Victoria Frame, a plaintiff in a lawsuit against Mined Minds, a nonprofit that ran boot camps that Frame says failed to deliver on promises to turn them into coders with lucrative careers.

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Broken code

Mined Minds aimed to turn cash-strapped Appalachians into computer programmers. But in a lawsuit, two former students say the coding boot camp was a far cry from what they were promised

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BY ANDREW ZALESKI // PHOTOS BY MADDIE MCGARVEY & CRAIG HUDSON

In 2017, Victoria Frame was a 21-year-old making $10 an hour as an assistant manager at a Family Dollar near Dixie, West Virginia, the small town where she grew up. She wanted a better living in a job outside of the retail sector, but without a college degree, she was unsure how to go about it.

That's when a new opportunity appeared: A free, 32-week coding boot camp was starting up in Beckley, about an hour's drive from home, where students would learn the skills required to find work as a computer programmer. The nonprofit running it: Mined Minds.

Boot camps are generally full-time certificate programs that teach in-demand programming languages in a span of

three to nine months, instead of the four years it usually takes to earn a college degree in computer science. Mined Minds was a relative newcomer, its name a play on a demographic it courted: out-of-work coal miners. In 2015, the nonprofit organized its first class in southwestern Pennsylvania. The next year, it expanded into West Virginia.

Frame heard about it from her mother, who attended an information session in 2017 and learned Mined Minds was preparing another run of its boot camp in Beckley. Because it was five days a week, eight hours a day, Frame knew she couldn't both take the class and keep up with her job. But Frame said Mined Minds told her and others they would receive a stipend of $10 an hour just for attending. And when she heard about the paid job that followed the initial training — a $15-an-hour apprenticeship to practice your skills, eventually leading to full-time work — she was sold.

"In West Virginia, that's a big deal," Frame said. "It was exciting to think that there was an avenue out of customer service."

She said she quit her job, planning to live off savings, and made the hour drive to Beckley in her mom's car. But on the first day, she — along with about 28 other students, including her mother — was told just two days of class a week were mandatory. The stipend she said she was promised never materialized. And Frame heard from one of her instructors, a Mined Minds graduate, that he struggled to find a programming job.

"I've applied for numerous programming jobs. I was never hired by any," said Michael Moore, one of Frame's instructors. "[The boot camp] might have been a good Programming 101 at a junior college somewhere, but it was far from the 'better than a college education' that [Mined Minds] claimed."

Frame heard something similar. "Throughout the class we were told repeatedly that the education from the boot camp was as good as college," she said.

But in November 2017, worried about her training's value and her dwindling bank account, Frame left the class. The next month, with roughly $200 left in savings, she contacted a lawyer about her predicament.

"In West Virginia, that's a big deal. It was exciting to think that there was an avenue out of customer service."

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VICTORIA FRAME

Steve New and Adam Taylor, the West Virginia lawyers representing Cook and Frame in the lawsuit against Mined Minds.

Boot camp programs are sometimes lauded as a way to lift up cash-strapped residents of economically depressed areas and retrain blue-collar workers whose jobs disappear. In 2017, Wired magazine declared coding "the next big blue-collar job." Two years earlier, Wired published a profile of Rusty Justice, a Kentuckian in the earth-moving business who gained national attention after teaching programming to former coal miners. It's not difficult to imagine why the boot camps would appeal to those in Appalachia, where more than 33,000 jobs in coal mining were lost between 2011 and 2016, according to data from the Appalachian Regional Commission, and plenty of people scrape by on hourly wages.

Yet for all the positive coverage of coding boot camps, the industry isn't without pitfalls. The Flatiron School, recently acquired by co-working company WeWork and regularly cited as one of the better boot camps, settled for $375,000 with the New York attorney general in 2017 over allegations that it inflated claims about its graduates' prospects for full-time work and their salaries. That same year, while 15 new boot camps opened, another seven closed, according to Course Report, a company that tracks the industry. It's not uncommon for boot camp graduates to find themselves in debt and out of work, as Bloomberg reported in 2016.

