

[SUBSCRIBE](#)[GIVE A GIFT](#)[LOG IN](#) TO ACCESS
THE DIGITAL ISSUE[SIGN UP](#)
FOR AQ UPDATES[RSS FEED](#)

- [Subscribe](#)
- [About](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [News](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Partners](#)

ARCHIVE

From issue: **Higher Education and Competitiveness** (Summer 2014)

Innovators

Some of our hemisphere's emerging leaders in politics, business, civil society, and the arts.

In this issue:

- [Business Innovator: Lisa Besserman](#)

- [Arts Innovator: X Alfonso](#)
- [Political Innovator: Claudia López](#)
- [Civic Innovator: Oriol Gutierrez](#)



Mixing it up: X Alfonso' Fabrica de Arte Cubana brings together a blend of Cuban art forms. Photo and homepage photo: Sven Creutzmann/Mambo Photo/Getty.

Business Innovator: Lisa Besserman

Lisa Besserman could be at home anywhere in the world; but last year, the Queens, New York, native put down roots in Argentina to launch Startup Buenos Aires, to motivate, support and connect startups across the globe. The 29-year-old tech entrepreneur, named one of the “100 Most Influential Tech Women on Twitter” by *Business Insider Australia* in May, says that her goal is to put Buenos Aires “on the map of global startup ecosystems.”

Her clients seem to agree. A year after its launch, her organization—which helps local startups find employees and funding, and connects local tech talent to projects and employers—has attracted some 4,000 members, including foreign firms.

Besserman is a successful example of a new class of global workers that could be called “tech nomads.” In November 2012, feeling constrained by corporate culture in New York City, Besserman left her job as director of operations at AirKast Inc., a mobile app development startup, and looked at a map to determine where she’d begin her next business venture. The only requirement: the city had to have a similar time zone to the East Coast to make doing business easier.

She chose Buenos Aires—though she was not fluent in Spanish and had never set foot in Argentina—based on her conviction that North American companies will begin to shift their overseas partnerships to Latin America, thanks to its proximity and cultural similarities.

Arriving in Argentina in late 2012, Besserman realized that despite the abundance of entrepreneurs and tech talent in Buenos Aires, “the business ecosystem was sorely fragmented and there was no viable support system for startups.” Regardless of their stage of development, all the startups she encountered seemed to lack resources—whether it was the right business connections or adequate funding and support.

Yet the talent and skills were there. “Buenos Aires is an incredible hub for innovation, technology and development,” Besserman says, noting that Colombia and Peru already rely on Argentine tech experts. Low costs also help: a senior app developer in Argentina charges about \$50 an hour, compared to between \$200 and \$500 an hour in the United States. And, although Besserman is now learning Spanish, she says she hasn’t met a developer in Buenos Aires who doesn’t speak English. Within a month of her arrival, her tireless networking scored a meeting with Hernán Kazah, the Argentine co-founder of e-commerce giant MercadoLibre, and she was on her way to securing a place in the Argentine startup world.

Besserman says that Startup Buenos Aires’ network and expertise are especially helpful for foreign companies—representing industries as diverse as fitness and health, technology, e-commerce, travel, and clothing design—who want to build local teams and set up operations in Latin America. For them, the organization’s growing database of local tech talent is a rich resource. Currently, about 60 percent of Startup Buenos Aires clients and members are Argentine, and about 40 percent are expats, she says.

But that’s only one aspect of Startup Buenos Aires’ work. The organization has three pillars: education, resources and community engagement. It offers free workshops on subjects including coding, program design, startup law, and marketing. It also serves as an outsourcing hub, featuring job and internship listings on its website and a variety of online materials to help startups with marketing, communications and crowdfunding campaigns. Startup Buenos Aires’ community work includes curating tech conferences, networking events and Women 2.0 “Founder Friday” parties. And it will help coordinate Buenos Aires Social Media Week in 2015, which hosts panels and parties for an international mix of tech enthusiasts.

