

ATHENA Summit: Stronger Together

More than 500 women entrepreneurs convene at USC to discuss the state of their startups



(From left to right) Willow Bay, dean of USC Annenberg; Gwyneth Paltrow, founder of GOOP; and Dr. Wanda M. Austin, interim president of USC. Photo by William Vasta

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THE SECOND ANNUAL ATHENA CONFERENCE at USC, focused on women entrepreneurs, drew more than 500 guests to USC's Town & Gown to examine the theme, "Stronger Together."

The daylong event featured a welcome from Dr. Wanda Austin, USC interim president; a conversation with GOOP founder and CEO Gwyneth Paltrow; and remarks by Dr. Sumun Pendakur, chief learning officer of the USC Equity Institutes, as well as panel discussions and a pitch competition.

"It's an uplifting experience to hear from so many smart, talented, bright, innovative, inspiring women, and all of you should count yourselves in that group," Dr. Austin said. "I want to thank all of you for celebrating women leaders and their entrepreneurial journeys, which as I'm sure you have heard

today, are not easy journeys, but they are tremendously rewarding."

Helena Yli-Renko, academic director of the Lloyd Greif Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at the USC Marshall School of Business welcomed attendees to the summit. "ATHENA is a celebration of women business leaders and their entrepreneurial journeys," she said. "We all benefit from hearing their stories and triumphs, as well as their challenges."

Willow Bay, dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, introduced and interviewed Paltrow—who received the Brand Icon Award from USC Marshall, the Greif Center and the Annenberg School—by establishing her bona fides not as an actor, but as an entrepreneur.

"GOOP celebrated its 10th birthday this year," Bay said. "A newsletter that

she hit the 'send' button on in 2008 now reaches a reported 8 million people. And it's really the starter fuel for what has become a significant global lifestyle brand, integrating commerce and content in some very interesting and innovative ways... and Gwyneth Paltrow, of course, is the vision and voice behind it."

Recalling GOOP's journey from her kitchen table to worldwide visibility, Paltrow recalled, "I didn't know if anyone had heard of GOOP, if it was going to work." Describing today's GOOP community as "forward thinking, wondering what is around the next corner," she discussed the need to continuously learn and innovate: "We take our role as trailblazers seriously," she said. "We want to push the envelope. We want to ask questions that are uncomfortable."

An Entrepreneurial Investment

This year, a new feature, the Female Founders Pitch Competition, was added, made possible by a gift from USC alumnus Jake Medwell, founding partner of 8VC venture capital firm. The competition was limited to current female USC students, faculty, staff or alumni less than five years from graduation, with a prize of \$10,000.

“I have so much respect for this summit and its focus on women entrepreneurs, I wanted to do something to support it,” said Medwell. “As a graduate of the Greif Center, I know the competition will be fierce and that we’ll spawn some incredible companies over the five-year span of this gift.”

The winning team among 45 entrants was Cool Cube, founded by Marshall student Thea Knobel.

Every Stage

Throughout the day, more than 40 women executives participated on panels or as table leaders helping spark conversation, introductions and networking. They represented a range of ventures including Hello Sunshine, a media company founded by Reese Witherspoon to create and discover content that celebrates women and puts them at the center of the story.

Headlining a panel on building a powerhouse brand in Hollywood, participants from Hello Sunshine included Sarah Harden, the firm’s CEO; Lauren Neustadter, head of film and television; and Charlotte Koh, head of digital media and programming.

Hello Sunshine was named the first recipient of the ATHENA award, and two scholarships for young female entrepreneurs have been established in its name.

Other companies playing a leading role at the event were founder Amy Nelson’s workspace startup The Riveter; founder Lara Jeremko’s venture firm Beyond Ventures; and founder Rachel Sumekh’s nonprofit Swipe Out Hunger Foundation.

Panel topics ranged from “Growing Your Business,” to “Investing in Women-Led Companies” and “Purpose-Driven Business,” moderated by Abbey Fifer Mandell, executive director of USC Marshall’s Brittingham Social Enterprise Lab. A full listing of the day’s events is available on the ATHENA website.

Passion was a theme of the day. The panelists in the “Investing in Women-Led Companies” discussion agreed the entrepreneurs they seek to fund all demonstrate conviction, authenticity and passion. How strong a passion?

“Your life has to depend on it a little bit,” said Minal Hasan of K2 Global.

A Second Success

Reflecting on the second-year of ATHENA, David Belasco, the Greif Center’s executive director, said, “We convene the entrepreneurial and investment communities to discuss and take action on issues that impact women-led companies. It’s vital that USC remains central in this community and the conversation.

“The energy in the room was palpable, and we received strong feedback from the attendees and panelists,” he continued.

The event was co-chaired by Jeymi Choi, associate director of the Master of Science in Entrepreneurship and Innovation degree program. Joining her were Robyn Ward, founder of Founder Forward, a coaching and consulting business, and alumna Suzy Ryoo, VP of Technology and Innovation at entertainment consultancy Atom Factory and a partner at the early stage venture capital fund Cross Culture Ventures.

“I knew from the excitement created by last year’s event that we were on to something,” said Choi, who has been a driving force behind ATHENA. “This year was even better.”



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1 Anna Barber, managing director of Techstars, addresses the audience during a panel on investing in women-led companies.

2, 4 More than 500 guests attended the daylong event in celebration of female leaders and entrepreneurs.

3 Dean Willow Bay interviews Gwyneth Paltrow, founder of GOOP.

Photos by William Vasta



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