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BUILDING A MOVEMENT

How the creators of Light City and Mr. Trash Wheel set about making Baltimore shine brighter

CONTENTS

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2016 : VOLUME 16 : NUMBER 5

IN EVERY ISSUE

- 8 **Inside Out:** The secret life of angel investors
- 14 **Human Element:** How Tim McFadden turned his passion for glass art into a career
- 66 **Infographic:** Fishing for a good deal

COLUMNS

- 6 **From the Editors:** Running the machine
- 10 **Collective Wisdom:** Four functions of business
- 11 **10 Things:** Maximize motivation
- 12 **Interior Matters:** Salvaging a reputation
- 13 **Innovator:** The promise of transformation

FEATURES

- 25 **Pioneer spirit**
Sagamore wants to revive Maryland's rye whiskey heritage
By Dan Mills
- 28 **Building a better classroom**
Three Teach For America alums are growing Baltimore's startup scene
By Tina Irgang

SPECIAL SECTIONS

- 30 **Centers of Influence Awards**
Honoring Baltimore's most trusted advisors
- 52 **Healthiest Company Awards**
Honoring Baltimore's wellness pioneers



PAGE
16

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

How the creators of *What Weekly*, *Light City* and *Mr. Trash Wheel* set about making Baltimore shine brighter

By Alyssa Hurst and Tina Irgang | Photography by Rachel Smith and courtesy of What Works Studio

Go to smartceo.com for a video interview with Brooke Hall and Justin Allen at the Light City festival.





BUILDING A MOVEMENT

The creators of *What Weekly*, Light City and Mr. Trash Wheel were on a mission to showcase a brighter side of Baltimore. So they built a coalition of the city's most prominent business and civic leaders to make it happen.

Brooke Hall
CEO
Justin Allen
CMO
What Works
Studio

By Alyssa Hurst and Tina Irgang
Photography by Rachel Smith
and courtesy of What Works Studio

You won't find What Works Studio listed on the New York Stock Exchange. The names of CEO Brooke Hall and CMO Justin Allen don't conjure up immediate looks of recognition in the eyes of prominent investors. But the creative minds behind this small design studio have launched a whole series of projects designed to put Baltimore on the map and let the world know about the creative talent working in the city.

Even if you've never heard of What Works Studio, you may have danced in the brightly lit parade on night one of the Light City festival, or hopped on LED lily pads to see them change color

in the night. Perhaps you opened your wallet on Giving Tuesday to help Baltimore raise \$5.7 million in one day as part of the Bmore Gives More campaign. Or maybe you pass Mr. Trash Wheel, arguably the world's most beloved trash interceptor, on your walk to work each morning.

All of these game-changing, over-the-top projects have one thing in common: What Works Studio helped make them happen. By creating meaningful relationships with Baltimore's most prominent power players, the married couple at the helm has taken its small operation and given it the power to do big things.

“
**WE GOT THIS
 MISSION OF, HOW
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 HOW AMAZING
 THIS PLACE IS?”**

**TELLING THE STORY
 OF BALTIMORE**

In 2010, Hall was running a one-woman marketing and PR company, known as Brooke Hall Creative, out of her dining room.

“I just really knew I would be an entrepreneur. I wanted to work for myself, keep my own schedule and do my own thing,” she says. Hall was interested in magazines and had done some work as a photographer and writer, so she decided to launch an online publication to promote Brooke Hall Creative in Baltimore, and drum up more local business. The publication would focus on events happening in the city.

When Hall shared the idea with Allen, he saw its potential, and together, they developed a broader concept: The magazine, *What Weekly*, would document the burgeoning underground music and arts scene in the city, whose story was rarely told.

“We got this mission of, how do we tell the world about how amazing this place is?” says Hall. “All the stories about Baltimore that we were seeing were just negative, even by the local media.”

That negative perception, says Allen, didn’t seem to fit with how local people were experiencing their city: “We’re not trying to shy away from [the challenges]. We talk about those things in our projects, but it isn’t the whole story. It isn’t even half the story.”

