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**DEPUTY MAYOR GLEN AND DEPARTMENT OF SMALL BUSINESS SERVICES ANNOUNCE
INAUGURAL CLASS OF MENTORS TO SUPPORT UNDERSERVED WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS
IN NEW YORK CITY**

WE Connect Mentors program to feature 17 successful women business owners offering insight and guidance as part of broader WE NYC initiative

NEW YORK—A diverse group of women entrepreneurs from across all business sectors will be mentoring women entrepreneurs from underserved communities in a new City program called WE Connect Mentors, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development Alicia Glen and Department of Small Business Services Commissioner Gregg Bishop announced today.

WE Connect Mentors is a first-of-its-kind initiative with 17 successful women entrepreneurs participating in the program. The 17 WE Connect Mentors represent successful New York City women business owners who will provide tailored advice through in-person meetings in all five boroughs, online chats, and blog posts. The offering is part of the broader [WE NYC \(Women Entrepreneurs NYC\) initiative](#) designed to expand the economic potential of women entrepreneurs. The City believes that supporting women entrepreneurs not only empowers women, but also uplifts entire families and communities.

“The WE Connect Mentors program should be commended for providing women entrepreneurs with an essential resource that helps foster and bolster success,” said **Mayor Bill de Blasio**. “Mentors are not only integral to the personal success of women entrepreneurs, but they are integral to the overall success of our city.”

“There exists an unacceptable gender gap when it comes to the number and success of women-owned businesses in our city. WE NYC and our first cohort of WE Connect Mentors will empower women entrepreneurs, especially those in underserved communities, with the support and expertise they need to thrive,” said **Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development Alicia Glen**. “This administration’s investment in the power of women through education, training, and full inclusion in the workforce and in the economy is not only critical to combating inequality, but also key to ensuring New York City’s role as a competitive economic player and progressive leader on the global stage.”

“I am honored to welcome and congratulate WE NYC’s first cohort of WE Connect Mentors. While all 17 mentors can and should be celebrated as successful women entrepreneurs doing business in New York City, what is truly extraordinary is their passion for helping other women on their entrepreneurial journey,” said **Gregg Bishop, Commissioner of the Department of Small Business Services**. “Mentorship has played a critical role in my life, and I am thrilled that we can connect women across the five boroughs with the opportunity to learn and grow with support from these business role models.”

“Many people think of business as a cutthroat, dog eat dog world. In reality, business owners are almost always open to sharing the benefit of their experience and connections with their peers. WE NYC’s mentorship program recognizes that willingness and takes the brilliant step of extending the benefits of the mentors’ years

of expertise beyond their own immediate circles to benefit other women who are their peers in ambition, but not in access. It's a generous and a meaningful step, and I commend the Mayor's Office, SBS and the mentors themselves for making this investment in others," said **Council Member Robert E. Cornegy, Jr., Chair of the Committee on Small Business.**

"The WE Connect Mentors program is a wonderful opportunity for aspiring and experienced women entrepreneurs to strengthen their business models by exchanging ideas and resources. Through mentor-mentee relationships, women business owners will learn from hands-on experience and become well-equipped for success," said **Council Member Laurie A. Cumbo, Chair of the Committee on Women's Issues.**

Women entrepreneurs are key economic actors in New York City – employing more than 190,000 people and generating approximately \$50 billion in sales annually. However, in New York City, men own 1.5 times more businesses than women, employ 3.5 times more people and make on average 4.5 times more revenue. After hearing from over 1,500 women, WE NYC identified four areas of need that contribute to this gender gap: access to capital, business skills, networks and mentors, and comprehensive information.

To address these key challenges, WE NYC is introducing a range of tailored business services, including outer-borough networking events and free business courses on topics like credit building, funding, and leadership with partners that include micro-lender Grameen America, Citi Community Development, Babson College, Deutsche Bank, and Next Street. The City will also launch the WE Connect Portal this spring – a one-stop digital portal for women entrepreneurs highlighting success stories, business resources, events, and classes.

