

Legacy in the Making

ME & THE BEES
LEMONADE

In 2009, at the age of four and a half, **Mikaila Ulmer** was stung by two bees in one week. Rather than being paralyzed by her fears, she was motivated by her parents to learn about the bees and, eventually, launched a brand devoted to helping save them. In the ultra-competitive beverage category, Mikaila and her business did not have the budget to compete with the big brands, but she did have something far more powerful and enduring: a real problem to solve, a personal passion for wanting to solve it, and a genuine story to tell. Her solution, Me & the Bees Lemonade, has gone on to capture the attention and support of highly influential leaders, such as former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle, as well as major organizations including Dell, the National Park Service, and Whole Foods Market, that all believe in her mission. An ambitious social entrepreneur, Mikaila has also launched the Healthy Hive Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to honeybee research, education, and preservation, and has begun writing her first book, with an ambition to inspiring other young entrepreneurs. Recently, The Legacy Lab had the opportunity to speak to Mikaila, the founder and CEO of Me & the Bees Lemonade, about being fearless, believing in the impossible, and always dreaming like a kid.



business idea. While I was trying to come up with a product, I got stung by two bees in the same week. I was really, really afraid of bees. I wanted nothing to do with them. I was afraid of anything that looked like a bee and sounded like a bee. I was afraid of anything that flew and buzzed.

To get over my fear, my parents encouraged me to do research about bees. So I did. I learned that bees were important to our environment and to our ecosystem. Without healthy pollinators like bees, our farmers would not be able to produce the food we need. I also learned that bees were dying at an alarming rate. Because of the research I did, instead of being afraid of bees, I wanted to help them. I wanted to create awareness that the bees were dying and to do my part to help save them, which would, eventually, help save our source of food. I came up with the idea to create a product that was going to help save the bees. For additional inspiration, I turned to my Great-Granny Helen's 1940s

Mikaila, you famously started life as an entrepreneur at a very young age. Can you tell us a little bit about your inspiration for creating Me & the Bees Lemonade?

■ I came up with the idea behind Me & the Bees Lemonade when I was four and a half years old.

Though, at the start, I called it something different: BeeSweet Lemonade.

I signed up for a kids' business fair in Austin, where I live with my mom, dad, and little brother, Jacob. I knew I wanted to participate in the fair, but I didn't yet have my

cookbook and picked out a family-favorite recipe for flaxseed lemonade, which I modified by sweetening with honey from bees. There was a bee problem, and my mission as a social entrepreneur was to help solve it.

Many of the kids at the business fair were creating businesses that would help themselves. They were trying to earn money to buy something like a bike. But for me, it became important to start a business not just for me but also for the bees and for the world. This really mattered to me.

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Over time, I was invited to sell my product in local stores and even Whole Foods Market. Then came the [ABC] TV show *Shark Tank*. Then, my product started appearing in even more major retailers and became available online too. My lemonade stand became a lemonade brand. As support for Me & the Bees has grown, I have become even more determined to help save

the bees than when I was just four and a half years old.

As a young entrepreneur and full-time student, who do you look to for help with running Me & the Bees Lemonade?

■ I'm the founder and CEO, but I definitely don't do all the work. My entire family helps with Me & the Bees.

My mom is the Chief Marketing Bee. She helps build my brand, managing everything from PR and social media to speaking engagements and interviews. She helps me practice my business speeches. Even if it is 11 p.m., my mom will stay up late to help me feel prepared. My dad is the Chief Worker Bee. He is also the finance manager. He teaches me how to create budgets and how to work with financial documents. He teaches me what to do with the money the business earns: what to give, what to save, and what to spend. My dad teaches me a lot of things that I, in turn, pass on to other kid entrepreneurs who want to learn about managing finances. My younger brother, Jacob, is the Chief Photo Bee. If there's a photo that needs to go on social media, Jacob will take it. My older brother is the tech guy. He knows how to code, and he's really good with computers. When my mom is trying to figure out something on the website, he's like, "You have to do Control-Alt-F. You didn't know that?" Grandma Rose and Papa,

they help to get my Me & the Bees Lemonade to North and South Carolina, near where they live. They sell it to their friends at church and throughout their local community. My other grandma, Grandma Barbara, is a jewelry maker. She inspired me to create different bee jewelry that I give away as gifts and that I sell on my website.

