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Local

Morgan State grad creates natural products for women

By John-John Williams Iv, The Baltimore Sun | AP

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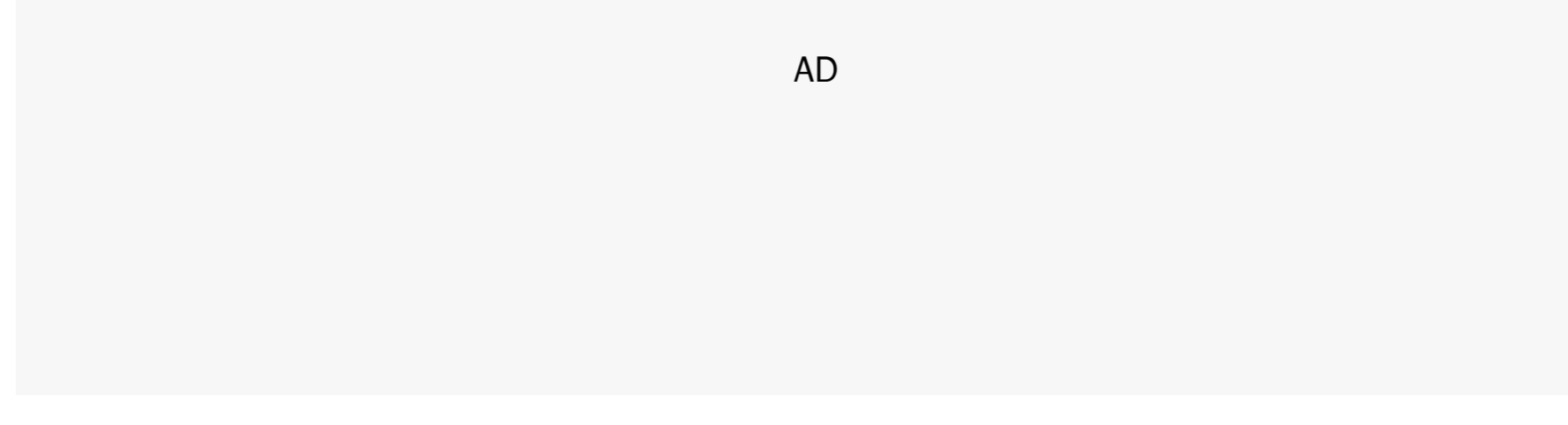
BALTIMORE — Almost three years ago, Arion Long, who now lives in Canton, was on life support. She had lost her daughter during childbirth. While in the hospital, Long contracted E. coli sepsis, which put her in a coma.

Against the odds, two weeks later, she was off life support and successfully pitching her idea for natural, chemical-free feminine hygiene products at Hera Fast Pitch DC, a competition where for-profit startups vie for cash prizes.

Long won \$10,000 that day — one of many times her company would be recognized for its efforts in this industry.

Her drive to succeed combined with being diagnosed with a cervical tumor in 2013 prompted Long to develop the natural products through her company Femly. Long believes her cancer was linked to chemicals in a feminine hygiene product.

Since 2018, Long's Baltimore-based company has been awarded more than \$1 million in funding from pitch competitions to philanthropic giving, including money from Beyoncé's nonprofit organization.



Long's products such as pads and cups are made in the United States and Italy, while her delivery boxes and other items are warehoused through Belts Logistics Services in Baltimore.

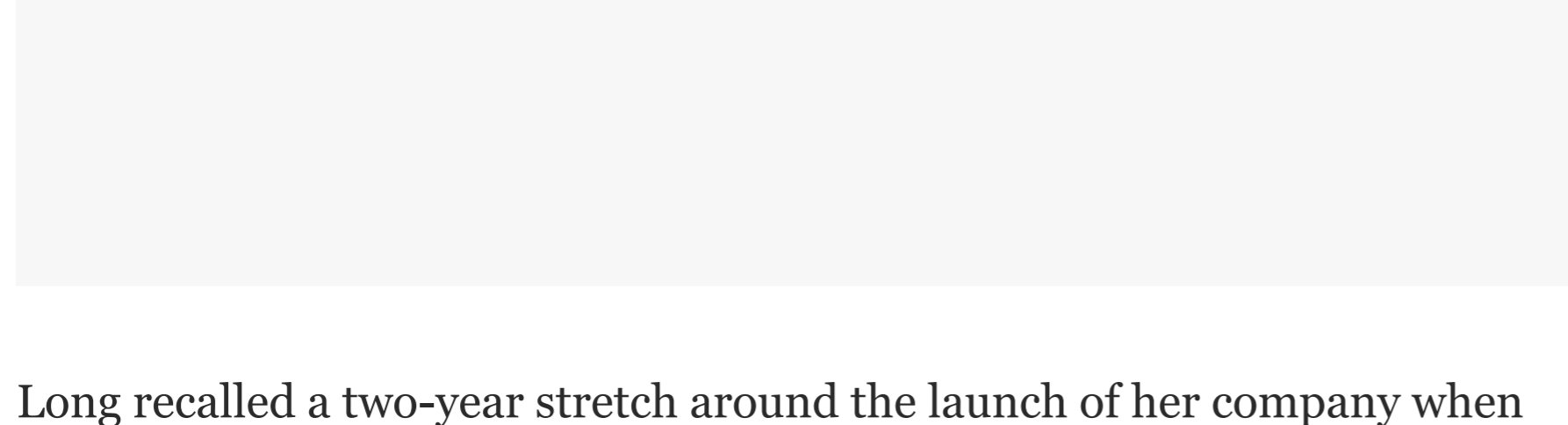
The 2013 Morgan State University graduate, with a bachelor's degree in family consumer science and minor in analytical marketing, said she has an even greater ambition.