Shifting the narrative meant building connections with others who believed in Baltimore’s future and embodied its creative spirit, he adds: “It’s finding all of those people out there who are acting in the best interests of their community, but doing it in a really cool, fun, spectacular way — whether it be through business, or through arts and culture, or through nonprofits.”

One of those people was Erica Denny, a well-known photographer who showcased the city’s club scene and contributed to *What Weekly*. When Denny suddenly died after an asthma attack in 2010, “we decided that we



SERENDIPITY, MISSED CONNECTIONS & BROKEN NOSES

How a successful life and business partnership got started

For years, Justin Allen and Brooke Hall kept missing each other.

Allen grew up in Clarksville, TN — a small military town that he says was once ranked the worst place to raise a child. He escaped by hitting the road and building cell phone towers for a living. Along the way, he met a girl and ended up following her to Westminster, MD. After the two broke up, Allen spent some time living on a farm in Columbia, mending fences and caring for horses. He also worked at Baltimore's 33rd Street ETC location, where he designed and developed implantable surgical devices, and played music in Baltimore clubs. Eventually, he decided it would be easier to just move to the city.

Hall was born in Tulsa, OK, but later moved with her family to Maytown, a small farm town in Pennsylvania. Throughout her high school years, Hall says she felt like a big fish in a small pond, desperate to get out. She followed her half sister down to West Palm Beach, FL, before enrolling at The Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University in Jupiter. After graduation, she followed a Hopkins Ph.D. student to Baltimore.

Though the pair had both settled into Baltimore — at one point in apartments right across an alley from each other — and ran in similar circles, they didn't meet.

Then, on January 16, 2009, Hall walked into Club Charles with her father, and parked herself right next to a man at the bar. The two started making small talk.

In fact, that man was a friend of Allen's. Allen had promised to meet him at the club, then changed his mind about going out. However, Allen's friend didn't have a cell phone, so Allen still had to stop by Club Charles to talk to him.

"So I went, and I saw HER at the bar," says Allen.

When Allen saw Hall, he liked her immediately. But as she was talking to his friend, he instead set his sights on her father. After winning over his future in-law, Allen turned his attention to Hall and the two headed outside for a smoke.

"And the rest is history," says Hall.

On their fourth date, Hall and Allen headed to Lithuanian Hall, a venue in the SoWeBo

neighborhood, with friends. They drove home around 2 a.m., feeling pretty good about each other. All of the other bars had let out, and their car ended up stopped at a red light.

"And all of a sudden, this dude runs out and jumps onto the car we are in," says Hall. At first, Hall and Allen say the man was dancing and marching, but then he made his way to the roof of the car and began stomping, caving in the sun roof and attempting to rip off the car's door. Allen and two friends jumped out of the car and attempted to restrain him, but once the man's friends joined the tussle, a full-fledged street brawl erupted.

"Next thing I know, I looked in the rearview mirror to see what was happening behind us and I saw the crazy guy stomping like he had something on the ground," says Hall.

"It just happened to be my head," says Allen.

With Allen suffering from a gash in his head, covered in blood and nursing a broken nose, Hall headed out into the cold to flag down a passing ambulance. Even though his injuries caused a bit of temporary amnesia, Allen remembers watching Hall waving for help.

"She was dressed to the nines. She had on this vintage fur coat of her grandmother's out on North Avenue, looking like a million bucks," he says.

Despite Allen's dogged ambitions to take the pretty girl whose name he couldn't remember home, Hall and the medics were able to coax him into the ambulance and rush him off to the hospital. "I curled up into his hospital bed in Shock Trauma and ... I just lay there with him all night," says Hall.

**"I WAS LIKE, 'LEAVE
WHAT'S-HER-NAME ALONE.
SHE'S THE LOVE OF MY LIFE.'"**

Allen and Hall forged a lasting connection that night even as, Allen recalls, the hospital's doctors tried to flirt with Hall.

"I was like, 'Leave what's-her-name alone. She's the love of my life.'"

were going to do this big tribute to her and her work," says Hall. *What Weekly* made a commemorative book in honor of Denny's memory. It became the magazine's first-ever printed product.