But just as bee colonies swarm when they outgrow their original hives, Me & the Bees is growing beyond our little hive. Today, in addition to my family, we have a highly skilled operations team and national sales force who help us bring Me & the Bees to retailers and "bee-lievers" in more than 40 states from coast to coast. Working with my family and then seeing our Me & the Bees hive grow has been one of the most fun parts of running my business.

One of the stories that often gets reported on is that you appeared on the ABC television show *Shark Tank* when you were just 10. Can you share a little about the experience, including why that was an important moment for Me & the Bees Lemonade?

■ Initially my parents didn't want me to go on *Shark Tank* because when we watched some of the episodes, we saw that if the sharks didn't like a product, they could get really mean. I do not like having my feelings hurt. Eventually, we convinced ourselves to give it a try,

since it was a good opportunity to increase awareness of my lemonade, my company, and my bigger mission to help save the honeybees from dying. It was a big stage for my idea to help solve a big problem.

Preparing for *Shark Tank* was a very long process. We did not know what to expect, so we practiced the pitch for months in advance. I remember the week before the show practicing very hard at the hotel—in the hotel fitness room, in the hotel conference room—over and over again. It was a long process, but it was worth the hard work and extra effort because of the potential positive outcome.

Before we went on TV, we saw all the sharks as having something we liked as partners. Mr. Mark [Cuban] is from Texas, which is where we live. Ms. Lori [Greiner], from QVC, is good at storytelling, and my product has a story to tell. Mr. Daymond [John] is a great marketer. He's also a shark who invests in people. In making my pitch, I asked for \$60,000 for 15% equity in my company. Mr. Daymond ended up giving \$60,000 for 25% of the company. I was really happy that he invested in me and my idea. Of course, he's now my favorite shark of them all.

Shark Tank seemed scary at first, but it was the chance to do the most good in support of the work I was doing, with my family and through my business, to help save the bees.

As your enterprise has evolved from a lemonade product that first appeared at a kids' business fair in Austin to a national brand, what is the biggest challenge Me & the Bees Lemonade has faced? What did you learn from the experience?

■ When we appeared on *Shark Tank*, we were there with my original brand: BeeSweet Lemonade. But we got so much positive attention after being on the show that we were quickly asked to change our brand by another, larger business that had a similar-sounding name. Being asked to give up the name I created when I was four and a half was definitely the biggest challenge so far.

It was a sudden request. We were not given much time to make the change. At first, we did not know what to do. If we did not choose the new name wisely, then all the work my family and I had put into building the business over the past six or seven years would go down the drain. It was very stressful and upsetting. It was a really important moment for the business.

So we reached out to some supporters and friends who believed in my mission at an ad agency called Team One to work on solving the branding problem. Together, we came up with three big ideas. First, we wanted the new name, logo, and label design to reflect my mission as a social entrepreneur. While we knew some things would have to change, the goal to create a more

bee-friendly world would always be at the center. Second, to stand out from all the other lemonades, we got inspired by stories instead of looking at other brands. We wanted people to feel like they were reading an amazing story about making friends with the bees when they saw our lemonade. We wanted to inspire other bee-lievers to join me on a quest to save the honeybees. If you look closely at my new label, I think you'll see that story. Third, rather than trying to launch it all on our own, we depended on some of our biggest bee-lievers, including *Good Morning America* and *Microsoft*, to help us spread the word.

“As an entrepreneur, things are not always going to go your way. There will be times when, just like me, you're going to get stung. What's important is to not get discouraged. Get back up. Spread your wings.”

Just like when I got two bee stings in the same week as a kid that inspired me to create my first prod-

uct, I worked to overcome the naming challenge. I turned BeeSweet Lemonade, a product, into an even larger story about Me & the Bees, a brand on a larger mission that is expanding beyond lemonade.

What I learned from the experience was that whether it is a name change, logo change or some other change, every business is going to go through some change. Learning how to make good, fast choices and adapt is important. Part of the secret to lasting success is also knowing who to collaborate with, and never being afraid to ask for help. Surrounding yourself with people who bee-lieve in you makes a very big difference. It's how your brand is going to grow.

What other lessons have you learned along the way in running Me & the Bees Lemonade about building a business meant to have an enduring impact?

■ There are a lot of lessons in business and in life that can be learned from bees.

I like to say, "Don't be discouraged by life's little stings. Get back up and spread your wings." As an entrepreneur, things are not always going to go your way. There will be times when, just like me, you're going to get stung. What's important is to not get discouraged. Get back up. Spread your wings. If I stayed down or upset when faced with the challenge to my brand name,

I would have hurt my business. Had I not learned this lesson, Me & the Bees would not be thriving like it is today, making a meaningful difference for honeybees.

