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## Local biotech is the only U.S. company to win H&M's Global Change Award

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San Francisco-based biotech Rubi Laboratories was one of five winners of H&M's Global Change Award, granted to innovators working to make the fashion industry more sustainable.

The company was founded in 2020 by twin sisters, Leila and Neeka Mashouf, who each have extensive backgrounds in biological engineering and business, along with a passing interest in fashion. CEO Neeka Mashouf was working as a product manager at the time, and felt that she could be doing more to make an impact on businesses wanting to be more sustainable.

They turned that passing interest into a product that has the potential to



RUBI LABORATORIES

have lasting ripple effects on the fashion industry. I spoke with Neeka about how they've been able to manufacture textiles out of carbon dioxide, essentially turning carbon emissions into carbon-negative materials.

Leila and Neeka Mashouf

"We're helping fashion brands source carbon-negative, sustainable textile material that plugs right into their supply chains. We've developed a technology that eats CO<sub>2</sub>, inspired by how trees grow — just as a tree that breathes in CO<sub>2</sub> and makes cellulose and all these different products that we ended up using — we use those same systems but have engineered them to work in industrial scales outside of the tree and outside of cells. So there's no plants involved, no trees, no cells. It's a process that can be done at an industrial scale to take CO<sub>2</sub> and turn it into useful materials," Neeka told me on a call.

Their mission and vision is to contribute to a "planet positive" world. And Neeka said that in order for the vision to come to fruition, the supply chain needs to be reinvented starting with the textiles produced and sold on a global scale.

Fashion sort of runs in the family. The twins' uncle was the founder of BV Stores, a women's fashion brand, so they've grown up around professionals working in design studios and alongside merchandiser and materials engineers. Those experiences granted Leila and Neeka a front-row seat to the sorts of issues that plague the industry from ever-shortening turnaround times for new products to supply chain delays. It wasn't an industry that was particular kind to the planet.

And the industry is paying attention. In February, Rubi Laboratories announced \$4.5 million in seed funding for their first samples that they're currently testing with industry leaders. "The response has been overwhelmingly positive, which is so great to see brands are serious about implementing new materials that can achieve their sustainability commitments — because for so long, there haven't been resources to achieve those commitments. And once we can work to scale up our production to meet performance criteria, and other things, there's just a lot of excitement in getting this in their products and to consumers who are really driving this demand," said Neeka.

The H&M Foundation — the philanthropic arm of the global affordable-fashion powerhouse — launched the Global Change Award in 2015 to encourage companies to transform the fashion industry, from textile production all the way to supply chains, for the better. The €1 million prize is split between five winners each year (Rubi will receive €200,000). Winners also receive one-year of access to an accelerator program that shares resources for the production of the winning products.

Rubi Laboratories boasts total funding of \$8.7 million, according to data obtained from Crunchbase, and with this award, the founders are hoping to bring their carbon-zero textiles to more environmentally-conscious retailers and consumers.

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