainable and body-safe choices, including certified 100% organic cotton and a plant-based sugarcane-derived, BPA-free applicator, aiming to reduce environmental impact without compromising performance. For Nadia, corporate responsibility isn't branding, it's a filter for decision-making.

Looking ahead, Nadia sees Marlow as part of a wider shift in wellness: away from aspirational perfection and toward real, attuned support. Sustainability and clean ingredients are becoming baseline expectations. The next frontier, she argues, is pain-aware menstrual care – designing for comfort, not just absorbency, and refusing to dismiss discomfort as "normal." Marlow's lubricated tampon is just the start. The bigger mission is a cultural one: a world where menstrual health and menstrual pain are treated with the seriousness they deserve, in research, in product design, and in everyday conversation.



This product exists because people who menstruate deserve better comfort, better design, and better support.

ROSA SMART STROLLER



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Parenting, Powered by Presence

Anne Hunger & Kevin Huang

Glüxkind (NEXT NAI (Montréal), 2022)

GLÜXKIND BEGAN THE WAY many great lifestyle brands do, not from a desire to “disrupt a category,” but from a real moment in life where the status quo stopped making sense.

In 2019, Anne Hunger and Kevin Huang were expecting their first daughter. Like most new parents, they stepped into early parenthood feeling excited, overwhelmed, and full of anticipation, and quickly discovered that everyday parenting can feel unnecessarily hard, even with the best products on the market. Their daughter became the first tester of Glüxkind prototypes (Anne jokes that the earliest ones were just Kevin), and when their son arrived in 2023, he was immediately promoted to “Chief Product Tester.”

What emerged from those lived experiences was Glüxkind’s core belief: technology should quietly support life, not dominate it. It’s not innovation for innovation’s sake. It’s the kind of thoughtful design that reduces strain, increases safety, and helps parents stay present in the moments that matter.

Glüxkind is best known for its smart stroller systems, designed for urban families navigating busy sidewalks, grocery runs, and hilly neighbourhoods where getting out of the house can feel like a workout. On its product pages, Glüxkind describes AI-powered features like powerful push assistance (with a dual-motor powertrain) and automatic brake assistance to help parents manage inclines and descents more safely and easily. The message is clear: parenting requires enough energy already, mobility shouldn’t drain what’s left.

But what makes Glüxkind a lifestyle story is how deeply personal its design philosophy is. Anne and Kevin’s decisions, product roadmap, modular features, even the brand messaging, reflect how they live as parents: the challenges they face, the experiences they treasure, and the memories they want to create. For them, time outside isn’t optional, it’s essential. It’s where kids explore, burn off energy, notice the small things adults overlook, and build confidence through movement. A stroller shouldn’t be a barrier to that; it should be a bridge.

The emotional connection Glüxkind has built with parents is rooted in that reality. One of the most common reactions they hear when people see the stroller is: “Where was this when my kids were little?” – usually followed by a story. That’s the brand’s sweet spot: not the gadget, but the lived experience. Because

parenthood is fueled by stories, and the baby product industry runs on social proof, parents supporting parents, especially when everything is new and uncertain.

Anne and Kevin also approach community in an unusually human way. They’ve maintained personal customer service from the start: every inquiry answered by one of them, not a ticketing system. Sometimes early customers even share family photos, funny moments, or milestones – the kind of intimacy that doesn’t happen when a company feels distant. In those exchanges, Glüxkind becomes more than a product; it becomes part of a family’s narrative.

That same intention shapes Glüxkind’s approach to responsible entrepreneurship. They believe in “designing less, but better,” integrating features and accessories that might normally be purchased separately into one system, reducing material use, packaging waste, and complexity. Their modular design extends the stroller’s life beyond infancy through a durable core frame with interchangeable attachments, so families can adapt rather than replace. And with a software-enabled platform, Glüxkind can continue to improve through over-the-air updates, evolving the product long after purchase.

Everyday parenting still feels unnecessarily hard – even for something as essential as a stroller.”

Even more notably, inclusivity is central to the company’s vision. Assistive technology isn’t positioned as a luxury, it’s framed as enabling parents with mobility limitations to move confidently and independently. For Anne and Kevin, thoughtful family design means designing for *all* families.

Ultimately, Glüxkind reflects a modern kind of lifestyle aspiration – not perfection, but presence. Parenting will always be demanding. But if technology can reduce the strain and fade into the background, parents can focus on what matters: the walk, the conversation, the curiosity, the calm 1:1 moment with a child, the memory being made in real time.

And that is Glüxkind’s story: parents building tools for parents – creating technology that feels human enough to disappear.



[CLICK HERE FOR FIBRA'S
WEBSITE & SOCIALS](#)

Fibra: Intuitive FemTech

Parnian Majd

Fibra (NEXT 36, 2022)

FIBRA BEGINS WITH A POWERFUL REFRAME: what if women's health technology didn't feel clinical, complicated, or intrusive, but instead felt soft, intuitive, and seamlessly woven into everyday life?