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I also like to say that it's important to "have a hive mentality." Having a hive mentality is knowing that there is not one bee that can do everything; that it is really hard to get big things done only by yourself. Having a hive mentality is really important when you are going through tough times because there are people who, if you let them, will have your back. It takes the whole hive to get things done. Whether it's family, friends, or other supporters, I have learned that there's always help back at the hive. You just have to ask instead of trying to figure it all out by yourself.

One of the most remarkable parts of your story is how it has grown in reputation. Can you share a little bit about some of the recent recognition for your work with Me & the Bees Lemonade, and what the recognition means to you and your future ambitions?

■ I am very proud of the honors I have received for my work. I am particularly proud of the honors and recognition given for coming up with a disruptive entrepreneurial idea and also for making a difference in the world with Me & the Bees. While they are all special to me, recent recognitions that stand out include receiving a Tribeca Disruptive Innovation Award at the Tribeca Film Festival, an Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Medal Award, and a National Retail Foundation Dreamer Award, as well as earning a spot on the *Ebony* Power 100 list of Future Achievers. It was also really amazing to be selected as the National Park Service Biodiversity Youth Ambassador representing the Pollinator Conservation Initiative.

More than the individual recognition, one of the things I love about what I get to do is helping to pay it forward by inspiring other young entrepreneurs. One of my favorite examples is participating in the Dell Women's Entrepreneur Network (DWEN) Summit. Over the past four years, I've had the opportunity to present to groups of girls my age who are interested in entrepreneurship at the sum-

mit's Girls Track program, in South Africa, Canada, San Francisco, and Singapore. One of my presentations was about powerful storytelling. Another one was about financial responsibility. In the one about financial responsibility, we came up with business ideas, we pitched them, we created budgets and we worked through the first steps of starting a business, including marketing your business. What also made it memorable was that I got to know the local students as friends. We ate together, in and around the presentations, and we swam together afterward. We still talk over WhatsApp®.

Helping the honeybees and inspiring other young entrepreneurs motivates me to keep going with Me & the Bees.

“Just like me, Mr. and Mrs. Obama know how much we all need the bees ... They care about organizations like Me & the Bees that are helping to save the bees.”

You mentioned the Pollinator Conservation Initiative, which is related to a presidential memorandum issued by former President Barack Obama in 2015. What led to the White House's initial interest in bees? How was their interest in Me & the Bees Lemonade important to you and your work?

■ Meeting Mr. and Mrs. Obama was important to me. I knew that they cared about the bees because early on they created their own garden complete with a bee colony at the White House.

Bees contribute to more than a third of all the food we eat. That means that at least one in every three bites of food comes from a bee-pollinated plant. If there are no bees, there is no pollination and that means, for example, no more fruits and vegetables. Bees also contribute over 15 billion dollars to the U.S. agricultural economy each year. Just like me, Mr. and Mrs. Obama know how much we all need the bees. As I mentioned, they even had a special garden that I got to visit at the White House, where a beekeeper named Charlie Brandts took care of a bee colony. They care about organizations like Me & the Bees that are helping to save the bees. That's why I initially got invited to the White House—because they believed in the work that I was doing.

It was awesome being able to meet the Obamas. A dream come true.

They were these huge figures that you only saw on TV or read about in articles or learned about in class at school. I know the Obamas inspire a lot of people across the country. They inspired me personally by showing an interest in my mission and what my company does to save the bees.

It is very nice to have friends in high places helping to spread the good buzz about bees.

“I have a lot of smaller dreams, like creating more products and coming up with a new fragrance. But saving the bees and inspiring more kids to be social entrepreneurs are my focus.”

Looking forward, what are your hopes and dreams for Me & the Bees Lemonade? What are your ongoing ambitions?

■ What are my hopes and dreams? I have a lot of smaller dreams, like

creating more products and coming up with a new fragrance. But saving the bees and inspiring more kids to be social entrepreneurs are my focus.

First, I want to create a measurable impact on saving bees. In its lifetime, a bee will only produce a twelfth of a teaspoon of honey. Imagine how many bees it takes to make a whole gallon or a whole pound of honey. We cannot let the bee population go down. Through Me & the Bees, I participate in social communities like South by Southwest and government groups like the National Park Service. I've also recently launched a nonprofit dedicated to increasing honeybee aware-

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ness and habitats, the Healthy Hive Foundation. As a social entrepreneur, I work through both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, to reach the widest audiences and make the biggest impact possible for bees.