"My goal is to take over the world," she said. "I'm 5-foot-1 with 51 feet of energy."

Long, 31, attributes a chunk of her success to moving back to Baltimore from Upper Marlboro in 2018. She said Baltimore is a city bursting with opportunity.

"(In Baltimore) we got access to funding, access to a maker's space. The Baltimore market came with executive coaching. I gained a lot with mentors," she said. "When I came to Baltimore, I found my people."

Many of the pitch competitions she's won since moving to Baltimore came with mentoring, coaching and access to other resources, she said. The competitions and grants also gave her the necessary capital to help her company grow.



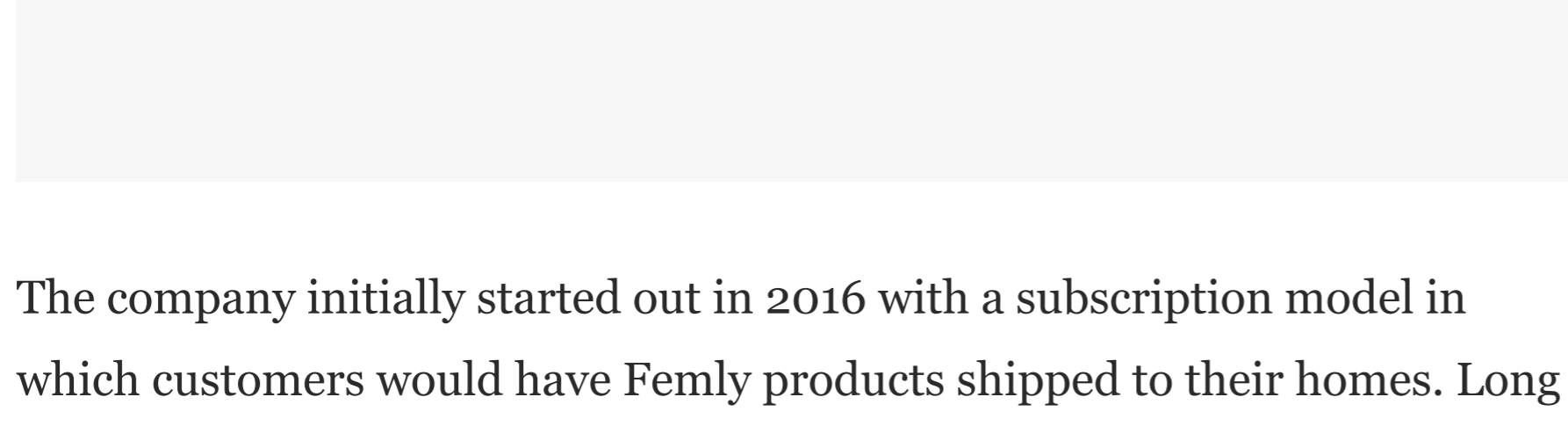
Long recalled a two-year stretch around the launch of her company when she did not have much success finding funding for the business.

"Because I'm Black, have a vagina, and didn't go to Stanford, no one would meet with me," she said.

She credits her success at the Hera Fast Pitch DC, which triggered six figures' worth of funding in the weeks that followed. She also said she did extensive research online to find the right competitions and grants to fund her company.

She now has 11 employees, all either people of color or women, working in everything from marketing to distribution.

Long said she has prioritized partnering with educational entities to increase access to feminine care and developing innovations for the feminine life cycle, creating products that help women during pregnancy, postpartum and menopause.



The company initially started out in 2016 with a subscription model in which customers would have Femly products shipped to their homes. Long has expanded to work with several businesses to provide hygiene products that are dispensed free in public bathrooms.

She has given away 3,000 products across the Baltimore region this past year and said she plans to expand these efforts at colleges — particularly at historically Black colleges and universities.

Long and her company — her husband serves as its chief operating officer — have caught the eye of investors including Beyoncé's philanthropic offshoot, BeyGOOD, which awarded Femly \$10,000 in November.

In January, Long won \$250,000 from Metropolitan Economic Development Association, a nonprofit that provides business development services, access to capital and market support for businesses owned by Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC.)