Founded by Parnian Majd, Fibra is redefining lifestyle wellness by transforming underwear into a wearable health platform. The product integrates textile-based, yarn sensors into comfortable garments that can passively track key reproductive health signals, including skin temperature, vaginal pH, discharge volume changes, and heart rate/HRV, and sync that information into the Fibra app for ongoing insights.

But Fibra isn't just an innovation in femtech – it's an innovation in how wellness fits into a woman's life.

Parnian's personal values are at the core of the brand. She describes herself as someone drawn to design that is "minimal, purposeful, and quietly powerful," and Fibra reflects that sensibility in every decision. For her, creating Fibra wasn't only about building better technology, it was about creating technology that truly sees women, respects their intelligence, and reflects their lived experience. No gimmicks. No shame. No messaging that treats women's bodies like problems to fix. Instead, Fibra is rooted in science and empathy, presented with integrity and elegance.

That combination, rigor without harshness, is what gives Fibra its distinctive place in the lifestyle and wellness world.

The inspiration behind the product came from a deceptively simple observation: the most accurate health insights come from routines people already follow naturally, not the habits they have to remember to start. Parnian has spent years in biosensing and wearable technology, and she has seen firsthand how many devices fail because they interrupt daily life. They're uncomfortable. They need constant charging. They're bulky. And eventually, they end up forgotten in a drawer.

Underwear is different. It's personal, consistent, and in direct contact with the body's most meaningful reproductive signals. For Parnian, it became the ideal foundation for a smarter system, one that removes friction entirely. Instead of asking women to work for their data, she wanted the data to work for them: automatically, passively, and beautifully. The concept is radically modern, yet deeply human: technology that blends into life rather than demanding attention.

That intention carries into Fibra's material and production choices. Parnian frames every decision through a personal test:

Is this something I would feel proud and safe to put on my own body? From there, Fibra prioritizes comfort and longevity. The sensors are designed to be soft, washable, and long-lasting, reducing dependence on disposable plastics or single-use tests. The electronics are built to be rechargeable and modular, with sustainability treated not as a feature but as a responsibility, both to the body and to the planet.

At the heart of Fibra, though, is something even more personal: body literacy.

Parnian speaks about Fibra as more than health tracking. It's a tool that builds a relationship between users and their proprioception – the ability to understand what their bodies are doing, and why. The emotional shift happens when a user realizes: "My body makes sense – I finally have language for it." Fibra is designed for reassurance, offering gentle nudges and clear insights without overwhelm. In a world where women receive endless messaging about what their bodies "should" do, Fibra does the opposite: it listens.

And that listening creates confidence.

Instead of guessing, users see patterns. Instead of chasing symptoms, they understand rhythms. The result is a sense of



No gimmicks, no shame-based messaging – just thoughtful design rooted in science and empathy."

calm, clarity, and self-trust, a kind of wellness that goes deeper than products and protocols. It's agency. It's knowing. It's being able to make informed decisions in a body that feels supported rather than scrutinized.

Fibra also signals a broader shift in the lifestyle space: wellness is moving from aspirational to attuned. People don't want more noise. They want tools that fit naturally into real human behavior. Fibra proves that meaningful innovation doesn't have to be bulky or clinical – it can be soft, stylish, and seamlessly integrated into the routines women already have.

For Parnian, that's the future she's building toward: health tech that honors the body instead of overriding it, and innovation that feels not only personal, but profoundly necessary.



The SPF Upgrade

Max Clark

Icarus (NEXT 36, 2025)

FOR MOST PEOPLE, sunscreen is a last-minute grab – the thing you remember only when you're headed to the beach, packing for vacation, or feeling a sunburn coming on. It's treated like a utility product: functional, forgettable, and often tolerated rather than enjoyed.

That's exactly what Max Clark set out to change when he founded Icarus Sun Protection.

Max describes himself as "the most intentional person" he knows when it comes to sunscreen, and the spark for Icarus came from a surprisingly ordinary moment: walking into a store and realizing there simply weren't any options that felt truly good. Not just in the marketing sense, but in the lived experience sense. The products available felt cheap, irritating, and uninspired, built to meet baseline regulatory requirements, but not designed for people who care about long-term skin health, the environment, or the everyday ritual of applying SPF.

That frustration quickly turned into clarity. If a better sunscreen didn't exist, Max decided he would build it.

At the heart of Icarus is a conviction that sunscreen deserves to be held to the same standard as the rest of modern skincare. Max points out something that feels obvious once you hear it: in most cosmetics categories – soaps, moisturizers, serums, cleansers – brands obsess over texture, scent, and user experience. Yet sunscreen, arguably one of the most important daily health products, often feels like an afterthought. Greasy textures. Harsh ingredients. The sense that you're applying something you *should* wear, not something you *want* to wear.

