



## Into the VALLEY

WHEN LOUISE CHUNN'S STARTUP BUSINESS WAS PICKED FOR AN INTENSIVE BOOT CAMP OUT IN CALIFORNIA, SHE LEARNT WHAT IT REALLY TAKES TO JOIN THE TECH SET

**O**n my first morning in Palo Alto I walked past a shop staffed by robots. Which is what it sells. Screens mounted on two wheel-bottomed poles, they whizz about, asking if they can help. Does anyone buy them, I asked incredulously. Of course they do. This is Silicon Valley, where the future is born; everyone is an early adopter here.

So what was I, a longtime magazine journalist with a four-series-old iPhone and a conviction about improving people's mental wellbeing, doing in the heartland of technological innovation? Where everyone is trying to invent or invest in the next Facebook or Uber, planning settlements on Mars – or just fancies having their own robot?

I am the founder of Welldoing.org, a website that matches people with the

therapists most suited to them. I'd been working with a tech developer on an algorithm that has matched hundreds of people with therapists for more than a year, when I was invited to join a Shoreditch-based programme for Founders Over 50. It opened my eyes to the exhilarating effects of being part of the startup community, so when I was chosen as the only British founder on a two-week accelerator programme at Blackbox, a support business for startups in Palo Alto, I didn't have to think twice: this was my golden ticket.

Filled with the spirit of adventure (and a few butterflies), I flew to San Francisco at a couple of weeks' notice. Palo Alto itself is a 40-minute drive south. On first impressions, it's affluent, ordered and rather bland, populated by couples in Lululemon activewear



*Top:* the Google campus in Mountain View, California. *Above:* Louise Chunn pitching her startup at Blackbox

walking exotic dogs and clutching Starbucks beakers. And it was not nearly as warm and sunny as I'd expected. Cocooned in almost all the clothing I'd packed, I shared my first breakfast with two other Blackbox participants – one from Palestine, one from Israel – moaning about how much colder it was than our home countries.

I needn't have worried – that was one of my last

experiences of the outside world. The Cowper Inn, adjoining Victorian timber houses in a street near Palo Alto's main drag, is where we ate, slept and – between the hours of 10am and 6pm – absorbed the wisdom of more than 40 speakers over the next 14 days.

The 18 other Blackboxers were pretty diverse. Mohammed, an urbane former banker from Paris, was spreading the pop-up shop revolution, while Dave from Dublin wants to save us all hours of email pain at work. Canadian doctor Alexandra has a nifty app for covering last-minute problems >



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with childcare and elderly care, while Marcelo from Uruguay can alert you to what's happening in the streets of your city before you get tangled up in traffic.

Like kids in summer camp, we soon got to know each other very well. Some were the tech cliché of head down, fingers tapping as they kept their businesses ticking over in the breaks; others were picking each others' brains, or testing out their product or sales pitch. Fadi Bishara, founder of Blackbox, says that startup founders fall into three types: the hustler, the hacker or the hipster. And we had them all.

The first day got off to a swift start. Our chief speaker, a bluff guy called Bill Joos, said the induction was "like drinking out of a firehose". I was just hoping some of it would soak in. Joos, a former air traffic controller turned sales and marketing consultant, was teaching us to pitch. First off we each had to give a 10-minute demonstration.

Most of the others had clearly done this dozens of times before. But I hadn't done it once. I thought my years of being the public face for five different magazines would sustain me, but I was wrong. That evening I Skyped my husband, who said I looked like a rabbit in the headlights. I went to bed battling the kind of negative thoughts that send people to see a therapist. The irony...

I greeted day two by joining a pre-breakfast running group, led by Ana, our delightful course organiser. Half a dozen of us jogged through the sedate streets of Palo Alto, taking in the homes of Larry Page of Google (large, modern, with the tallest TV aerial you've ever seen) and the late Steve Jobs (Cotswolds cottage-style with Hobbit features and an orchard of – what else – apple trees to one side) before settling down for a day with the venture capitalists (VCs).

