Or the first time, the optics and photonics startup accelerator Luminate NY has partnered with OSA Frontiers in Optics + Laser Science APS/DLS (FiO + LS) conference to give the accelerator’s 10 finalists a chance to share their innovations with an international optics audience.

Now on its third cohort, NextCorps Luminate NY offers US$100,000 to each finalist accepted into a six-month intensive program, in which the startups are provided with resources and coaching to flesh out their business plans. The companies then compete on “Demo Day” for additional funding. This year, due to COVID-19, the program was extended, and the final pitch event will take place virtually at the free-to-register FiO conference.

OPN caught up with two Luminate finalists, OSA Fellow Boon Ooi of SaNoor Technologies, USA, and Sanna Gaspard of Rubitection, USA, to learn more about their startups and their experience with Luminate.

Boon Ooi
CEO, SaNoor Technologies [sanoortech.com]

What gap in the optical communications market does SaNoor aim to fill?
My research team [at KAUST, Saudi Arabia] has been working on high-speed underwater optical communications since 2014, and SaNoor was established in 2018. Currently, there is not high-speed underwater...
communication with data rates of gigabits per second. And existing sound-based technology for underwater communication links only provides tens of kilobits per second. Our technology can find niche solutions to problems facing oil and gas and energy (windfarms, for example) industries in pipeline and environmental monitoring. I am excited to witness our technology being deployed by these industries to increase safety of their operations, prevent pollution and to help protect marine mammals and our fragile undersea environment.

Q. Have you faced any major hurdles launching this startup?
Forming a team and product field trials are two main challenges. However, I think SaNoor is doing well so far. Other than the delay of our new product introduction due to COVID-19, our other plans for SaNoor are on track.

Q. What made you decide to apply to Luminate?
Luminate runs the top optics and photonics accelerator program in the world, and the “who’s who” of the optics and photonics community serve on Luminate’s board. The program is run by a group of highly competent and experienced leaders and colleagues in the field. Luminate’s portfolio consists of many successful startups, so we knew that the program was going to be highly competitive. Luckily, SaNoor loves competition. We were honored to be selected as one of the 10 startups of this cohort.

Q. What are the next steps for SaNoor?
Right now, we are getting ourselves ready for Demo Day in September. After that, we look forward to setting foot in Rochester, closing our financing round, completing staffing and ramping up production.

In five years, we hope to see our systems being deployed to several value oil and gas and energy companies for pipeline and environmental monitoring, and on track to transform Sanoor into a midsize company.

Sanna Gaspard
CEO, Rubitection (rubitection.com)

Q. Have you stumbled on any roadblocks while launching your startup?
It’s been difficult. If you’re young and a recent graduate, you may not have access to money or the network to grow. I had just earned my Ph.D., and I was a woman running a med-tech company with a technology that I had invented—and I was a Black woman doing those things. I felt it was difficult to get people to take me seriously and get behind the business.

Q. Was any of this made more difficult by COVID-19?
It definitely shifted our whole schedule over by a few months. I think participating in Luminate during COVID was beneficial. As startup infrastructure was kind of crashing—investors were pulling back and businesses going into crisis and shutting down—being with Luminate gave access to funding, resources and individuals to support our business.

Q. After Demo Day, what are your plans for Rubitection?
Rubitection will continue tech development, focus on growing our team, fundraising and recruiting clinical partners. In the next five years, I see us on the market working with hospitals and the U.S. Veterans Administration to reduce the risk of bedsores and diabetic foot ulcers.

My mission is not just to improve care, but to equalize care for people of color around the world by taking our product global. So we’re also trying to set the foundation for that now.