Icarus flips that idea on its head.

Max's goal is to turn SPF from a begrudging obligation into a lifestyle experience, something that fits naturally into people's routines, whether they're golfing, travelling, running errands, or spending time outdoors. He envisions a sunscreen that feels "buttery smooth" on the skin, smells pleasant, and supports skin health – the kind of product people associate with premium personal care, not with chalky lotions stuffed in beach bags.

From the beginning, Icarus has also been built with a clear aesthetic point of view. The brand is intentionally modern and premium, designed to evoke luxury and confidence rather than clinical minimalism or drugstore utility. Max doesn't see performance and beauty as competing priorities, he sees them as inseparable. A quality product should look like one. And a premium aesthetic should be backed by a formulation that doesn't cut corners.

That balance, protection and experience, is especially important in sun care because SPF is ultimately a trust category. Sunscreen is tied to health in a way that most beauty products aren't. Max's



"A quality product deserves to exist in a quality aesthetic."

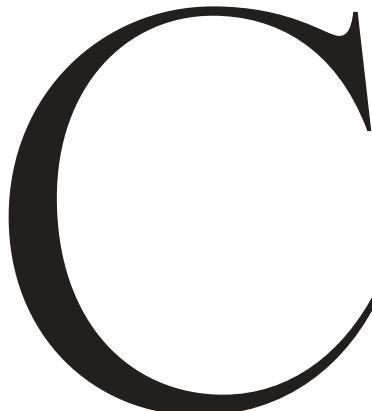
approach to credibility is interesting: while approvals and regulations matter (and sunscreen is heavily regulated in Canada), he believes the strongest trust is built through brand consistency and customer experience. People want to understand *why* a founder is building something, and when they resonate with that reason, credibility becomes emotional as much as technical.

Ultimately, Max's long-term vision for Icarus is aligned with where wellness is heading more broadly: toward prevention, intentionality, and daily habits that quietly shape health over time. Dermatologists have already been pushing SPF as a consistent part of skincare routines, not a seasonal product. And as Millennials and Gen Z increasingly shape the market – consumers who are more inclined toward premium, high-performance essentials – Max sees an industry ready for improvement.

In that next chapter, Icarus isn't just trying to be another sunscreen on the shelf. It's trying to become the sunscreen people actually enjoy wearing, so no one ever has to choose between an irritating product and a sunburn.