These are the guys who back startups when they are little more than concepts without revenue or users. The risk is high, but for some the rewards have been astronomical. Their super-casual wardrobe of jeans and untucked shirts disguises the tens of millions of dollars some have made. Right now, with rumours of a bubble, they are all fixed on finding "unicorns" – startups valued at \$1 billion before they even go public.

I've always thought that my idea could extend far beyond therapy and Britain, so I was delighted when our first VC, British-born Keith Teare, agreed that I was a potential unicorn. Before I could put a down payment

on a Tesla, he predicted that initial investment might be slow to clinch. "You should look for someone who feels affinity with the subject matter. Have you thought of Richard Branson?"

By day three, our focus was back on pitching: the handshake pitch (10 words); the elevator pitch (45 seconds); the napkin pitch (elevator plus sketch on a paper napkin); and the three-minute pitch, which is what we'd be doing before several hundred invited VCs, startup founders and press in San Francisco in nine days' time. At the end of the day we took it in turns to pitch to the group, who then filled in a sheet enumerating our good and bad points.

I sat in my room poring over their comments: "Clarify difference from competition", "Nice voice, smile more", "Where's the Big Idea?", "Explain exactly how you do it", "Offer ratings



The prospective tech entrepreneurs on their first day at Blackbox

of therapists' service". More than half said if they were potential investors they'd take another meeting, but almost all had questions and caveats. This was harder than I'd imagined.

On day four we went to Google's campus, about 20 minutes away. We were allocated Google staff mentors; mine was the son of a psychotherapist, married to a psychology grad. Genuinely interested in my idea, Joel's suggestions focused on product/market fit. Now we were talking! I immediately emailed some of his advice back to my team in London.

Most nights, after eight solid hours of note-taking and attention, I was too pooped even to watch a sitcom in my room, but on Friday I joined half a dozen handsome young Blackboxers in a heaving bar for a whiskey sour or two. Given that I'll never see 55 again, it was flatteringly amusing to have to show ID to enter the establishment. At all other times, though, it didn't seem relevant that I was not the archetypal twentysomething in a hoodie. In fact, by the beginning of the

second week, as my notebook filled up with information and advice, I felt like I was actually getting younger, leaner, hungrier (at least metaphorically).

Of all the people I met, I realised it was the founders who really turned me

## It was nerve-racking. Think *Dragons' Den* before a live audience, a long way from home

on. Older than my fellow Blackboxers, humbler than the VCs, these were the guys who'd come from Poland, Spain, Finland or Germany, had been "in the Valley" for a few years, and were now thriving. They'd survived cutthroat competition, they'd raised money, they'd got the traction and revenue that we were all dreaming about. They made it all seem doable.

Friday was pitch night. We gathered at a warehouse-style worksharing space and roamed the room like nervous dogs. Slowly the audience of potential investors, fellow founders and press took their seats in front of the stage, while four judges sat to one side.

I won't pretend otherwise: it was nerve-racking. Think *Dragons' Den* before a live audience, and a long way from home. As I'm not looking to relocate to California, it was highly unlikely I'd find my investors here but... stranger things have happened in this valley of unicorns and robots.

I was second up. In my Cos dress and ankle boots, I climbed on to the stage and I laid it on them: what Welldoing.org did, who it was for, how it would change the world of therapy, and beyond. I ended to applause, especially from my fellow Blackboxers, who hugged and back-patted each speaker as they finished.

After the pitches, interested people searched us out, exchanged business cards, proposed partnerships, Skype sessions, more meet-ups. Then some of us headed out for a celebratory bar-hop, promising to keep up the Whatsapp group and gather for a reunion when the first one of us reaches unicorn status. As Fadi said, building group support to last us in future years is a big part of his programme.

Next day I headed back to London, a changed woman, ready to take on the world. I've a headful of plans, tips and hacks to "Always Run, Never Walk", as one of our speakers signs off his daily newsletter. Now, who can introduce me to Richard Branson? ■