The WE Connect Mentors program responds to a need for mentorship and business advising, especially in underserved communities. Selected from applicants representing all five boroughs, the inaugural class of 17 WE Connect Mentors includes women with extensive entrepreneurial experience and business expertise:

- **Malene Barnett** is the Founder and Design Director of Malene B, a company specializing in handcrafted custom carpets, inspired wallcoverings and artisan tiles. Her luxe creations have enlivened premier hotels, iconic office buildings and sophisticated private spaces.
- **Karen Taylor Bass** is the Founder and Media Strategist for TaylorMade Media, LLC. She has created strategic public relations, branding and marketing campaigns for corporations, luxury brands, celebrities, athletes and entrepreneurs.
- **Vanessa Best** began a fledgling medical billing firm over 20 years ago, obtaining her first contract with a doctor who opened a practice after leaving a prestigious New York City hospital. Today, there is nothing novice about Precision Healthcare Consultants, which provides clients with all phases of revenue cycle management, clinical documentation improvement programs and office management training.
- **Jovanka Ciales** is a former entertainment executive turned wellness expert, detox specialist, nutrition educator and author. She is the creator of the Wellness Smackdown™, a proprietary detox and weight loss program for natural weight loss which was featured on the first season of ABC's *My Diet Is Better Than Yours*.
- **Diana Franco** brings with her years of experience in a diverse range of corporate and technology driven environments. She has been a founding-member of multiple tech ventures, like Grenout, LLC, establishing and leading global business units with an emphasis on mobile and Internet presence and social media shopping.

- **Eleni Gianopoulos**, who has always had a passion for baking, began a small catering business in her apartment. What began as a side business featuring Eleni's mother's famous oatmeal-raisin cookies quickly outgrew her home and evolved into a full-fledged cookie empire. Today, Eleni's New York custom cookie creations are a favorite of celebrities, luxury brands, Fortune 500 companies and cookie lovers alike.
- **Jen Glantz** is the Founder and CEO of Bridesmaid for Hire, providing in-person and digital support for brides, maids of honors and bridesmaids, before their wedding or up at the altar. Since launching in 2014, Glantz has been featured by over 500 major media outlets around the world.
- **Liz Gutman** graduated from the International Culinary Center's prestigious pastry arts program before she founded Liddabit Sweets. What started as a weekend table at the Brooklyn Flea is now a full-time confectionery business with eight employees, two retail shops, an online boutique, a custom-built kitchen space in Sunset Park's Industry City complex, and a presence at over 50 retailers nationwide, including Shake Shack and Dylan's Candy Bar.
- **Malla Haridat** is an entrepreneurship coach, strategist and Founder of Mom and Daughters Inc., and a trainer for youth business-builder programs. Haridat also is the founder and CEO of New Designs for Life, and is a nationally recognized expert in the specialized field of entrepreneurship education and has trained over 5,000 students.
- **Ellie Kassner** is President of W.H. Kassner, Inc., a miscellaneous metal subcontracting commercial construction company specializing in the custom fabrication of stairs, railings, platforms, canopies and more.
- **Wonder Lee** is a self-taught assemblage artist, poet, designer, and author. She founded the company Wonder Lee 123 Designs Inc. Lee's eco-friendly bow ties transform discarded items into wearable art and have gained local, national and international recognition.
- **Aquila Leon-Soon** is the Founder and CEO of Advance Talent Solutions Inc., an organizational development and leadership strategy firm serving nonprofit and public sector entities. With nearly 15 years of professional experience, she has a proven track record of successfully enhancing the effectiveness of mission-driven entities.
- **Christine Rico** the Founder of CFO on Speed Dial, which helps companies increase profits and make a positive social impact. Rico's work draws on 20 years of experience creating profitable social enterprises across many industries including local food production, transportation, logistics, e-commerce, up-cycled furniture and health care.
- **Dayna Sessa** is Founder and CEO of Datanomy, a health analytics firm based in SoHo. A biomedical engineer and former management consultant, Sessa was selected as a Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Business Scholar, Tory Burch Foundation Fellow & Cartier Women's Initiative Finalist.
- **Deepti Sharma Kapur** is the CEO and Founder of FoodtoEat, an online marketplace where local businesses can order team meals from the best local restaurants, food trucks and caterers. Kapur also co-Founded the Mountaintop Program, an initiative that brings innovators and entrepreneurs into New York City schools to mentor and inspire K-12 students.
- **Aileen Gemma Smith** is CEO and Founder of Vizalytics Technology, the New York data company bridging the information access gap between government and citizens, businesses, and communities. Smith has worked as a content manager, strategist and consultant for Newsweek, the Financial Times