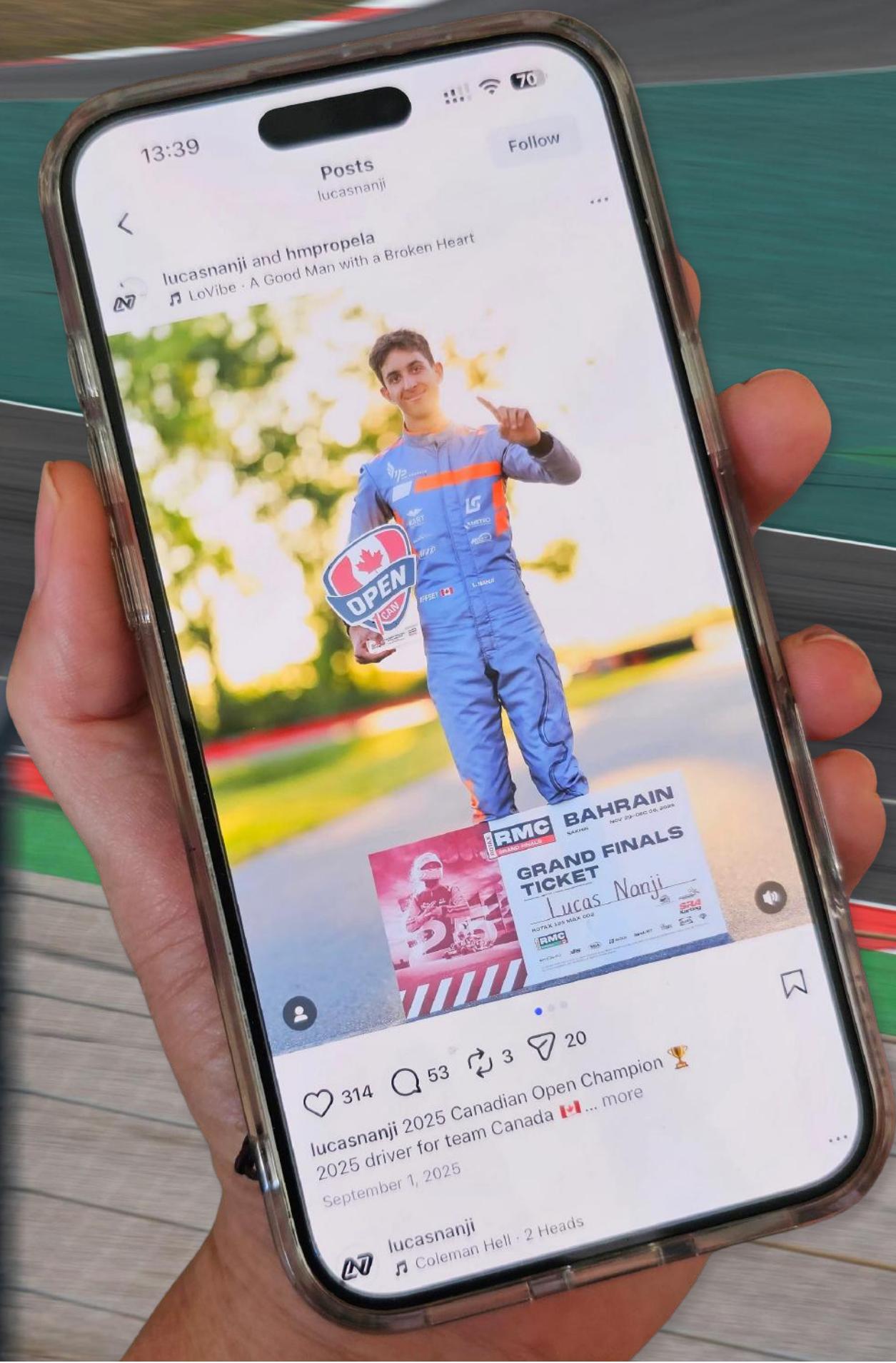
Life in the Fast Lane



HIKO NANJI IS THE CHAIRMAN OF METRO SUPPLY CHAIN, a boundlessly enthusiastic supporter of NEXT Canada, and a valued member of our Board. He's also someone whose life runs at a relentless pace – shuttling between Montréal, Toronto, and Miami, balancing the demands of leading a global supply chain business with the equally consuming role of being a deeply engaged parent.

I get Google alerts for NEXT Canada's Board members as a way of staying connected to what's happening in their worlds. Recently, one alert tagged "Nanji" caught my attention for a different reason. It wasn't about supply chains or boardrooms – it was about Chiko's son, Lucas, who competes internationally in kart racing.

Given this issue of GRIT is focused on lifestyle, Chiko (and his unusually busy lifestyle) felt like a natural fit. And despite a schedule that would overwhelm most of us, he made time to sit down for a quick cappuccino at the Hazelton – an unhurried moment in an otherwise fast-moving life.



In Conversation

KYLE J. WINTERS, NEXT CEO: Chiko my friend, what is this that I hear that Lucas is in Bahrain right now? Take me through that – he's been training all year, and now he's representing Canada internationally – and in Bahrain?

CHIKO: He is. He's there racing karts as part of Team Canada. It's a very small group – in his category, I believe there are only three or four drivers representing Canada – and Lucas earned his place by winning his way onto the team. Now he's competing in Bahrain at a very high level.

And he's only seventeen? Your seventeen-year-old son is racing professionally.

Yes. Over the past six months, he's also been transitioning into open-wheel cars. He's been competing in the F4 circuit and has completed close to thirty test days across Europe and the United States. Next year, he'll be joining the Pabst team in the U.S. and competing in the USF2000 series.

What does that kind of commitment do to your life – and to your partnership at home? How much are you chasing him around the world?

A lot. We spend significant time helping him choose coaching teams and engineering teams, and deciding who he should partner with. We're really following his dream and his passion. But it comes with anxiety. When you see your child moving at that kind of speed, as a parent, it's frightening. Watching your son drive 240 kilometres an hour in an open-wheel car is scary – there's no way around that.

And as parents you are travelling constantly to support him?

We are – Europe, the U.S., track to track. From the outside, there are moments that look glamorous, but there's also a tremendous amount of hard work. You're watching him manage pressure, discipline, and the physical demands of the sport.

People don't realize how athletic you need to be. The neck strength, the G-forces – unless you're in this world, you don't train for that. He works closely with engineers and a mental performance coach, learning how to qualify, how to race, and how to deal with adversity.

He's also learning how to train alongside friends, then compete fiercely against them – and still respect the outcome. How to race with his elbows in, and when necessary, with his elbows out.

Which is competition in its purest form.

Exactly. You prepare together, you compete hard, and afterward you respect the result.

His education must look very different from a traditional school path?

Very different. He's homeschooled, following a U.S. curriculum. He has teachers who work with him online and sometimes meets him at the track. It's unconventional, but it allows him to pursue both racing and education seriously.

Fast Facts:



FOUNDED: 1974

HEADQUARTERS: Montréal, Québec, Canada

WHAT IT DOES:

- End-to-end supply chain and third-party logistics (3PL) solutions
- Warehousing, transportation, fulfillment, and last-mile delivery
- Technology-enabled supply chain optimization and visibility

SCALE:

- ~19–21 million sq. ft. of logistics and distribution space
- 9,000+ employees

FOOTPRINT:

- 175+ sites
- Operations across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe

MARKETS SERVED: Retail, e-commerce, consumer goods, healthcare, and industrial sectors

OWNERSHIP: Privately owned

EXPERIENCE: 50+ years of supply chain expertise

RECOGNITION: Multiple-time recipient of Canada's Best Managed Companies designation

Do you think the emotional investment you and your family are making brings you closer to him than most parents of a seventeen-year-old?