Now, Frame and another former student are suing the nonprofit, the co-founders, one of the instructors, and a for-profit company affiliated with Mined Minds, and two lawyers in West Virginia are seeking class action status to include about 30 former Mined Minds trainees from around West Virginia. Among the allegations listed in Frame's complaint: that students were promised payment for their time in training and during an apprenticeship phase; that Mined Minds told students its training was "as good or better than a college education," yet its instructors were "ill-suited to teach"; and that, while successful graduates were guaranteed jobs in the tech industry, no graduate "ever found a job in the tech industry other than those who eventually worked for Mined Minds or a company directly related thereto." All of the claims in the lawsuit, except where noted, were denied by Mined Minds in a verified pleading with the Circuit Court of Raleigh County, West Virginia, signed by Mined Minds' co-founders Jonathan Graham and Amanda Laucher.

It's up to the Raleigh County Circuit Court to decide whether Frame and Cook can represent the 30 others in a

class action suit. As of May 10, a judge had not yet made a decision on the class action status.

For this story, Postindustrial spoke with several former students and graduates of Mined Minds, including five who went on to work for the nonprofit either as contract programmers or salaried employees; the lawyers involved in the lawsuit; and folks in America's boot camp industry. Mined Minds co-founder Amanda Laucher said in an April 1 email that the suit "has absolutely no merit and is completely frivolous," but declined to comment further, citing the advice of attorneys to wait until the lawsuit is wrapped up.

Laucher did not respond to follow-up emails regarding Mined Minds' current operations in West Virginia. Reached by phone on April 17, Laucher said, "I have no comment, but I appreciate that after I decided to not talk to you via email you followed up anyway." Laucher added that Mined Minds currently has one in-person class in session and another remote class starting soon. Then she abruptly ended the call.

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"In a February 2017 interview with KDKA in Pittsburgh, a reporter asked Laucher if Mined Minds graduates find jobs. Laucher was unflinching: 'Every single one of them, yes,' she said. 'They all find a job.'"

Since the first boot camps appeared in 2012, their growth has been meteoric. They're now in 86 U.S. cities, according to Course Report. On average, students pay about $12,000 to attend. That's the main selling point: gain practical knowledge quickly and at a lower cost, and you'll find work in the growing field of computer programming.

Mined Minds was different in that it provided free training. Husband-wife duo Jonathan Graham and Amanda Laucher, veterans of the tech industry, started it in 2015 in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania. For Laucher, it was personal. In southwestern Pennsylvania, where she grew up, her brother, Marvin, was working at Consol Energy's Enlow Fork Mine about 40 miles southwest of Pittsburgh. In summer 2015, he saw friends get laid off and wondered how much longer his job would survive. Laucher had an idea: Learn to code.

In July 2015, Mined Minds organized its first-ever boot camp in a Waynesburg fire hall. Each weekend, Laucher and Graham drove eight hours from their home in Chicago, where they both held programming jobs, to teach classes. Students learned HTML and CSS, the backbone of websites, as well as Ruby, a popular programming language with startups, and JavaScript, a key language for building smartphone apps. Ten students attended that class, including Laucher's brother and Joseph McKenzie, a mechanic doing odd jobs at the time.

"I'm blown away," he said. "Four years ago I never would've thought I would've had this career I have now."

After his training, McKenzie became an apprentice for six months, and then got a salaried job with Mined Minds. Through GPdL, a for-profit entity owned by Laucher and Graham, graduates performed work for clients who turned to Mined Minds for web development services. In December 2018, McKenzie left Mined Minds to go out on his own as a freelance web developer. He said Mined Minds never promised him or any of his class members stipends for the initial training and views the current lawsuit dubiously.

"People are thinking they should be getting paid for something they're getting for free," McKenzie said. "The only thing Mined Minds ever said was: 'We're going to teach you the basic stuff for development, and if it works out, we'll try to hire you.'"

In a February 2017 interview with KDKA in Pittsburgh, a reporter asked Laucher if Mined Minds graduates find jobs. Laucher was unflinching: "Every single one of them, yes," she said. "They all find a job." The nonprofit even points this out in documentation about its training, which was included in discovery documents that are part of the lawsuit in West Virginia and were provided to Postindustrial by lawyers Adam Taylor and Steve New. "Every successful graduate should expect to immediately earn a living wage of around $40,000 / year or more," reads one page of the training documents. As for the time commitment: "We require students to be available full time for learning during the course (at least 40h per week)."

