Emily and Alon Shaya, Calvin Mackie honored as 2025 Entrepreneurs of the Year

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Emily Shaya accepts the Tulane Distinguished Entrepreneur of the Year Award as her husband and co-recipient Alon Shaya looks on. The award was presented on Tuesday, March 25, at the 2025 Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation Awards Gala.

Tulane University honored restaurateurs Emily (BSM ’06, MBA ’13) and Alon Shaya and educator Calvin Mackie as Entrepreneurs of the Year at the 2025 Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation Awards Gala.

The gala, an annual presentation of the Lepage Center at Tulane’s Freeman School of Business, took place on March 25 at the Audubon Tea Room in New Orleans.

Tulane President Michael A. Fitts delivered remarks along with Freeman School Dean Paulo Goes and Lepage Center Executive Director Rob Lalka.

The Lepage Center presents the awards each year to highlight outstanding entrepreneurs in the community.

The Shayas, who own and operate four acclaimed restaurants through their company Pomegranate Hospitality, received the Tulane Distinguished Entrepreneurs of the Year Award, which honors individuals who combine a history of entrepreneurial success with philanthropic generosity and service to the community.

Mackie, founder of education nonprofit STEM NOLA, received the Tulane Outstanding Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award, which recognizes individuals who are solving social problems and meeting community needs through the use of entrepreneurial principles.

“In a world of disruption and rapid technological change, entrepreneurial thinking isn’t just a skillset — it’s a mindset that empowers students to identify problems, create solutions, generate value and make an impact,” said Goes. “Emily and Alon Shaya and Calvin Mackie each embody that entrepreneurial mindset, drawing on their diverse talents to lead mission-driven businesses that contribute to the betterment of their communities. It’s my honor to recognize them as Tulane’s 2025 Entrepreneurs of the Year.”

Emily and Alon Shaya founded Pomegranate Hospitality in 2017 to create a space where meaningful, lasting relationships are created, community engagement prospers, cultural differences are celebrated, and personal and professional growth of the team are weighed with equal measure. As director of new projects, Emily manages expansion opportunities and works alongside their team to develop new projects from inception through opening, while Alon, chef-partner, oversees menus and culinary operations. They currently operate four acclaimed restaurants under the Pomegranate banner: Saba, a modern Israeli restaurant located in Uptown New Orleans; Safta, a companion to Saba located in the RiNo neighborhood of Denver; Miss River, a “love letter to Louisiana” located in the Four Seasons New Orleans Hotel, and Silan, a Mediterranean-inspired restaurant in the Atlantis Paradise Island Resort in the Bahamas.

Alon co-founded the Shaya Barnett Foundation to provide culinary education and resources to high school students, and he has volunteered his services to raise funds for No Kid Hungry, Alex’s Lemonade Stand and DC Central Kitchen/Martha’s Table. He is a recipient of the Youth Advocate Award from Liberty’s Kitchen and was

honored by InspireNOLA Schools for his work with Edna Karr High School. He serves on the board of the New Orleans Career Center and the Cherry Creek Innovation Campus in Denver.

Through their Rescued Recipes initiative, Emily and Alon have hosted dinners across the country featuring the “rescued” family recipes of Auschwitz survivor Steven Fenves, celebrating his story and helping the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to raise more than $800,000 in support of its preservation efforts.

In accepting the award, Emily acknowledged the Pomegranate Hospitality team members in attendance and thanked them for supporting their vision of a new approach to hospitality.

“We started Pomegranate Hospitality to create a safe and comfortable work environment,” she said. “In the restaurant industry at the time, that was not commonplace. We hope that we are setting a standard for creating a workplace and a culture that is supportive of the teams as well as a great place for people to dine each night.”

“We think of Saba as an incubator for how to make the city a better place,” added Alon. “People come to our restaurants to share special moments, to celebrate, to mourn, to talk, to engage in hard conversations, and we don’t take that for granted. We try to ensure that our restaurant can extend its reach beyond our four walls and really make a difference throughout the community.”



Calvin Mackie, founder of STEM NOLA, addresses attendees after accepting 2025 Tulane Outstanding Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

An award-winning professor, mentor, inventor, author, public speaker and entrepreneur, Mackie founded STEM NOLA in 2013 to expose, inspire and engage communities in learning about opportunities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. STEM NOLA designs and delivers activities, programs and events that bring inspiration, motivation and training to STEM stakeholders across entire communities. Since 2013, the organization has engaged more than 200,000 predominantly under-served low-income students in hands-on STEM project-based learning.

A graduate of Morehouse College with a BS in mathematics, Mackie was simultaneously awarded a BS in mechanical engineering from Georgia Tech. He later earned his master’s and PhD in mechanical engineering from Georgia Tech and served on the faculty of Tulane University for 12 years, rising to the level associate professor of engineering, until the school was disbanded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Mackie served on the board of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, the agency that led the state’s rebuilding efforts following Hurricane Katrina; the Coastal Protection and

Restoration Authority, the entity charged with developing a comprehensive coastal protection plan for Louisiana; and the Louisiana Council on the Social Status of Black Boys and Black Men, which was charged with creating programs and policies to positively impact the lives of the state's black males. He currently serves on the Louisiana STEM (LA-STEM) Advisory Council.

Mackie has won numerous awards, including the 2003 Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring, and the 2019 Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Board's Chair Phoenix Award.

In accepting his award, Mackie thanked his wife, Tracy, and shared the story of how he was inspired to start STEM NOLA after seeing his son regain his love for science through the hands-on projects they did together in their garage. What started as a weekend project for his son and his friends grew into a national organization that strives to break down racial, ethnic and gender barriers in teaching STEM to K-12 students.

"At STEM NOLA, we have a dream that we're going to put STEM in the hands of a million kids every weekend, every after school, every Saturday," Mackie said. "And those million kids are going to wake up every day hoping and dreaming and believing that they're going to create something so great that they're going to be one of the 14 million millionaires in the world, one of the 2,750 billionaires in the world, and then they're going to come back and transform the economy of New Orleans from here on out."

To see more photos from the gala, visit the Freeman School's Flickr page.