I don't have another seventeen-year-old to compare it to – but I do think it creates a closeness you wouldn't otherwise have. We're a very tight family. I'd say about eighty percent of our dinner conversations revolve around racing.

Is this a surprising dimension of your own life?

I've always loved cars. But seeing the fire in his belly – his passion – reminds me of how I built Metro.

For all the travel, training, and intensity, what comes through most clearly is perspective. In supporting Lucas's racing career, Chiko and his family have built a level of connection you don't often see at seventeen – sharing the discipline, risk, and focus that come with chasing something exceptional. It's a reminder that lifestyle isn't just about speed, but about being present in the moments that matter most.

FOUNDER-FRIENDLY AI: How Canada's Entrepreneurs can Build Iconic Brands



Authored by

CHARLOTTE SOBOLEWSKI

AI transformation leader for consumer products and retail,
EY Canada

IN

A MARKET WHERE TRENDS SHIFT WEEKLY AND LOYALTY IS FRAGILE, lifestyle and retail founders face a defining question: how do you stand out when customers have infinite alternatives? EY's Future Consumer Index shows shoppers no longer make decisions based on legacy, but instead trust, value, quality and relevance. Winning brands don't only sell products, they reflect identity and purpose. Historically, early-stage founders lacked the resources to deliver this level of resonance. That's changing.

AI has evolved from a buzzword into an accessible toolkit that allows entrepreneurs to build experiences that feel both tailored and human, without heavy investment, sophisticated teams or infrastructure.

ENDLESS CHOICE, ERODING LOYALTY

Digital engagement has exploded but so has the noise. With 88% of consumers saying brand messaging misses the mark and over a third abandoning brand loyalty, founders must rethink growth models. Mass distribution and paid media no longer guarantee visibility. AI-driven discovery channels favour scale, leaving smaller brands invisible unless they actively participate in this ecosystem.

For founders, building a great product isn't enough. They must create experiences that resonate. Increasingly, AI is becoming an indispensable part of how that happens.

HOW AI LEVELS THE PLAYING FIELD

AI has become a front-line growth engine, and for founders this means access to capabilities once reserved for global giants. Today, public-model AI democratizes advanced prediction, personalization and trend analytics, giving entrepreneurs strategic advantages without deep technical teams or heavy infrastructure.

Think of it as three wins:

- **Validate faster**

Generative design tools like *DALL·E* or *Gemini* allow founders to create products and packaging concepts in hours, accelerating iteration and reducing upfront costs.

- **Sense trends sooner**

AI-powered platforms such as *Google Trends* AI surface cultural signals in real time to anticipate shifts before they hit mainstream.

- **Personalize deeper**

Sentiment analysis and predictive engines transform raw feedback into actionable insights, enabling hyper-personalized experiences that resonate with identity and emotion.

This is the **Workforce of One** advantage: AI amplifies creativity, strategy and operational capacity so founders can move with the discipline and speed of much larger companies.

CRAFTING RESONANT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

Hyper-personalization isn't optional, it's the baseline for Canadian shoppers who expect brands to anticipate their needs. In lifestyle and retail, identity and emotion drive purchase decisions and AI makes this possible.

Practices founders can implement today to transform browsing into belonging, without enterprise-level overhead:

- **AR try-on tools:** Use *Shopify*'s AR integration or apps like *Threekit* to let customers virtually try on apparel or home décor before purchase. This reduces product returns and builds confidence.

- **Conversational AI:** Deploy chatbots like *Shopify Inbox* to guide customers to the right product in real time, answering questions and recommending complementary items.

- **Dynamic personalization:** Plug in tools like *Dynamic Yield* or *Nosto* to tailor homepage content and product recommendations based on browsing history and purchase patterns.

NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM FOR AI-DRIVEN ENTREPRENEURS

Canada is accelerating AI adoption through federal and provincial programs that lower barriers to integrating new technology. With inflation and rising costs, entrepreneurs need tools that deliver value without eroding margins. These programs provide that runway, combining funding with hands-on guidance for responsible AI adoption.

Practical ways founders can leverage these resources:

- **Secure funding for AI projects:** The Canada Small Business Financing Program helps to offset costs for implementing AI-driven personalization or inventory optimization tools.

- **Join collaborative AI initiatives:** The Digital Supercluster projects provide access to shared AI infrastructure and innovation networks for retail and lifestyle solutions.