Mined Minds expanded in 2016, first through a partnership with the Community College of Allegheny County, near Pittsburgh, to teach classes at a local makerspace, and then to West Virginia. In January 2017, it held its first graduation in Charleston with eight students. U.S. Senator Joe Manchin attended, and noted in a press release that he was "instrumental in bringing the foundation to West Virginia." More classes in more West Virginia towns followed the graduation.

Yet even as Mined Minds was setting up more classes, cracks began to form. In November 2017, Pittsburgh's KDKA news station reported that the nonprofit was "under-delivering." Its evidence: Max Pokropowicz and Brian Lewis, two students who completed Mined Minds training in Allegheny County, said they were promised apprenticeships to help them find tech jobs, and then were laid off in short order — Pokropowicz after 13 days, and Lewis after just three. KDKA further found that of the 20 students who started the boot camp with Pokropowicz and Lewis, only seven graduated, and, according to KDKA, "six were quickly let go." The boot camp in question was funded with a $71,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry.

In a sworn deposition that she signed, Laucher said the reason the students were laid off was that Mined Minds received a letter from the state's Department of Education on November 1 demanding that Mined Minds get the proper licensing as a school.

"We ceased and desisted all operations in Pennsylvania at that time," Laucher said in the deposition, selected portions of which were provided to Postindustrial by lawyers Taylor and New.

KDKA's Andy Sheehan also reported that only two coal miners in Pennsylvania had completed Mined Minds training and taken jobs, one of them being Laucher's brother, Marvin.
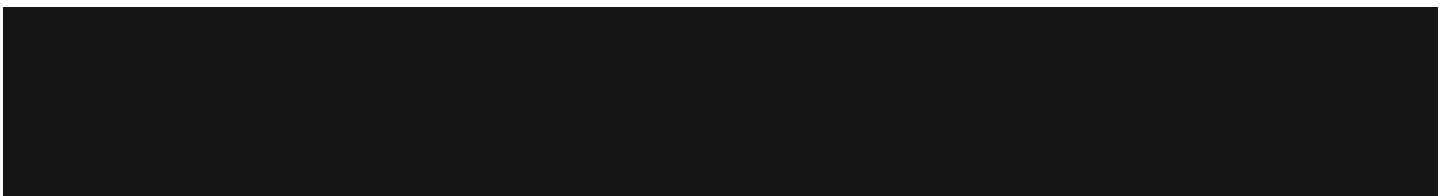
The news from KDKA unsettled Frame.

"We were really scared the same thing was going to happen to us that had happened to other people: getting fired a week into the apprenticeship with no notice, for seemingly no reason," she said.

"What appealed to me was their first claim, that anybody can learn coding."

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T Y L E R   C O O K

Tyler Cook and Victoria Frame, plaintiffs in a lawsuit against Mined Minds, a nonprofit that ran boot camps that Cook and Frame say failed to deliver on promises to turn them into coders with lucrative careers.

At age 27, Tyler Cook, the second named plaintiff in the lawsuit, was working full-time as a bank teller and living with his parents in Fayetteville, West Virginia. After college, he made enough money to pay his bills, but not enough money to live on his own. In early 2017, Cook heard about Mined Minds from his dad, an employee with the state's adult education department.

"What appealed to me was their first claim, that anybody can learn coding," Cook said. "And that after completing the course you would have skills that would be sought after."

At an information session, Cook said he recalls Laucher saying Mined Minds had connections with some of America's biggest tech companies: Google, Amazon, Oracle. In the complaint, Cook said he was told that classes ran Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day, and that failure to attend all days "would lead to worsened job prospects," a claim that Mined Minds denied in its answer filed with the Raleigh County court. Cook scaled down to a single four-hour Saturday shift at the bank so he could attend the Beckley class that began in June, the same one Frame joined.

In separate conversations, Cook and Frame offered similar descriptions of a class experience. (A disclosure is in order: Cook and Frame have been dating since September 2017.) Both said they went into the experience assuming they were needed five days a week; both were surprised that, when the first class convened, the students voted on which two days were mandatory. The other three days were reserved for homework and studying.