What Weekly also told the story of Little Vinnie, a tattoo artist who specialized in creating realistic nipples for women who had undergone mastectomies.

"The piece was getting a reaction," says Hall. "People were writing in to say, 'Thank you so much for documenting this, because I have to go through this.'"

GETTING HEARD AND OPENING DOORS

Stories like these built a reputation for *What Weekly* and its mission of spreading the word on the creative work happening in Baltimore.

"The vibe that we were putting out created a core community of collaborators who wanted to be involved, and some of them are still involved today," says Allen. "*What Weekly* was a platform, and artists and writers were attracted to it."

They weren't the only ones. Angel investor and former T. Rowe Price executive John Cammack recalls that reading the magazine helped change the way he thought about the city he was living in.

"While I lived in Baltimore, my job was to help [T. Rowe Price] perform better across the U.S.," he says. "I didn't know Baltimore, and I had probably a cynical view of the city and its future. ... I read *What Weekly*, and it just opened this vantage point.

There was this optimism about the city. I was so impressed by the reporting and the themes and the whole attitude that I decided to look up Justin and Brooke."

Cammack, who is now managing partner of Cammack Associates LLC, was part of a longstanding discussion group of older, influential Baltimoreans. He decided to invite Hall and Allen, along with about a dozen other "young doers," to meet with the group.

Members of that group generated further positive word of mouth for Hall, Allen and *What Weekly*. "I viewed their enterprise as absolutely essential to having Baltimore believe in itself and, beyond that, having others revisit what they thought of Baltimore," says Cammack. "You're talking about two people who had an idea before its time, which all entrepreneurs do."

As *What Weekly* started to gain traction, it began to generate business for Brooke Hall Creative from clients who wanted a similar look for their brands and websites. By 2012, the company was doing well enough that Allen came on full-time to help with both design and business development.

"*What Weekly* was really great as a lead into the city. We built our network with that, and we built our reputation," says Allen.

"People would just come to us," adds Hall. "*What Weekly* ended up being kind of like our content marketing strategy. ... It turns out that when you produce cool content that's beautiful, people want to work with you."

To take Brooke Hall Creative beyond its identity as a one-woman



Since its founding, *What Weekly* has generated buzz with its artful photography of Baltimore artists like Celebration (top) and Bosley (bottom).

“
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THEN WHEN YOU NEED
TO CALL THEM TO
ACTION, YOU CAN.”

show, the two decided to rebrand as What Works Studio, a name they chose to tie the company back to the *What Weekly* brand that had been its main business-development engine so far.

By 2013, the company had built enough business to move out of Hall's dining room and incubate at Maryland Art Place on Saratoga Street. In October 2014, What Works Studio outgrew that space and moved into its current offices, on North Charles Street in the Mount Vernon neighborhood.

THE SPARK OF AN IDEA

“What Weekly was sort of our case study in our ability to build an engaged audience, to build great, spectacular design — our ability to create marketable user experiences,” says Allen. That ability would soon be put to the test on a much larger scale.

While they were running *What Weekly* and What Works Studio, Hall and Allen started thinking about other ways they could shift public perception of Baltimore and create word of mouth for artists and other creative minds in the city.

After witnessing firsthand and hearing about the innovative ideas and community building that came from festivals like Vivid Sydney in Australia and Austin's South by Southwest, something clicked.

“We had to go out to festivals and conferences and we were coming away inspired and really jazzed to do something big,” says Allen. “We noticed that these events were informing how we felt about cities, and we thought this would be a great way to continue to expand the narrative [of Baltimore].”

The two wondered if they could pull together a festival here, and started brainstorming concepts. In 2013, on a 16-hour road trip to Florida and back, “we put pen to paper and started planning out the whole thing,” says Allen.

The result was a 20-page, full-color brochure, website, video and other materials

for a festival called Light City. “It didn't say, ‘We are proposing to do this.’ We put a date on it. We said, October 2015, this is happening in Baltimore,” recalls Allen. The mock brochure included a full conference schedule, with real people assigned to each speaking slot. It also featured a lineup of real musicians who spanned every genre so that everyone who picked it up would see something they liked.