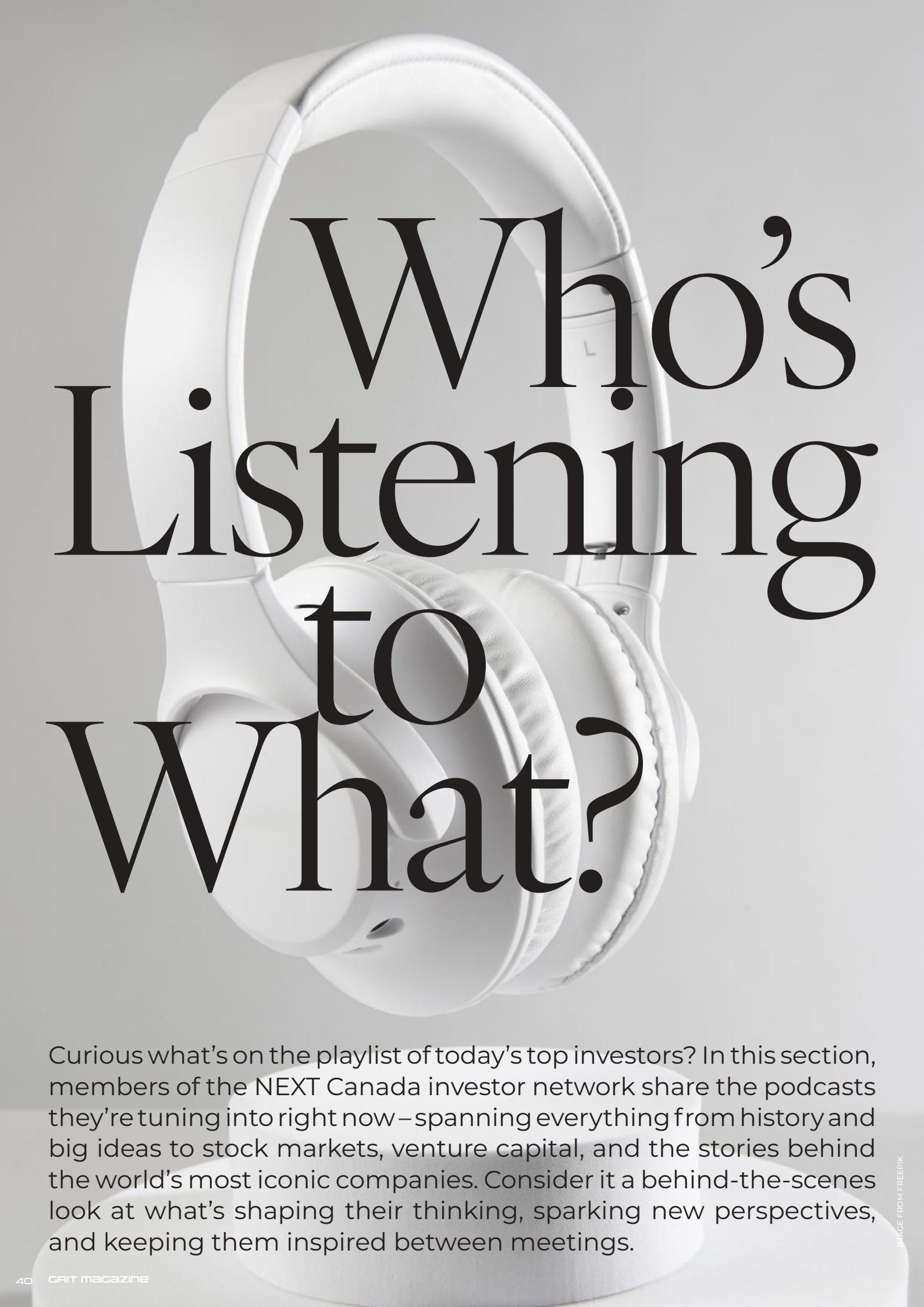
- **Tap in mentorship & training:** Futurpreneur Canada offers AI-focused business planning support and peer mentorship tailored to early-stage founders.

- **Empower women-led ventures:** Grants and advisory services are available through the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy to integrate AI into customer engagement or supply chain workflows.

EY's entrepreneurship ecosystem reinforces this path. Programs like **EY Entrepreneur Of The Year®** connect founders with advisors, peer networks and scale-up experts who help apply AI to real business challenges, from responsible data use and AI-enabled operating models to strengthening financial foundations and validating new digital offerings. These resources give entrepreneurs hands-on guidance, ensuring Canada's next generation of lifestyle and retail businesses can grow with agility and integrity.

In a world where loyalty is fragile and choice is infinite, entrepreneurs who embrace AI are not just surviving — they are shaping the next generation of style-defining brands. AI won't replace creativity or intuition, but it will amplify both, helping founders validate faster, personalize deeper and scale smarter.

Nominations for Canada's EY Entrepreneur Of The Year® program open February 2. To learn more, visit ey.com/ca/eoy



Who's Listening to What?