Whether stipends were ever supposed to be provided during the free boot camp training is also a matter of some dispute. Cook said that when he started the class, he and other students were floated several different numbers by Mined Minds: $10 an hour, or something closer to minimum wage. At one point, according to Cook, Mined Minds collected students' Social Security numbers to process a stipend of about $100 a week. "We gave them our information," Cook said. "And then we never heard back from [them] at all."

Other Mined Minds graduates, however, said they were never told they would be paid during the training period, and Mined Minds denied in the answer filed with the Raleigh County court that students were promised monetary compensation during the training and apprenticeship phases.

"[Mined Minds] did make it clear there would be no pay while we were in the class. They said it multiple times," said Jacob Carroll, who completed a class in Clendenin, West Virginia, in 2016 before going on to work at Mined

Minds first as a paid apprentice, and then as a salaried employee starting December 2017 — only to be laid off the following June.

Most disappointing, Cook and Frame said, was the training itself. They learned Ruby, CSS, and HTML, and while a Mined Minds employee was always present, their three instructors were Mined Minds graduates: one was Laucher's brother, Marvin, while the other two, one of whom was Moore, had only just finished training that spring. Frame said much of their learning revolved around copying and pasting snippets of code and then trying to decipher how it worked. "Google it" was a favorite phrase.

"As the class went on, it just became immensely obvious that I truly did not know anything," said Cook, who compared it to "learning Spanish from Dora the Explorer, then jumping out of a helicopter in the middle of Mexico and expecting to find your way home."

By November 2017, the Beckley class had whittled down to about six people. Then came the final project, a class effort to determine if they could move on to an apprenticeship. The project was a booking system for a hotel. "We would work on something, get it functioning, and be told to completely change it," Frame said. "We figured it was some kind of test. But it just kept happening again and again."

Cook and Frame's description of the curriculum aligns with the experience of graduates Richard Collins and Scott Coffman, who attended Mined Minds classes in summer 2018 in Logan and Clendenin, respectively. The Logan class, Collins said, split into two de facto groups: Students who understood the material more quickly, and students who struggled to learn. The more advanced students, Collins recalled, were often told to Google their way to answers. With the less advanced students, Collins said there were times where he felt like their teacher.

"I spent half the time doing my own assignments and half the time helping others figure out their own problems," he said. Meanwhile, in the Clendenin class, Coffman said students quit because "they felt like the teacher was not giving them any attention at all."

Two events in addition to the class structure eventually made Cook and Frame drop out in November 2017 and seek legal action the following month. The first was the news from Pittsburgh's KDKA and the uncertainty over whether paid apprenticeships would be available after five months of training.

The second was an incident involving Frame's mother, Stephanie Wood Frame, whom Mined Minds accused of inappropriate behavior during a programming conference in Lithuania attended by Wood Frame; Amanda Laucher; Marvin Laucher; Heather Laucher, Amanda's sister; and Beckley instructor Moore. No police report was filed in the aftermath, according to reporting by Henry Kronk in the "Code Burst" podcast. But after the alleged incident in Lithuania, both Wood Frame and Moore were asked to leave the class. Over email, Moore denied the accusations of inappropriate behavior. Wood Frame said in a phone interview that the allegations are not true.

In her email sent April 1, Laucher referenced the above incident as the impetus for the lawsuit against Mined Minds: "I will say that the suit, brought by the two former students who are dating, has absolutely no merit and is completely frivolous. I believe they filed it because of embarrassment when [Frame's] mother, Stephanie Wood Frame, was asked to exit the class because of inappropriate behavior. ... The couple dropped out of the class and filed the suit within 10 days of Stephanie's forced exit."

"By the time they kicked Stephanie out, we were already pretty much considering leaving. We had already questioned the quality of their teaching and the fact they were already firing people," said Cook, referring to what happened in Pittsburgh in late 2017. "Kicking Stephanie out was the straw that broke the camel's back."

Tyler Cook, plaintiff in a lawsuit against Mined Minds, a nonprofit that ran boot camps that Cook says failed to deliver on promises to turn them into coders with lucrative careers.