The organization—which Besserman launched with her own savings—is already self-sustaining, thanks to the “talent search commission” (between 15 and 20 percent) that Startup Buenos Aires charges to recruit employees. Meanwhile, a few of Startup Buenos Aires’ clients—such as the Switzerland-based travel professionals’ network 3BaysOver—have since become fully funded.

Besserman says it’s only a matter of time before Startup Buenos Aires’ connections and resources turn the city into a global outsourcing capital “that can compete with India and China.”

Watch an AQ Q&A with Lisa Besserman.

[Back to top](#)

Arts Innovator: X Alfonso

The hippest place to be in Havana is an old olive oil factory once known as *El Cocinero*. Reincarnated this February as the *Fábrica de Arte Cubano* (Cuban Art Factory — FAC), it is the brainchild of Cuban rocker, rapper and filmmaker Equis Alfonso (“X”) and is already taking the Cuban arts scene by storm.

Part Miami Art Basel, part Williamsburg warehouse party, the FAC hosts viewings, performances and exhibitions of cinema, theatre, dance, music, literature, fashion, architecture, graphic design, photography, and the visual arts. Every evening, Havana hipsters — wearing Zara tops, TOMS shoes purchased in Miami, and talking on iPhones — form a line around the block to enter. For a 2 CUC fee (\$2, or 50 Cuban pesos) to enter the former factory space, they can sit on and among artistic installations, walk past walls of photographs and paintings, watch documentaries, and dance to some of Cuba’s hottest music.

FAC opened on February 13, 2014, with a mission to tear down the walls between different artistic mediums, shed art world pretension and bring together the entire community. It was inaugurated with a bang: X himself performed among the works of 33 other Cuban artists.

No one on the island is better suited to promote the FAC’s unique blend of mixed media than X. Now 41, he was raised in a world of artistic fusion, studying classical piano from the age of seven, playing in the jazz group *Estado de Ánimo*, and — upon completing his conservatory training — joining his parents Carlos Alfonso and Ele Valdés in their Afro-Cuban symphonic rock group, *Síntesis*, where he contributed percussion and vocals.

“I have always been surrounded by different art forms, and this felt like the moment to bring them together in the same space, knowing how much their unification has contributed to me, both as a person and an artist,” he says.

By the time his first solo album, *Mundo Real* (Real World), appeared in 2000, X was already known across the island for his mastery of different genres—from funk and hip-hop to rock, reggae and rumba—and for the diverse audiences that gathered to hear him play. His concerts themselves are works of artistic experimentation, often including painters, rappers and dancers on stage with videos playing on the surrounding walls.

The emerging creativity of Cuba’s art scene inspired X’s original vision of bringing together Cuban musicians, dancers, stage actors, and visual artists under the same roof.

In mid-2010, he and a group of collaborators secured support from the Ministry of Culture and the *Instituto Cubano de la Música* (Cuban Institute of Music) to hold artistic events and performances at the PABEXPO Exhibition Center in Havana. After searching for several years, the team finally found a more permanent home in *El Cocinero*.

X insists on playing down his own role in turning FAC into a thriving artistic community, even though his growing international prominence has helped ensure the organization’s success. He received a 2000 Coral Award from Havana’s *Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano* (International Festival of New Latin American Cinema) for co-composing the score of Cuban film *María Antonia* and garnered Latin Grammy nominations for his music in 2001 and 2002. In 2005, he was honored with Spain’s Goya Award for best original music in the film *Habana Blues*.

“The future of the FAC is in the hands of the artists and their imaginations,” X says. “The most important thing is that it has already created the possibility of creating and living together.”

Watch a video of the X Alfonso song "Vuelo."

[Back to top](#)

Political Innovator: Claudia López

Claudia López fled Colombia in October of 2013 after receiving death threats for her investigative reporting on the so-called *parapolítica* network that linked her country's politicians with paramilitary groups. "Yesterday, I left the country as a preventative measure," López wrote to her Twitter followers. "I will return when the police and the inspector general do their jobs."