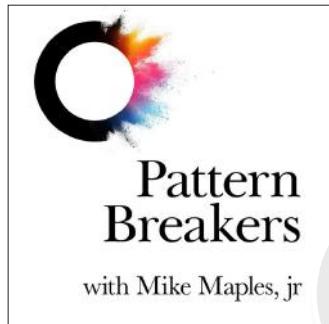
Curious what's on the playlist of today's top investors? In this section, members of the NEXT Canada investor network share the podcasts they're tuning into right now—spanning everything from history and big ideas to stock markets, venture capital, and the stories behind the world's most iconic companies. Consider it a behind-the-scenes look at what's shaping their thinking, sparking new perspectives, and keeping them inspired between meetings.



LUCAS PERLMAN

Principal, **StandUp Ventures**

Odd Lots uses markets as a lens on the real world. Hosts Joe Weisenthal and Tracy Alloway move effortlessly from how a New York pizza shop actually operates to U.S. Treasury markets, revealing how incentives, market structure, and supply chains shape everything around us. Smart, curious, and very fun!



ALEX NORMAN

Partner, **N49P** and Co-founder, **TechTo**

I listen to **Pattern Breakers**, a podcast hosted by Mike Maples of Floodgate. One of the original pre-seed investors. In each episode he conducts and interview with a founder whom has scaled a business and tries to explain what trait/action they took that is common across pattern breakers (his term for successful founders).



WILLIAM MA

Investor, **MaRS IAF**

Hidden Brain is practical psychology without the fluff. I find myself applying it to everything, from daily life to VC and startups. It helps me stay more thoughtful about people and decisions. Bonus: Shankar's voice is very calming.



SARAH WILLSON

Principal, **Panache Ventures**

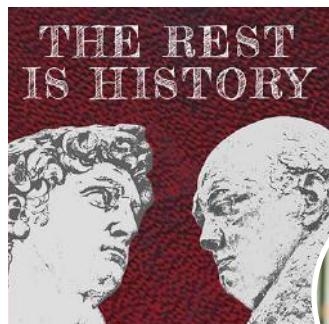
I love **How I Built This** because it tells the real stories of how iconic companies were built, taking you back to the early days marked by uncertainty and difficult decisions. It serves as a great reminder that building a company is often far less linear than it appears in hindsight.



DANIEL NEITO

Principal, **BDC**

I was a musician for nearly a decade before learning about the world of business and finance. I listen to Rick's podcast, **Broken Record**, because it treats music first as art, while never ignoring how deeply the business bleeds into the creative process. I like how candidly it explores resilience, resourcefulness, and taste as strategic advantages. The challenges musicians face today, distribution abundance, fleeting attention, constant reinvention, mirror what founders face, often in even more unforgiving form, especially in the age of AI.



JIM ORLANDO

Managing Partner, **Wittington Ventures**

I hated history in school. Dry, boring, facts and dates. Somehow **The Rest is History** makes it interesting and informative by being witty, irreverent and bringing out the humanity of it all. Who knew that Sherlock Holmes' deerstalker hat was inspired by witnesses reporting that Jack The Ripper wore one too (or was it vice versa?). Or that the French revolutionaries were so focused on equality that they renamed the King and Queen cards in a card deck to "Freedom of Profession" and "Genius of War"? These guys bring it all together.

10 Founders to Watch

The talent pool of 1,300 alumni is quite remarkable. Here are 10 who stand out to me as great leaders who are driving truly innovative ventures.



KYLE J. WINTERS
CEO, NEXT Canada



EUNICE WU
Co-Founder & CEO

ASEPHA
NEXT 36 (2023) &
NEXT AI, Toronto (2024)

Asepha is an AI health-tech startup automating pharmacy workflows, like prescriptions, data entry, and communications, to free pharmacists from manual tasks and boost efficiency.



CODY RUBERTO
Founder & CEO

URIDE
NEXT Founders (2022)

URide is a Canadian ridesharing app that provides safe, affordable, reliable transportation across small and mid-sized communities, connecting riders with local drivers to improve mobility and reduce impaired driving.



DIANA VIRGOVICOVA
Founder & CEO

XATOMS
NEXT 36 (2022)

Xatoms is a cleantech startup using AI and quantum chemistry to discover light-activated photocatalysts that rapidly purify polluted water, making clean, sustainable water more accessible globally.



OSAMA USMANI
Founder & CEO

SALUBRUM
NEXT 36 (2024)

Salubrum is a venture-backed AI-driven healthcare platform that helps brands identify high-intent patients and run precision marketing campaigns, simplifying patient engagement and commercialization in healthcare.



AVRIL SUN
Co-Founder

SUCCESSION AI
NEXT 36 (2025)

Succession AI helps small business owners plan exits and sell their companies using AI-driven buyer matching and strategic succession planning that accelerates sales and boosts deal outcomes.