Mined Minds has maintained that they never represented to any students, Frame and Cook included, that they would be paid for attending training.

"I definitely — specifically told them there wouldn't be payment from Mined Minds, but we did put a couple of different options in front of them," Laucher said in the deposition.

What Laucher did say is that the nonprofit had looked for government-sponsored opportunities to provide students with stipends as they went through the training period. In the deposition excerpts provided by the lawyers, she mentioned collecting the Social Security information of people in Frame and Cook's class for the purposes of providing the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources with a list of people who might need financial assistance. Referring to Frame and Cook, however, she said they "did not have any interest in receiving any kind of financial help throughout the program."

Yet New and Taylor said other former students they've spoken with told them the exact opposite — that they went into Mined Minds' classes thinking they would receive stipends.

Furthermore, Laucher still counted Frame and Cook as successful graduates despite the fact that both dropped out of the class: Cook because he went back to school, and Frame because she became the manager of a Dollar Store. Referring to Frame specifically, Laucher said in the deposition that "the logic and problem solving skills that came with Mined Minds training" made her "more employable at a higher level" — even though that employment was not in the tech industry.

Laucher also reiterated that all Mined Minds graduates find a job, either as a contractor-apprentice with Mined Minds or as a salaried employee with GPdL, the for-profit company affiliated with the nonprofit.

Moore said this feature of the training program is also something of a weakness. "When that job is over, you don't

get another," he said in an email. "I asked them to help me find another job using the skills I learned while in their program, and literally said a job anywhere in the United States, and I was told, 'You should start your own company.' But they didn't teach me how to hunt down and price jobs."

Billyjack Buzzard had a similar experience. A former coal miner, Buzzard enrolled in a Mined Minds class in June 2017 in Clendenin. In December 2017, he was hired by Mined Minds as a contractor making an hourly wage, and then, in June 2018, he was hired full-time as a salaried employee. Shortly thereafter, he started working one-on-one with a client as a consulting developer. Buzzard said he believed the boot camp training he received was as good as a four-year education in computer science, especially after Mined Minds told him they would sooner hire a boot camp graduate than they would someone with a college degree.

In the media, Buzzard was held up as a success story, an example of the precise demographic Mined Minds said they wanted to reach: the unemployed coal miner who needed to retrain for work in a different field. Yet during a phone interview at the end of March, Buzzard was irritated. Three and a half weeks earlier, without warning, he said, Mined Minds laid him off. According to Buzzard, Mined Minds claimed he was billing a client for time worked, but wasn't actually working on the client's project. Buzzard said the discrepancy is easy to see: He wasn't inputting any hours into QuickBooks because he was a salaried employee.

Buzzard is still unemployed in the tech field, and his inability to find another job is indicative of a larger problem with coding, and the boot camps that teach it, being hailed as the cure-all for displaced blue-collar workers. Job markets are local, and assuming that anyone can get a job as a computer programmer simply because they have a reliable wireless internet connection is an oversimplification.

"It may seem like there's a low barrier to entry with the boot camp world," said Liz Eggleston, co-founder of Course Report. "But that's just not true. You have to have an outcomes team, real career advisers, and there has to be a market for developers in the area. And you have to know if those companies are comfortable hiring from a boot camp."

In its training documentation, Mined Minds said it "will continue to grow a network of companies, both national and regional, that are committed to employing the graduates locally." Because Mined Minds did not respond to follow-up requests for comment for this story, Postindustrial was unable to confirm whether such a network has materialized. However, the funding for this sort of coding training certainly exists.

In June 2017, the Appalachian Regional Commission named Mined Minds in a grant worth $1,489,945 that was awarded to the Washington Greene County Job Training Agency in Pennsylvania. The grant itself, split between Mined Minds and another Pennsylvania group, is part of the commission's Appalachian Region Code Initiative to teach software programming to former workers from the coal sectors of southwestern Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

"The program is run on an expense-based model — they bill us for whatever work they do and for their employees and training costs," said Jeffrey Nobili, program manager at the job training agency.

