



By Maggie Ginsberg
@maggieginsberg



Amy's Impact

Madison mourns the loss of Amy Gannon, who had an immeasurable influence on local entrepreneurialism.

WHEN I took over this column from Brennan Nardi last year, she said, “Before you do anything else, go see Heather and Amy.” She meant Heather Wentler and Amy Gannon, co-founders of the Doyenne Group. As I type these words, news of Gannon’s sudden, tragic death on Dec. 26, along with her 13-year-old daughter, Jocelyn, is spreading throughout the entrepreneurial community and beyond. Both were killed in a helicopter crash during a family vacation in Hawaii.

I’m writing this during that strange, sleepy week between Christmas and New Year’s Eve. But I know the reverberations of Gannon’s passing are still shaking the city she championed, just as I am certain her powerful legacy will continue to ripple outward. She was a catalyst, a true mover and shaker, and her work made so many other people’s work possible.

I didn’t know that yet when I met with Wentler and Gannon. Clearly very busy, they squeezed me in while eating lunch out of Tupperware containers at the Doyenne offices inside StartingBlock Madison. I pulled out my recorder but told them not to worry; this was mostly for background. I’d give them a



Amy Gannon (pictured top on right and directly above) co-founded Doyenne with Heather Wentler (pictured top on left) in 2012.

heads-up if I decided to quote them in print. I remember the way Amy looked up at Heather and shrugged. She didn’t say it, but I understood: *I say what I say and I am who I am, whether on the record or not.*

To say Doyenne has influenced the local entrepreneurial ecosystem is a wild understatement – infiltrated is more like it. The duo founded Doyenne – a French term for the most prominent female in her field – in 2012, the same year they joined the weeklong Forward Festival tech conference, creating a sold-out women’s entrepreneur breakfast and the first-ever panel of female entrepreneurs. They said that up to that point, Forward Fest was almost exclusively run and attended by white males. By 2018, Forward Fest’s organizing committee had shifted to 70% female, and half of the presenters were women.

“We didn’t just say, ‘Let us have speakers.’ Over the years we said, ‘Let us design it, let us build it, let us benefit from it,’” Gannon said. “When we first started, somebody said, ‘You’re going to take all the women from our stuff by doing your own things.’ I said, ‘News flash – you don’t have any women at your stuff so I’m not going to take them away. Secondly, we are going to bring the women to you since you can’t figure out how to do it, and we’re going to tell you how to transform what you’re doing to be more equitable, more inclusive and a space where women feel like they are a valuable presence there.’ And that’s what we’ve done.”

That’s not all. Doyenne now has about 300 members and provides programming and funding for female entrepreneurs (and some men of color). They hired local entrepreneur

Jasmine Timmons as director of operations for Doyenne Madison, and Doyenne Milwaukee launched in 2019 with plans to expand into more cities. The Doyenne website hosts a trove of writings by Gannon and Wentler that women at other organizations can use to keep pushing for parity, or to challenge the traditional ways we view who or what is seen as successful. Gannon also co-organized the Social Good Accelerator and was a faculty member at Edgewood College. In the days after her death, former students, local entrepreneurs and many community leaders flooded social media with messages testifying to her impact. Her range was stunning. Her loss is immeasurable.

But it’s a true gift when a person’s life’s work can outlast them, and Amy left behind endless opportunities to build upon the strong, collaborative, diverse entrepreneurial ecosystem she envisioned. Her beliefs can be borrowed by any of us: Speak your mind, especially when calling out disparity. Support entrepreneurs with your time, money and talent, especially those who will never attract big investors. Look for who’s missing from the room. Don’t just complain about problems; work to fix them. Don’t try to fit into the existing, broken system; build a new one.

And if you haven’t already, join Doyenne.

Maggie Ginsberg is a monthly columnist and senior contributing writer for Madison Magazine. A donation page has been established for Amy and Jocelyn Gannon at doyennegroup.org/amy-jocelyn-memorial-donation. A public memorial event will be held from 5-8 p.m. on Jan. 31 at The Sylvee.

PAULUS MUSTEIKIS (TOP); FILE PHOTO (BOTTOM)