Hall and Allen's first email about Light City went to investor John Cammack. They asked for Cammack's help in getting key stakeholders around the city to embrace the festival idea. One of the names he came up with was Gary Vikan, then director of the Walters Art Museum.

Having those names attached to the project early on helped Hall and Allen build momentum for their idea, says Cammack. “I think when you have a risky idea, if you can surround yourself with people from the establishment, it helps. Now, if you're debunking the idea, you're debunking John Cammack and Gary Vikan.”

Hall and Allen also tapped into other members of their network whose names commanded respect in Baltimore, including architect and arts patron Adam Gross. Gross got them a meeting with Laurie Schwartz, president of Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore.

“So we get there, Adam was late, and Laurie was there by herself. We walked in and said, Adam Gross told us to be here. And she says, who are you?” recalls Allen. “Brooke did a really good job of winning her over, and by the end of the meeting, we were all fast friends. ... [Schwartz] saw the potential of what Light City could do to bring locals back to the harbor.”

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MR. TRASH WHEEL

Though at the time, What Works threw a lot of its energy into bringing Light City together, the festival had already started opening doors to other major projects dedicated to improving Baltimore.

In May 2014, shortly after the Inner Harbor Water Wheel was installed near Pier 5, Adam Lindquist, director of Waterfront Partnership's Healthy Harbor Initiative, snapped a cellphone video of the solar-powered trash interceptor scooping up a tire, and posted it on YouTube for his friends and family to see. But its reach went far beyond that. “People just loved seeing the tire go up and fall into the dumpster, and people were just absorbed by this. A million hits on YouTube — just totally unprecedented,” says Hall.



At that time, What Works Studio had already formed a relationship with Waterfront Partnership. “They reached out to us when they were starting to conceptualize Light City,” says Sarah St. Claire, director of marketing at Waterfront Partnership. The nonprofit was in the process of creating a new brand identity and redeveloping its website, and St. Claire asked Hall and Allen to take on both projects.

When the water wheel's video went viral, Lindquist started hunting for the right idea that could help him capitalize on that popularity. After hearing several pitches from firms who told Lindquist to open-source the water wheel's construction code and consider trademarks and patent infringement, What Works' unique pitch stood out. As Allen puts it: “I looked at [the water wheel] and I was like, let's turn this into a character.”

"We took one of the early pictures of it — that iconic profile — and we just plopped two googly eyes on it and sat in front of the white board," says Allen. From that early planning session, Hall, Allen and their team created a character complete with a name, history and voice. It's that voice that impressed Lindquist the most.

While the idea of a campaign featuring a talking water wheel was certainly out of the Waterfront Partnership's comfort zone, Lindquist says he felt confident in Hall and Allen's approach. And so, Mr. Trash Wheel was born.

As part of their approach, Allen and Hall told Lindquist about their team — one that included a comedian and other creative minds with the talent to bring Mr. Trash Wheel to life. Since then, Allen and Hall say, the role of Mr. Trash Wheel has been played

by many of What Works' staff members, and it's one of the most beloved jobs at the agency. "Whoever is Mr. Trash Wheel is ... very attached to that job," says Allen.

Since his conception in 2014, Mr. Trash Wheel's Twitter account has acquired more than 7,000 followers, completed two massively successful Reddit Q&As and interacted with fans around the world in languages including German, Hebrew and Hindi. He has even made fans of the folks at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. We've seen him transported into space to clean up the water on Mars, dressed up as David Bowie to celebrate the life of one of his favorite artists, and posing with his parents (his father is a garbage truck and his mother, a river boat). A python picked up in the harbor in 2015 has become a recurring character — Mr. Trash Snake — with its own Twitter account.

While Mr. Trash Wheel's online persona draws in new fans, his real-life counterpart is doing serious work for the Inner Harbor.

Since its wheels first started turning, the wheel has removed more than 400 tons of trash from the Inner Harbor and inspired people to take action toward the Healthy Harbor Initiative's mission of cleaning up the Inner Harbor by 2020. "We are entertaining people 80 percent of the time," says Allen. "I think if you can entertain people most of the time, ... then when you need to call them to action, you can."

