

This Female Founder Fought to Stay in the Game And She Just Raised \$3 Million in Funding from Serena Williams, Mark Cuban and Arlan Hamilton

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It's not lost on Melissa Hanna that last time she sat down for a conversation with *Entrepreneur*, it was about nine months ago.

Hanna is the co-founder of Mahmee, a data-driven maternal and infant health tech company dedicated to building out the missing digital infrastructure to connect mothers and babies to the care they need. On Monday, it was announced that the company had raised \$3 million from Serena Williams through Serena Ventures, Mark Cuban, Arlan Hamilton's ArlanWasHere Investments, Revolution's Rise of the Rest Seed Fund, Honeycomb Portfolio, UpFront Ventures Community Fund.

In 2014, Hanna launched the business with her mother, Linda Hanna, a Registered Nurse in Obstetrics, an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant who developed maternity and lactation programs at Kaiser Permanente and Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. The Hannas run the company with CTO Sunny Walia.

Hanna said that the plan now is to bring in new hires across the team to increase the company's operational capacity to serve even more patients and health systems and expand beyond

their current bases in Southern California and Pittsburgh.

When we spoke in the fall, Hanna talked about being driven to launch the company by her mother's work in the field and dire statistics about postpartum health outcomes, especially for women of color.

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In the US, new moms are dying from childbirth complications at a higher rate than any other developed country. And for every 5 mothers who die from pregnancy and childbirth, three could have been saved. And black mothers are three to four times more likely to die from those complications, according to the Center for Disease Control.

When Hanna launched the business, fundraising was often an exercise in being underestimated as a female founder of color in her twenties by predominantly white, male venture capitalists who couldn't understand her vision or the value of her business. But she kept fighting.

"I know that fundraising for any startup is an arduous process and can be a really lonely experience for the founders sharing their vision and finding the right investors along the way," said Hanna. "There was something special about how difficult it was to raise money for Mahmee, that happened at the intersection of our diverse founding team, our billion dollar vision, our mission to have a social impact in a space where for the longest time, people things even know there was an actual crisis happening. This sort of combination of things made it really difficult to find folks that saw this as a scalable, venture-backed in business."

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"I know how to keep costs down in a way that many founders who got checks within months of launching an app don't know how to do. I've had to manage our books down to the dollars and cents to make sure that we could stay in the game," she told *Entrepreneur* in the fall of 2018.

Arlan Hamilton, whose Backstage Capital fund has invested \$5 million into 100 companies led by underrepresented founders, was the first venture capitalist to write her a check, and it means a great deal to Hanna that Hamilton was the one to lead this most recent round of fundraising.

"Along the way, there were so many people that thought this should have been a charity project and a non-profit organization and did not see the maternal and infant health care industry for what it is, which is a multi-billion dollar market," Hanna said. "It's so gratifying to have these folks around the table with us now, like Arlan and Serena and Mark, who really get it and also want to see a big return on their investment and believe that's possible."

When asked what she would tell Melissa from five years ago if she had the chance to go back and talk to her about how she was feeling today, Hanna laughed. She said that she always had the conviction that if the business could get funded, it would have a chance in the market. That wasn't the part where she struggled the most as a new founder.

"What I would tell my younger self that was starting out on building Mahmee would be to roll with the punches, and not take the hits as hard as I did. Because I did always have that confidence and belief. But I did also take it hard when people challenged the viability of the business idea," she said. "It was an incredibly emotional process to build the business to a point that it is at now. All I can say is that I am so excited to be able to now launch from this point forward with the team that we have. A lot of underestimated founders and underrepresented founders, all they want is simply a chance to

play on the field. And funding is one part of it – but it's a really big part of it. You have to have the capacity to play at that level. Now Mahmee has that capacity."

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