Second, I want to make it normal, more within reach, for kids to come up with businesses and to grow their businesses. I'm currently writing a book to share some of my lessons and inspiration with other kids who dream of starting their own company. Being an entrepreneur, having an entrepreneurial mindset, is awesome. You get to come up with an infinite number of ideas. Some ideas you'll never use. Some ideas you'll start on, and they'll fade away. But some ideas you'll have are really good ones. At the end of the day, being able to use creative ideas to help solve problems is a great feeling. Kids, who have very big imaginations, represent some of the very best problem-solvers. I have been an entrepreneur for more than half of my life now. I want to help inspire other kid entrepreneurs.

I'm particularly passionate about social entrepreneurship. When I started my business, I used to dream of my lemonade being in every neighborhood. Today I dream of being able to inspire every kid in every school district to become a social entrepreneur—to notice problems in the world and help fix them through businesses. This is a big dream so I may need a little help.

The Me & the Bees Lemonade story serves as inspiration for so many people. Now that you're writing your first book, what advice are you passing along?

■ “Dream like a kid.” Why? Because kids are the best dreamers.

In June 2016, I was invited to introduce President Obama at the United State of Women. The conference featured many important female entrepreneurs. I gave a speech that told my story about how dreaming like a kid helped to make a big difference in my own work.

“My advice to anyone looking to start a business is simple. Bee fearless. Bee-lieve in the impossible. Dream like a kid.”

I started by asking the audience, “You're probably wondering why an 11-year-old is talking to you today about the economy, right?” I answered my own question by saying, “Because what makes a great entrepreneur is what comes naturally to kids. The biggest dreamers are kids. We dream big. We dream about things that don't even exist yet. We believe

in our dreams. We don't wait for people to tell us it won't work. We see possibilities where everyone else just sees problems. We believe in the impossible. I'm proof of that. When I was four and a half years old, I got this crazy idea to start a business to save the bees. Only a kid would think you can change the world with a lemonade stand, right?"

My advice to anyone looking to start a business is simple. Bee fearless. Bee-lieve in the impossible. Dream like a kid.

"I thought I had to choose between saving the bees and making money. But I have learned that I can do both by being a social entrepreneur."

Mikaila, as someone who has accomplished and continues to accomplish some amazing things, what parting wisdom do you have for entrepreneurs, young and old, who aspire to build a business that makes a lasting impact?

■ First, working hard is a must. In order to start my business, I had to

wear a lot of hats including a marketing and finance hat. I did in-store demos and workshops too in support of my ambition to help save the bees. And I did all this, and still do all this, while going to school at the same time. If you want to have long-term success as an entrepreneur, be prepared to always work hard.

Second, you need passion. After researching bees, I developed a passion for wanting to save them. My passion led me to create a business that's growing and successful. If you're working on a business that you are not interested in, that is not fun for you, you will not be as determined to make it successful for the long term. Along the same lines, surround yourself with people who are passionate like you. People who believe in your mission will help you to make your idea a success. Especially when you are faced with challenges, you will need a hive to help.

Third, keep your eyes wide open as inspiration can come from all around. When I got my Great-Granny Helen's cookbook I had no idea it would one day help to inspire Me & the Bees. But when I flipped through the pages, I found the perfect recipe for my lemonade.

Finally, know that you can be sweet and be profitable at the same time. Early on, I thought I had to choose between saving the bees and making money. But I have learned that I can do both by being a social entrepreneur, which is what I am now.

In support of her mission to save the bees, Mikaila Ulmer has inspired a large and growing group of "bee-lievers" across the United States, and increasingly, around the world through international speaking engagements. Yes, she has a lemonade product that is sold at major retailers alongside conventional beverage brands. But more important to Mikaila, and more unique than many of her competitors, is the genuine, personal story she has to tell about Me & the Bees Lemonade. This story has propelled her through 10 years of bee-lieving and will inspire many more to come. As a social entrepreneur, Mikaila gives her community a simple way to help make a difference, allowing her fans to contribute to saving bees one lemonade at a time. And despite her relative youth, or maybe because of it, Mikaila continues to take a very forward-looking point of view on her business—not resting on past accomplishments, but remaining focused on her ongoing ambition to save the honeybees and inspire other young social entrepreneurs to creatively solve big problems. By being fearless, believing in the impossible, and dreaming like a kid, Mikaila continues to write new pages of her story—and her brand's story—every day.

BY MARK MILLER AND LAUREN MABUNI

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