and Razorfish. She created Staten Island Counts, which mined publicly-available data to reveal insights about the NYC borough where she grew up.

- **Geri Stengel** is Founder and President of Ventureneer, a digital media and market research company that helps corporations reach small businesses through thought leadership. Her book, *Forget the Glass Ceiling: Business Without One*, provides women entrepreneurs with practical advice for overcoming the barriers they face.

“To me, being a WE Connect Mentor is an opportunity to give back to others. Vizalytics Technology is successful today because of the many individuals who have helped and supported me. Now it is my obligation to other entrepreneurs to open doors and help them succeed as well. I am a business owner not just to sell a product, but also to support my community and help the next group of entrepreneurs grow and scale their businesses,” said **Aileen Gemma Smith, CEO and Founder of Vizalytics Technology**.

“I strive to create bold products inspired by global cultures and perspectives. After 20 years in the design industry, I also want to inspire other designers and entrepreneurs to live boldly and find their courage. The opportunity to become a WE Connect Mentor is important to me because of the many, many women mentors in my life who have guided me in my journey. While I have always made a point to pay it forward, this program gives me an opportunity to do so on a much larger, more structured scale with women across New York City,” said **Malene Barnett, Founder and Design Director of Malene B.**

“There is no better way to celebrate our 20th year in business at Eleni’s New York, than by giving back to the very city that has helped us succeed. Just as successful women have helped me so much in the past, I would want the same for my daughter Sophia as she grows up. To encourage this spirit of mentorship, I want to continue mentoring and advising women through programs like WE Connect Mentors to support other women as they chase their dreams of becoming strong and successful entrepreneurs!” said **Eleni Gianopulos, Baker-in-Chief at Eleni’s New York**.

“My first mentor, my late mother, taught me to follow the advice, ‘There is more happiness in giving than receiving.’ That principle has instilled in me the passion as a business owner to look for opportunities to make a difference and help others in the healthcare industry and beyond. As a WE Connect Mentor, I will have the unique privilege of sharing lessons learned over two decades and providing inspiration to women entrepreneurs in New York City. What an amazing honor!” said **Vanessa Best, CEO and Founder of Precision HealthCare Consultants**.

“The opportunity to be a WE Connect Mentor is the ultimate way to inspire other women as they take that very first step in launching their own business. I started my business, Bridesmaid for Hire, with no previous business experience and I know how daunting that process can be. Think of it like this: starting a business is just like going on the stair master at the gym. Every step up is difficult, at first, but if you have someone by your side motivating and inspiring you to keep on moving forward, it will start to feel powerful and just right. I am so honored to be that person for women entrepreneurs of this great city,” said **Jen Glantz, CEO and Founder of Bridesmaid for Hire**.

To stay updated on WE NYC opportunities and programming, women entrepreneurs can visit nyc.gov/wenyc, sign up for the [WE NYC Newsletter](#), participate in the WE NYC digital community through the [WE NYC Facebook Group](#), or join the conversation online using [#WENYC](#).

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