Lindquist recently heard an author call Mr. Trash Wheel a love letter that the city has written to its people. "It's a playful thing and it gets people to smile when they think of it and see it," says Lindquist. "It didn't have to be that way. I mean, it's a trash interceptor. The world is full of trash interceptors. Nobody has any love for other trash interceptors."

In addition to serving as the voice behind Baltimore's beloved Mr. Trash Wheel, What Works Studio has taken over the Waterfront

Partnership's social media accounts, and redesigned the organization's Healthy Harbor Report Card. Lindquist and St. Claire say the company has had a palpable influence on the way Waterfront Partnership interacts with its community. "What Works has helped to teach us how to have fun, how to be a bit more relaxed and less corporate," says Lindquist. "We are really all about the people — connecting with the people, inspiring the people. To do that, you have to have some fun. You have to be something the people want to be connected to."

“ I LOOKED AT [THE WATER WHEEL] AND I WAS LIKE, LET'S TURN THIS INTO A CHARACTER.”

Top: For Light City, Mr. Trash Wheel received a new set of googly eyes, courtesy of Baltimore-based Key Tech. A previous set of eyes, handmade by Waterfront Partnership's Adam Lindquist, was damaged by high winds in 2015, according to *The Baltimore Sun*.

Middle and bottom: Since his creation by What Works Studio, the Mr. Trash Wheel character has had many adventures, which have included cleaning up space trash and appearing in the classic Japanese woodprint *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.

Opposite page: Mr. Trash Wheel gets a visit from another Baltimore legend, Mr. Boh.



SHARING THE LIGHT

Meanwhile, Hall and Allen kept making the rounds, gathering support for their Light City idea. Nancy Roberts, a Baltimore-based attorney at Duane Morris LLP, was co-chairing a marketing taskforce for the Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore at the time, and heard of the Light City idea through a colleague at her firm.

"Our focus [at the taskforce], ironically enough, was to ... elevate the profile among millennials across the country of what a great place Baltimore is," she says. "I was really impressed with how far they had come with this amazing idea. I thought it was a perfect fit for Baltimore. ... I saw Brooke and Justin as the embodiment of this generation of young, hardworking folks we were trying hard to bring to Baltimore."

Roberts got Hall and Allen a meeting with the leadership team at BGE in March 2014, in hopes that the utility would sign on to sponsor the festival.

And it did.

“**IT TURNS OUT THAT WHEN YOU PRODUCE COOL CONTENT THAT'S BEAUTIFUL, PEOPLE WANT TO WORK WITH YOU.**”

The inaugural Light City festival, which drew some 400,000 visitors, featured numerous installations around the Inner Harbor and beyond, including "Lumen" by artists Kristin McWharter and Steven Lynam (top), "The Pool" by Jen Lewin (middle) and "Peacock" by Tim Scofield and Kyle Miller (bottom).

"The fact that they were calling it Light City, and we were celebrating our 200-year anniversary... I said, why not," recalls Calvin G. Butler Jr., CEO of BGE. "I appreciated their vision, their passion, and the overall concept of bringing the community together."

At this point, the scale of Light City started to come into focus, and What Works began looking for a partner to help with event production.

"That's when we became aware of Baltimore Office of Promotion & the Arts" (BOPA), says Allen. After some negotiations, "we decided that we would collaborate on the project [with them], and that they could handle the production."

Hall and Allen "came to the point I think where they realized that building support from the community and the business community was going to take more infrastructure than their small company could support. They teamed up with BOPA to really become the festival producer," says Jamie McDonald, the founder of Generosity Inc. and another early supporter of the Light City project. In 2015, she signed on to chair the festival's steering committee. McDonald is also the founder of GiveCorps, which had conceived



LEARNING TO LEAD OTHERS

Like most young entrepreneurs, What Works Studio's CEO Brooke Hall and CMO Justin Allen encountered some challenges in transitioning from bootstrappers to leaders.

