

This College Student's Practical App Just Won Apple's Annual Competition. CEO Tim Cook Commends Her Innovation and Says She 'Demonstrates What's Possible.'

"Growing up in LA, I've always been aware of the wildfire risks that come with living in Southern California," Marina Lee, a 21-year-old computer science student at the University of Southern California, tells *Entrepreneur*. "But the urgency truly hit home when my grandmother found herself in the evacuation zones during the recent LA wildfires back in January – she called me because she got an evacuation alert on her phone."

Image Credit: Courtesy of Apple. CEO Tim Cook and Marina Lee.

Lee recalls being overwhelmed by the situation and unsure of what to pack, where to go and how to stay updated. Realizing that so many other people were probably experiencing the same confusion and fear, she decided to build an app to solve the problem: EvacuMate.

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Lee's EvacuMate helps users prepare an emergency checklist of essential items, upload copies of important documents via their iPhone camera roll and import emergency contacts through

their iPhone's contacts list. The app also allows users to monitor air quality levels and put together a first-aid kit.

Image Credit: Courtesy of Marina Lee

It took Lee about one month to develop the app and submit it to Apple's Swift Student Challenge, a competition that invites students across the globe to enter their original app playgrounds built with Apple's Swift coding language.

Most students begin preparing their submissions months in advance, so the deadline "felt a little tight," Lee notes. However, she was ready to rise to the occasion, having started her coding journey in middle school and completed several projects in the years since.

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As a “very creative” person, Lee first focused on the app’s design and layout, she says. Then she turned her attention to the practical features. Lee asked friends and family for feedback as she worked on EvacuMate, and the “very collaborative process” allowed her to engage with her target audience and understand how they’d interact with the app.

Image Credit: Courtesy of Marina Lee

“I definitely look forward to meeting other Swift Student Challenge winners [at WWDC].”

Out of this year’s 350 winning submissions, Lee was selected

as one of the 50 distinguished winners invited to attend the Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) at Apple Park. The 2025 conference, which takes place in-person and online from June 9-13, kicks off with CEO Tim Cook's keynote address and will showcase the company's new technology and software.

"Developers across America are innovating every day to build amazing apps that improve people's lives, and Apple is committed to supporting their work," Cook says. "It was wonderful to meet Marina, because she demonstrates what's possible when coders use their skills to make a difference in their communities – including her hometown of Los Angeles. Her app could be a great resource for people at times when they need it most, and I can't wait to see what she does next."

Some of this year's other distinguished winners include Taiki Hamomoto, 22, of Japan, whose app Hanufada Tactics teaches users how to play the traditional Japanese card game; Luciana Ortiz Nolasco, 15, of Mexico, whose app BreakDownCosmic offers a virtual gathering place for astronomy enthusiasts; and Nahom Worku, 21, who grew up in Ethiopia and Canada and developed the app AccessEd, which provides learning resources that are available with or without Wi-Fi connectivity.

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"I definitely look forward to meeting other Swift Student Challenge winners [at WWDC] and other developers in general from across the world," Lee says. "Throughout my years of involvement in the hackathon community, I've been able to build lasting friendships and connections with students from all across the world, but it was only through a virtual setting. So attending this conference would really bring that experience in person."

Lee is currently interning as a front-end engineer at Amazon

in Seattle, Washington. The role focuses on web design and building user interfaces, a process that, like coding, also gives her the chance to get creative, she says. She hopes to pursue similar work that allows her to merge her passion for creativity, art and coding after she graduates from college.

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Other young people who want to learn how to code and potentially pursue an engineering career should consider participating in hackathons, 24-48-hour events where students collaborate on projects and attend workshops, Lee says. Lee recalls being intimidated at first, but the experience laid the foundation for where she is now.

“I met some new friends that I still keep in touch with to this day,” Lee says. “[The experience] allowed me to learn more about coding and become more involved in the hackathon community. I started organizing some [hackathons] myself and mentoring at other hackathons. It’s a good first step in coding and really allows you to [join] the community.”

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