Two months later, López was not only back in Colombia; she was a successful candidate for the Colombian Senate. In March 2014, López won her seat representing the *Alianza Verde* (Green Alliance) with the slogan "*Colombia se respeta*" ("Colombia must be respected"). During the election, she received over 81,000 votes—making her the most-voted candidate in her party that election cycle. The small, progressive party won five out of 102 senate seats and came in sixth with 3.94 percent of the vote.

Defying what she considers the systemic corruption of her country—even at personal risk—is nothing new for the 44-year-old anti-corruption advocate. Since 2005, when she first published her findings about the expansion of Colombian paramilitary groups as a columnist in *Semana.com*, her work has led to the investigation of 126 members of Congress and the prosecution and conviction of 42 Colombian politicians for direct ties to paramilitary groups (one of the sentences was later revoked).

The Bogotá native has been committed to politics since her days at the *Universidad Distrital*, where she was part of the student movement *La Séptima Papeleta* (The Seventh Ballot), which called for a constitutional assembly during the 1990 congressional elections. She later transferred to the *Universidad Externado de Colombia*, where she studied government and international relations.

Her first professional opportunity in politics came while she worked in the *Dirección de Participación*

Ciudadana (Office of Citizen Participation) as an assistant for Enrique Peñalosa's 1995 campaign for mayor of Bogotá. In the following years, López directed the *Departamento Administrativo de Acción Comunal* (Community Action Administrative Department) for Bogotá's mayor's office, did consulting work, and later launched a career as a political columnist for publications including *Semana.com*, *La Silla Vacía* and *El Tiempo*.

In 2008, López joined *Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris* (New Rainbow Corporation), a Colombian NGO that works to promote democracy and national reconciliation, as coordinator of the organization's *Observatorio del Conflicto Armado* (Armed Conflict Observatory). The threats came after an article she wrote for *La Silla Vacía* in 2011 helped lead to the investigation and imprisonment of the former governor of La Guajira department, Juan Francisco "Kiko" Gómez, in 2013 for his ties to narco-trafficker Marcos "Marquitos" de Jesús Figueroa García.

Today, even as her security is monitored by Colombia's *Unidad Nacional de Protección* (National Protection Unit), López remains a relentless crusader for justice. "I felt a great sense of frustration," López says, explaining why she embarked on a career that has blended journalism, advocacy and politics. "Democracy [in Colombia] no longer belonged to decent citizens; it had been taken over by the mafia and illegal armed actors."

In addition to her anti-corruption platform, López has emphasized the need to construct a more equitable and accessible educational system and reform Colombia's justice system. López's platform also calls for better regulation of mining by the Colombian government, more responsible mining practices and the expansion of popular consultation.

"To achieve a more equal country, we have to practice active citizenship and politics," López says. "The key is to defeat corruption with clean citizen-led politics."

That message resonates in a country where widespread corruption and over 50 years of armed conflict have left many politically apathetic. Some 56 percent of voters abstained from the 2014 congressional elections.

According to López, the threat to Colombia extends beyond the conflict with guerrilla groups such as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia —FARC) to the widespread corruption that has prevented the country from building better institutions. Even her supporters will concede that López, who takes her senate seat in July, will have her work cut out for her.

[Back to top](#)

Civic Innovator: Oriol Gutierrez

BY

Mari Hayman

Oriol Gutierrez first came out when he was a high school senior nearly three decades ago, telling his best friend, but not his family, that he was gay. It wasn't until 1996 that he finally told his parents and sister the truth.

Yet Gutiérrez kept another secret from them for 12 more years: while serving in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, a routine checkup disclosed that he was HIV-positive. "I believed that the news that I was gay would be difficult enough," the first-generation Cuban-American explained in an essay he wrote in 2008 for *POZ*, a magazine that offers health news, support and advice for the more than 1.1 million people in the U.S. living with HIV.

Attitudes have changed since then, and Gutierrez himself is one of the reasons. He now serves as editor-in-chief of *POZ*, after evolving from a loyal reader to a freelancer and then, six years ago, to deputy editor. Gutierrez, 44, a native of New York City, took over *POZ* as editor-in-chief in 2012—and he has since spearheaded the magazine's efforts to raise awareness among critical audiences, including gay and bisexual Latino men, who account for nearly four out of five new HIV cases among Latino men in the U.S.