ON DELEGATION

"Obviously, when [Brooke Hall Creative] was a one-woman shop, I did all the work — all the design, all the website building, all the projects. I touched every aspect of it," says Hall. "Whereas now, a lot of the design and actual coding is being done by the team, and I'm doing more project management, payroll, HR and all the running of the business."

Because both Hall and Allen have experience in design work, they still sometimes find it hard to let go. "There were several false starts where I may still end up building a website, depending on the workflow," says Allen.

"Learning to delegate has been a very interesting journey," adds Hall. "There's still that desire to step in. But I've got to really trust my team. ... They specialize in what they love and we keep the business coming in the door."

ON FIRING

Early on, Hall says she learned an important lesson about employee relationships: "When it looks like somebody on the team isn't the right fit, it's better to just handle it early than let it drag on. ... We have a tendency to say it'll get better, even though you have a sinking feeling that it's probably not the right fit for the company, and it's really obvious that they don't want to be there. ... You really want it to work because you don't want to fail at the relationship. ... That's been tough for me, [because] these people are depending on us for their ability to eat, and it's a lot of pressure."

ON CULTURE

The culture at What Works Studio is evolving as the company continues to grow, but accountability, transparency and fun make up its core. Hall and Allen give their employees the freedom to decide their own hours, and this gives the What Works staff the flexibility to do things like travel to Ecuador and take on side jobs as pirates with Fells Point's Urban Pirates.

"We believe in enjoying our lives and maintaining that quality of life," says Allen. "We all want to be here. It's not a grind. ... We want to design our lives."

What Works Studio's quirky team helps make up its identity as a brand. "We actually had a comedian, two magicians and now we have two pirates ... and a karaoke queen," says Allen. "Everybody here has some sort of weird side gig, and it's great."

the Bmore Gives More campaign and brought in What Works Studio to help promote it.

"It's a real credit to Brooke and Justin that they were able to step back and really let [the festival] become what it was going to become very organically," says McDonald.

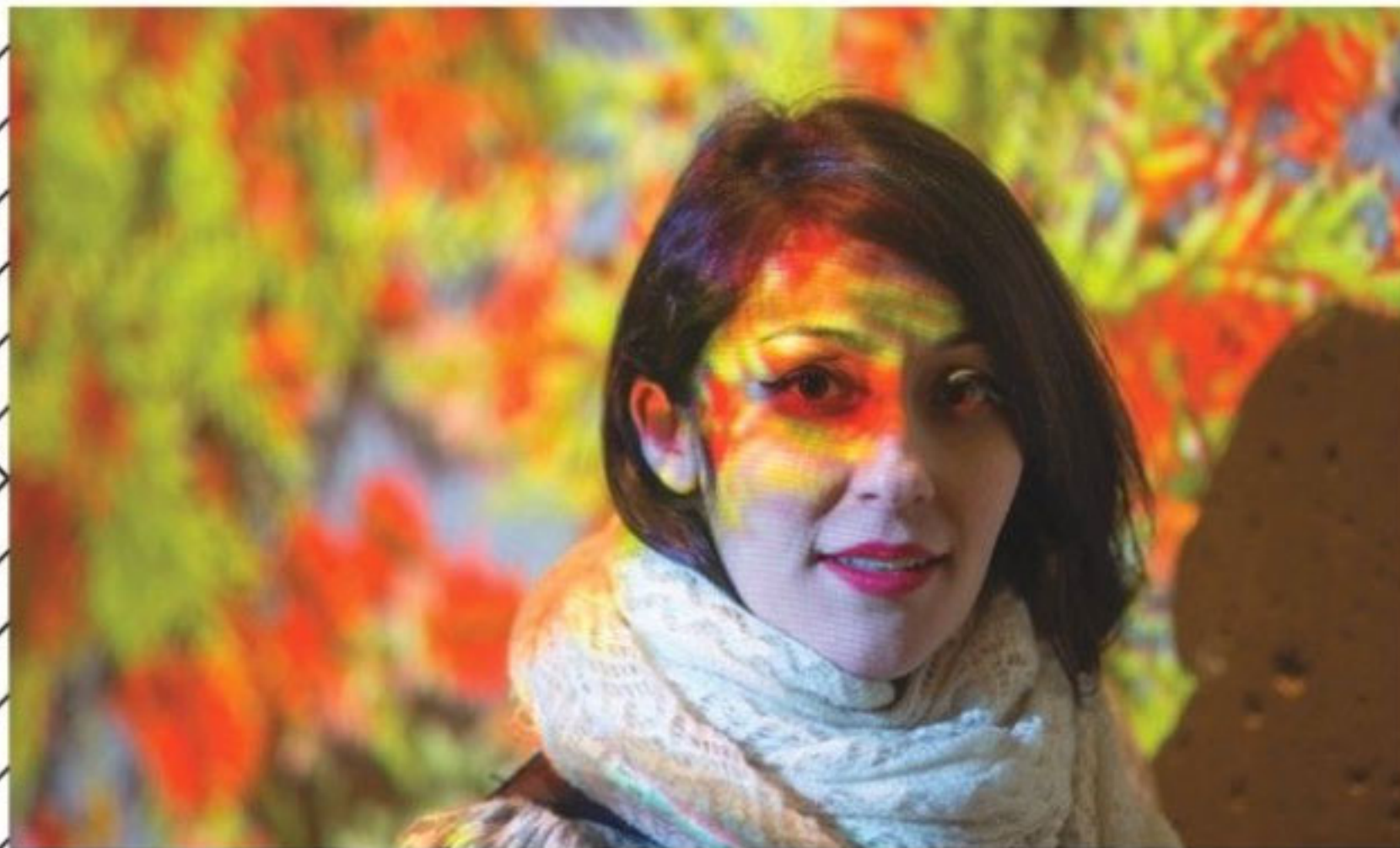
And what it did become surpassed expectations. The inaugural Light City festival attracted more than 400,000 visitors and contributed \$33.8 million to the city's economy, according to *The Baltimore Sun*. That sum was a much-needed boost for downtown businesses still reeling after 2015's riots. At the time of the festival, in late March 2016, it had only been a few weeks since Harford County schools had lifted a field-trip ban to Baltimore City.