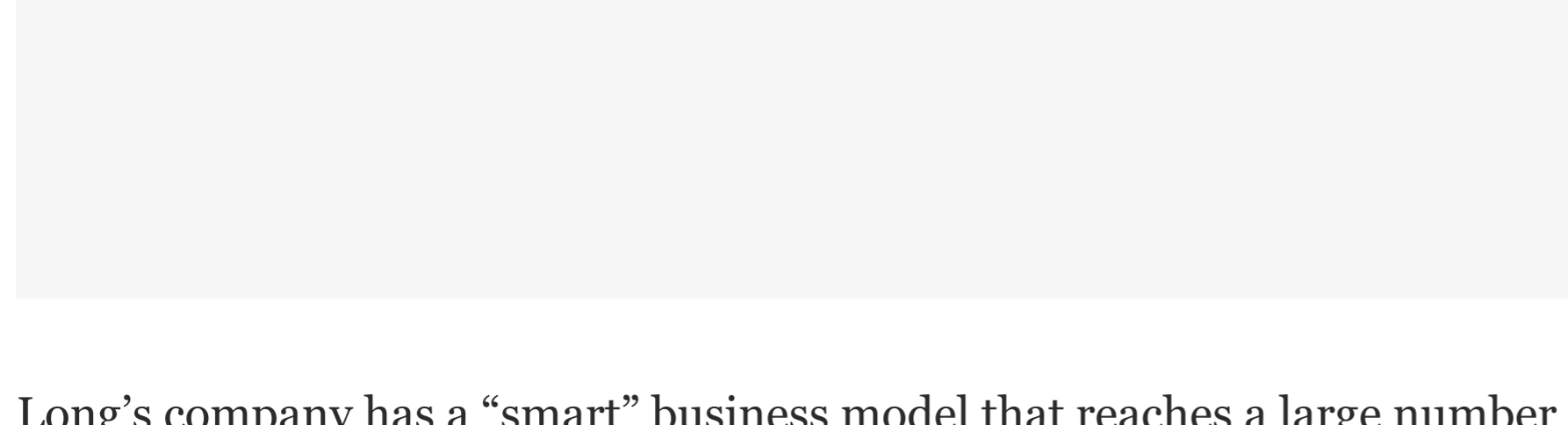


"Her leadership and her charisma really resonated with our 29 judges, who were very excited to invest in Femly," said Alfredo Martel, the group's CEO. Martel said less than 3% of private equity goes to BIPOC entrepreneurs.

"This injection of capital allows her to scale up manufacturing and marketing," Martel said. "This will provide even more momentum for her growth. This award provides that impetus to jump to the next level."

Femly was also one of 15 recipients of a Comcast Representation, Investment, Strength and Empowerment award recognizing excellent small BIPOC businesses. As a result, Femly will be featured in a commercial airing in April on Comcast Cable.

"(Femly) is a company that deals with a topic that is somewhat taboo in our community," said James Lavalley, vice president of integrated marketing solutions for Effectv, Comcast's advertising sales division. "It's really helping the community at large."

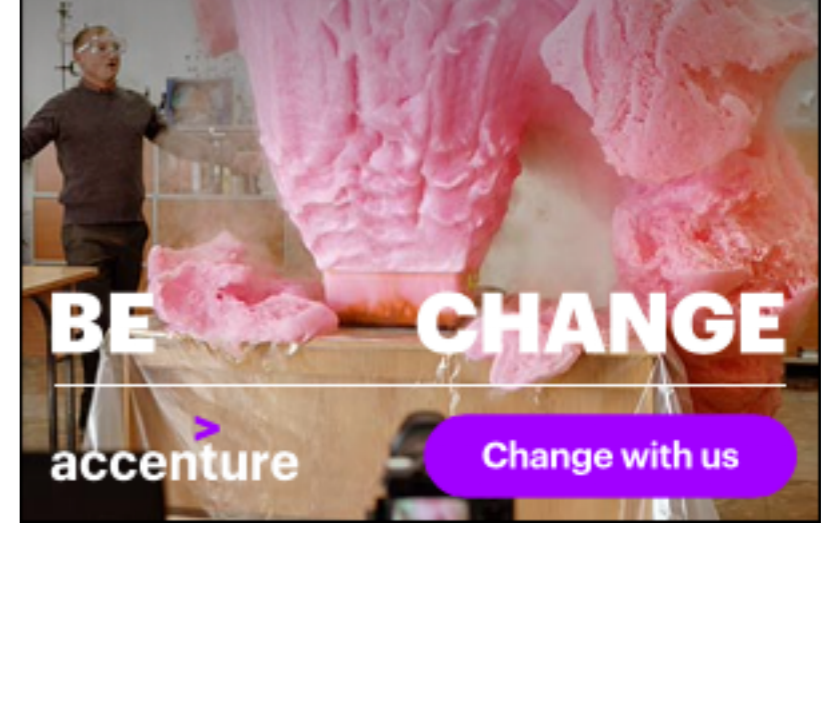


Long's company has a "smart" business model that reaches a large number of consumers, Wendy Bolger, director of Loyola University Maryland's Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship said.

"These are products that all women in some point in their lives need on a monthly basis," Bolger said. "She's very timely in the fact that she uses plant-based ingredients."

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