With effective treatment, most people diagnosed with HIV will not develop AIDS for many years, but late testing means that 36 percent of Latinos living with HIV are diagnosed with AIDS only a year after they are tested (compared to 31 percent of blacks and 32 percent of whites). "If Latinos are late testers, what does that say about the stigma in the Latino community about knowing your status?" Gutierrez asks. Meanwhile, he points out, African Americans, undocumented immigrants, the poor, and the homeless are also disproportionately affected by HIV. "You can't get a test if you can't afford one," he says.

Under Gutierrez' direction, *POZ*, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in June, has devoted its editorial resources to overcoming the economic, cultural and legal barriers that contribute to late testing and treatment. Supported by ad revenue, *POZ* is published eight times a year and has a print circulation of 125,000—although its website, *POZ.com*, registers 450,000 unique visitors every month.

POZ.com has a "Latino" section, with Spanish-language fact sheets and articles in Spanish on navigating the Affordable Care Act. Gutierrez also runs *TuSalud*, launched in 2007, a Spanish-language magazine and website that concentrates on fitness and nutrition as well as HIV, hepatitis B and C and other health concerns that disproportionately affect Latinos.

Under Gutierrez, *POZ* has focused on telling personal stories as a means to understanding larger topics such as HIV and mental health, discriminatory legislation and the virus' impact on women and minorities.

Gutierrez says that as the AIDS epidemic receives less attention, it's "natural" that many HIV-negative LGBT activists have moved on to other struggles, like marriage equality and housing discrimination. "But that leaves a vast majority of people with the virus out in the cold," he says—making *POZ*'s mission more urgent than ever.

[Back to top](#)



**SUBSCRIBE
TO AQ**
1-Year Print,
Digital, and
New App
Subscription
for only
\$20.95
Save 30%!

Connect with AQ



Most Popular

MOST POPULAR ON AQ ONLINE

[Most Viewed](#)

Past: [1 day](#) [1 week](#) [1 month](#) [1 year](#)

[Brazil, Ecuador, and the Inter-American Human Rights System](#) (49 times)

[Colombian Military Join Peace Talks](#) (25 times)

[Brazil's Long To-Do List](#) (21 times)

Venezuelan Attorney General Denies Leopoldo López Parliamentary Candidacy (18 times)

The Dominican Republic and Haiti: Shame (15 times)

WEB EXCLUSIVES

- [AQ Slideshow: El Bote at Cambalache: Life at a Landfill](#)

February 13, 2015

by [Timothy Bouldry](#)



For years, the Indigenous Warao relied on "El Bote," the landfill in Cambalache, Venezuela for their livelihood. View a slideshow of "El Bote" to learn more.

- [AQ Slideshow: Climbing Aconcagua, the Summit of the Americas](#)

February 5, 2015

by [Stephen Kurczy](#)



Aconcagua is the tallest peak in the Western Hemisphere and a meeting place for people from around the world.

[MORE WEB EXCLUSIVES »](#)

AQ Online is sponsored by



AQ Course Packets: Now Available for Your Classroom!



[Browse our catalogue.](#)

NOW ON AS/COA ONLINE

[Parting Shot: Leading Talent](#)

by Susan Segal - Mar 06, 2015

When it comes to gender parity in leadership positions, Latin America is falling behind. Fewer than 5% of the world's ...

[Weekly Chart: Latin American Women in Leadership](#)

by Luisa LemeCarin Zissis - Mar 06, 2015

When it comes to women leaders in government, the Americas has made strides in the past 15 years. The average portion of women ...

[Exhibition Opens Window to World of Latin American Design](#)

Mar 06, 2015

A new exhibition offers a look at the world of Latin American Design, a period regarded as one of the region's most ...



AQ MEDIA PARTNER

FINANCIAL TIMES

World

[Swiss banks drawn into Petrobras scandal](#)

44 minutes ago

Witness claims bribes laundered through accounts in Switzerland

Companies

[Colombia and rebels agree to clear mines](#)

17 hours ago