MOVING MOUNTAINS

With year one of Light City over, and year two already well into its planning stages, Hall and Allen are ready to decompress, refocus on What Works and let BOPA turn year two into an even grander event. "Light City did take a lot of our creative energy over the last few years, so we are focusing on making sure that we are bringing in the right kind of projects [and] developing the right kind of culture so that this company as a whole will be around for a long time," says Allen.

However, that's not to say What Works won't have a hand in making year two bigger and better. The two describe Light City as a platform that they hope the whole city will be excited to build upon, including What Works. "We will build on the Light City foundation,"



WE HELPED INSPIRE THIS MUCH JOY AND BROUGHT 400,000 PEOPLE DOWN TO THE INNER HARBOR. I WAS LITERALLY IN SHOCK. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL THING."

says Hall. "And it's exciting. I don't know exactly what it's going to be yet. We have some ideas."

Though Light City introduced Hall and Allen to major players in Baltimore, and its success gave What Works a significant boost in business, it's only an indication of what's to come for a company that has big solutions and refuses to see barriers to success.

While What Works is fully dedicated to its clients and helping build brands, its real heart is in the movements it seeks to build and the problems it aims to solve, says Allen: "We still have this core side of our business, but also have this large-scale movement-building line of our business that's really inspirational and really takes a lot of creative energy to pull off."

So how does this small, local company with only seven employees turn things like water wheels, event promotions and light sculptures into larger-than-life, successful and impactful movements?

"We find whatever the nugget is that resonates with folks, that common truth, that common mission, that common goal," says Allen. "The mission is to move to the next step and inspire people to action because they want to, not because they were convinced that they have to." **CEO**

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For a full list of photo credits for the Light City images, check out the online version of this story at smartceo.com.



Top: The installation "Diamonds Light Baltimore" by Cheon Kroiz was comprised of 15 diamond-shaped structures made using LED lights.

Middle: Light City played host to several interactive installations that reacted to human touch, including "Human Effect."

Bottom: Performers in illuminated costumes roamed the festival grounds, including stilt walker "Big Whimsy."