

EXCLUSIVE

NEWS

# Slain Baltimore tech CEO wanted to disrupt industry's 'boys network'

Members of Baltimore's tech scene say Pava LaPere was committed to social justice.



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By David Ingram

Pava LaPere was remembered by colleagues and friends Wednesday as part of the glue holding together Baltimore's small tech scene.

The 26-year-old CEO of software startup EcoMap Technologies wasn't from Baltimore, but she moved there for college and quickly fell in love with the city. LaPere's body was found Monday at her apartment building with apparent signs of blunt-force trauma.

Members of the city's tech community said LaPere was a fixture of conferences, happy hours and other meetups for Baltimore tech workers and founders; this year she had been recognized by Forbes magazine on its "30 Under 30" list.

But people who knew LaPere said she also had big ambitions beyond her startup: She wanted to disrupt the tech industry's reigning power structure of white men and make way for more women and other people from disadvantaged groups.

"She was determined to shake up the industry and the good ol' boys network," said Delali Dzirasa, CEO of Fearless, another Baltimore-based tech startup.

Dzirasa said he spoke with LaPere on the subject as recently as last week in a phone conversation.

"I remember getting off the call and thinking, 'They better watch out,'" he said. "It was nice to hear that energy in her voice."

Baltimore police said LaPere was found dead Monday morning and are searching for a repeat violent offender, Jason Billingsley, as a suspect in the case. Billingsley's mother said Wednesday she has urged her son by text to turn himself in.



Pava LaPere. pavamarie via Instagram

LaPere was a native of Tucson, Arizona, who went to Johns Hopkins University for college, according to an interview posted on the university's website. She studied computer science for three years before switching her major to sociology because, she said, she wanted to use entrepreneurship to solve inequalities in society.

While in school, she led an organization to foster entrepreneurship and organized a conference for student entrepreneurs from across Maryland.

Mac Conwell, a venture capitalist, said he met LaPere at that conference while she was attending college and was blown away by her optimism and charisma.

"She was the most exciting and ambitious and bubbly person, to the point where I asked myself, 'Is she for real?'" he said.

As a senior at Hopkins she founded her startup, which less than five years later has about 30 employees and a client list that includes Meta, the owner of Instagram and Facebook, according to Forbes.

EcoMap's products include chatbots and other resources for small businesses, trade associations and universities. It has raised \$7.4 million from investors, including a funding round last month, according to research firm Crunchbase.

Sharrod Davis, EcoMap's chief operating officer, said it was important to LaPere that the startup address inequality in society.

"She built this company that was focused on making information accessible to people who historically didn't have access to that information," he said.

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Friends said that LaPere was well aware of the small number of tech companies started by women, and how little of venture capitalists' investment money they get. U.S. startups with women-only founders receive just about 2% of venture capital, according to research firm PitchBook, and that percentage has stayed roughly the same for more than a decade.

"They're overlooking women, and when they do, they rob society of all of the innovation that comes from all of that thought leadership and all of that potential," Dzirasa said.

Like Dzirasa's startup, EcoMap has committed to a "50/50%" goal of employing a staff that is half women and half people of color.

Conwell said that the last time he saw LaPere, he told her to make sure she was taking care of herself and making time for fun outside work. Her response showed her selflessness, he said: "She said, 'I'm working on those things, Mac, thank you, but once I become a millionaire I'll be able to help a lot more people and do a lot more things.'"

Conwell said her approach was a good match with the broader Baltimore tech scene, which is much smaller than the tech sectors in major economic centers. The Baltimore-Towson area saw \$122 million in venture capital fundraising activity in 2022, compared to \$2.98 billion in nearby Washington, D.C., and its suburbs, according to PitchBook.

As a result, many founders in Baltimore are focused on tech products that would make society more equal, Conwell said – or "equitech," for short.

"We don't want to be the next Silicon Valley. We want to be the first equitech city," he said.

Wednesday night, hundreds of people gathered in the shadows of the historic George Washington monument in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood to honor LaPere. The tech community showed up and remembered the 5-foot-2-inch LaPere as a "giant" who spoke fast and loudly and a visionary who saw potential in people.

"She knew what she wanted to accomplish, and there was nothing in the world that would get in the way of accomplishing that," her father, Frank LaPere, said.

"She was the definition of daddy's little girl. She had me wrapped and still does," he said, his voice cracking. "She turned from daddy's little girl into being a girl boss."

"We're going to take her away from Baltimore, but her presence will never leave here," he said.

Davis, EcoMap's COO, said the startup will be speaking with investors and others in the coming days to figure out what's next.

"My focus at this point is on the well-being of our team," he said. "She inspired so many people – through her brilliance, through her passion, through her zest for life, through her authenticity. And so, I just hope that everyone can take a little kernel of what Pava gave them and hold that with them." 🍌

David Ingram

David Ingram covers tech for NBC News.

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