STEPHEN LAKE
Co-Founder & CEO

JETSON
NEXT 36 (2011)

Jetson is a home electrification startup simplifying adoption of efficient, all-electric heat pumps with online quotes, streamlined installs, and smart systems to replace gas furnaces and cut emissions.



MALLORIE BRODIE
Co-Founder & CEO

BRIDGIT
NEXT 36 (2013)

Bridgit is a construction workforce planning and resource management software that turns workforce data into actionable insights, helping contractors optimize teams, forecasting, and project delivery.



JAI MANSUKHANI
Co-Founder & President

OPENSESAME
NEXT 36 (2024)

OpenSesame is building “Cell”, an embeddable AI agent platform that turns existing insurance systems (policy, claims, underwriting, billing) into natural-language interfaces customers can use via web and SMS to get answers and complete tasks more intuitively.



LAUREN LAKE
Co-Founder

BRIDGIT
NEXT 36 (2013)

Bridgit is a construction workforce planning and resource management software that turns workforce data into actionable insights, helping contractors optimize teams, forecasting, and project delivery.



ANTHONY AZRAK
CEO

OPENSESAME
NEXT 36 (2024)

OpenSesame is building “Cell”, an embeddable AI agent platform that turns existing insurance systems (policy, claims, underwriting, billing) into natural-language interfaces customers can use via web and SMS to get answers and complete tasks more intuitively.

Community News

NEXT CANADA
COMMUNITY
MAKING
HEADLINES

Eunice Wu, Can Uncu

ASEPHA

Pharmacy AI agent Asepha raises \$4 million USD to double staff and open New York office



John Marzo

AIRFAIRNESS

Airfairness Launches AI Flight Compensation Tool After Acquiring Weekend-Built Startup via LinkedIn



Nima Jalalvandi & Marcelo Pedroza Harnandez

READY PLAN GO

Ready Plan Go raises \$750K to automate accountants' grunt work with AI



Kayli Smith

FRIENDLIER

Friendlier closes \$4.5 million to help more food service operators ditch single-use containers



Diana Virgovicova

XATOMS

With \$3-million pre-seed round, Xatoms launches pilot projects to purify water with quantum chemistry



OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, our alumni have captured attention for their achievements in capital raising, team expansion, innovation, and inspiration. Click on the headshots below to explore their accomplishments.



Jai Mansukhani & Anthony Azrak

OPENSESAME

a16z says OpenSesame to Canadian agentic AI startup for its speedrun accelerator

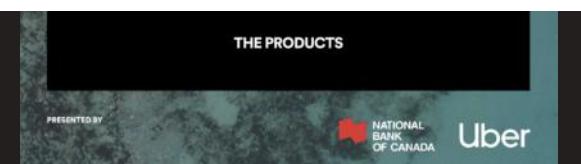


Vishar Yaghoubian

TOOTHPOD

Toronto, ON

BetaKit names Toothpod as one of the most ambitious companies in 2025



Joe Noss

PUBLICUS

Solving Government's Secret Bottleneck:
Procurement

Cody Ruberto

URIDE

Cody Ruberto Shares His Remarkable Journey & How That Inspired Him to Build Ridesharing for Small Towns Against All Odds



Joshua Liu

SEAMLESSMD

SeamlessMD making 'positive difference' for Timmins patients



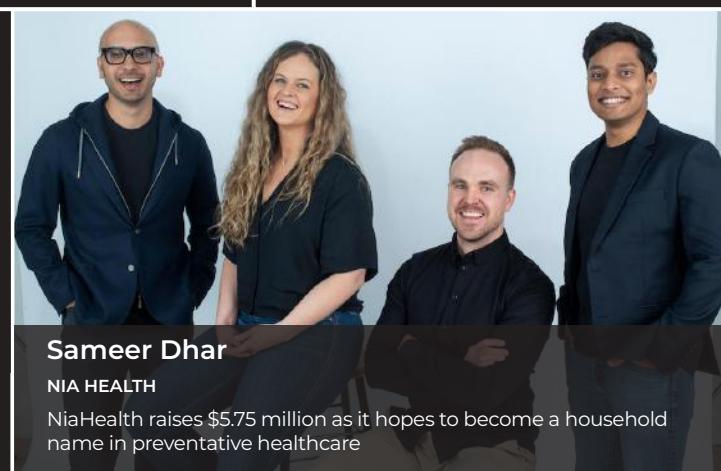
Jayiesh Singh

ABLE INNOVATIONS

How Toronto's Able Innovations is supporting healthcare workers across Canada with Robotics

**LIFTING CARE, REDUCING STRAIN:
HOW TORONTO'S ABLE INNOVATIONS IS
SUPPORTING HEALTHCARE WORKERS
ACROSS CANADA WITH ROBOTICS**

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Sameer Dhar

NIA HEALTH

NiaHealth raises \$5.75 million as it hopes to become a household name in preventative healthcare

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