In other words, Mined Minds sends an invoice to Nobili's people in order to pay the costs of operating its boot camps and the graduates it hires. A scan of Mined Minds' latest 990 form, filed in 2017, shows it paid out $164,027 in salaries and employee benefits. That closely aligns with information the job training agency shared with reporter Kronk in 2018: The total contract with Mined Minds is $702,000, of which about $160,000 had been invoiced for by Mined Minds. To date, Nobili said Mined Minds has billed for $552,933 of its total contracted funds.

Whether that's translating into stable jobs for West Virginia program graduates is the question. In Nobili's telling, the answer is not yet. As of February 2019, according to numbers he tracks, Mined Minds has enrolled 61 students through this Code Initiative, and 34 of those people either are or were working for Mined Minds.

"While we're training people with good skills, the competition for the employers looking for these skills is not out there yet," he said.

For Frame and Cook, that's the root of their anger and dissatisfaction with Mined Minds. They thought they were

being trained for jobs in a regional technology sector — or, at the very least, that the skills they were acquiring would look attractive enough for a faraway company to take a chance on an underemployed boot camp graduate in Appalachia.

"That was the appeal for a lot of these folks [who] thought that in a very short period of time, they could improve their lives," New said.

What they ultimately discovered is that no company wanted them. Buzzard said only two people he knew from Mined Minds went on to technology jobs not linked to Mined Minds — and at least one of them, he said, has a college degree.

"There's a lot of false hope there for me," said Buzzard, who's grateful he kept his job at a tattoo parlor even while he was employed full-time with Mined Minds. "I learned from Mined Minds. I did learn something. I could go and code a website in a heartbeat. But it's not here in the state."

"I learned from Mined Minds. I did learn something. I could go and code a website in a heartbeat. But it's not here in the state."

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BILLYJACK BUZZARD

What New and Taylor said they've heard from former students seems to be a microcosm of the bigger story playing out in West Virginia, one about a state filled with people looking for a line to a better life.

"In West Virginia, you want so desperately for good things to happen," said New, whose father worked in coal mines for 43 years.

More typical, he said, is that people leave for Detroit, or Columbus, or Charlotte in the hopes of finding better work, or anything that pays more than $8 an hour. Such was the case with Frame and Cook, who recently moved north to Columbus, Ohio, after Frame got a job in auto financing. In mid-May, Cook accepted a temp job as an accounting assistant.

Evidently Mined Minds is still running boot camps in West Virginia, something Nobili at the Washington Greene County Job Training Agency confirmed. In her email and by phone, Laucher said that Mined Minds is still teaching classes in West Virginia. But Postindustrial was unable to pin down specifics. New and Taylor said the operations in both Beckley and Clendenin are shuttered. Buzzard said two classes were happening in Logan at the time he was fired: An advanced class had four students, while a beginner class had only one.

When reached by phone in mid-April, Collins and Coffman, who were both apprentices making $12 an hour, reported that they, along with three other students hired by Mined Minds, were suddenly laid off on April 15. When Coffman asked why he was let go, he said Laucher told him "there are no project hours available." In other words, there's no work. In January, Laucher tweeted about the progress students were making: "Current Mined Minds participants are working on building Battleship. ... Can't wait to see where their careers go!"

Months before, in October 2018, however, the nonprofit tweeted out a cryptic message that made it seem like it wasn't holding any classes. "Very exciting news for WV as a new collaboration takes over the reigns of FREE entry

level coding training!" it read, followed by a link to a Fast Company article about a new tech-training and job-placement program in West Virginia. "With that in place," the tweet continued, "we look forward to focusing our efforts in other directions, continuing our mission to build tech hubs in the region."

To Cook and Frame, the mission, if ever completed, will come several years too late. PI

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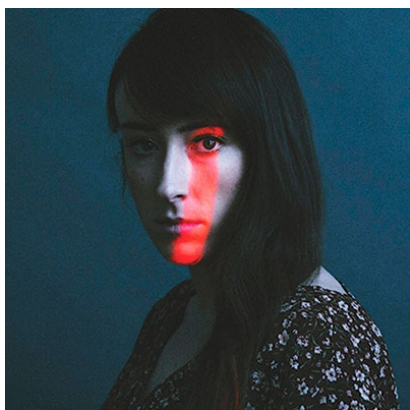
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