

## House Committee on Small Business

Monday, December 11, 2017

Thank you, Representative Schneider and Representative Blum, for inviting me to share my thoughts and my entrepreneurial journey.

The origin of my business, the zen of slow cooking, began many years ago, and the essence of it is captured in this picture. These are my 3 children, and you can see that in those years I had a very “un zen-like” life. In addition to the three children being close in age, my middle son was diagnosed as developmentally delayed when he was a baby, so as he entered his school years it became a challenging time for our family.

I called my best friend one night in tears, asking for her help and told her that I couldn’t even get dinner on table. She had 3 pieces of advice:

- 1) You aren’t a failure
- 2) Get off the phone
- 3) Buy a crock pot

I understood the first 2 pieces of advice, but not the 3<sup>rd</sup>. She then explained how a crock pot (now more commonly called a slow cooker) worked, and I set out the following morning to buy my first slow cooker.

I fell in love with this little kitchen appliance. It gave me the opportunity to create a dinner hour similar to the one I enjoyed as a child. My mother cooked from scratch each afternoon and we enjoyed a very zen-like dinner hour when my father came home from work.

I found that by preparing food in the morning using my slow cooker, I could use the afternoon to take my young children for walks, help with their homework, or otherwise effectively meet the flurry of activity that comes at that time of day.

I cooked steadily with my slow cooker for 2 years. Then one day my daughter came to me crying and said she couldn’t eat any more “thick meat”. I knew what she meant. I only knew how to make a few really good things in my slow cooker, such as pot roast or beef stew. Fortunately, by that time I understood the science behind the slow cooking process and was able to start adapting some of my favorite recipes, so that they worked in the slow cooker.

Fast forward to 2010. I decided to spend a year studying what life would look like for my son who has language based challenges, when he aged out of the school system, and found that only 25% percent of young adults with cognitive disabilities are employed. My son, Doug, who is here today, is a shining light and I couldn’t imagine a world where his light couldn’t shine. I began to believe that creating opportunities for adults with employment barriers was my calling, so I decided to take my entrepreneurial energy and create a business where he, and others like him, could work.

I shared this vision with a friend, and said I wasn't really sure where to begin. She asked a simple but truly important question – "What makes you happy." I laughed and shared how I loved slow cooking - how I used my recipe time as a period for quiet reflection in an otherwise busy day, and how much I enjoyed how the delicious aroma of the cooking food filled my house all afternoon.

She said, "I'm not sure what you are talking about, but do that". So those are the inspirations behind the zen of slow cooking.

It took another year to find the right partner to help me get the business off the ground, but I was fortunate to find a young mom (Jane McKay) who was doing recipe testing and food writing who had just moved from the UK. Together we co-created the zen of slow cooking food blog in 2012. The blog published recipes and inspirations for the home cook while putting a contemporary twist on slow cooking.

Using the most popular recipes off our blog, we created a line of premium spice blends crafted exclusively for the slow cooker featuring flavor profiles from all over the globe. Our spice tins included a recipe and shopping list to make it convenient for the home cook. We packaged up tins containing our first 3 spice blends and took them to our local Farmers market. We were delighted when we sold out that first morning until we realized that Jane, my business partner, would have to blend 40 more spice blends for the next week.

Over the next year, we sold at Farmers markets, holiday boutiques, and out of our home. In 2014 we were approached by several customers who wanted to ship our blends out of state. At that point, we opened our own online store and reached out to Planet Access Company. PAC is a social enterprise that provides training and employment for adults with disabilities. Each week Jane would hand blend and heat seal our spices. I would pick them up and bring them to Planet Access Company where 4 adults with developmental disabilities would package them up into individual tins. I would then return to gather our finished product to be sold at various events or online.

In 2015, we opened our first wholesale account at a local organic farm, and later that year we had the opportunity to interview with Whole Foods, who loved our concept. They asked us to make our packaging more merchandisable and then to come on board.

In 2016 we steadily built our business with Whole Foods, were picked up by a food distributor in the Midwest, and were finalists for "Chicago's Next Best Food Product". This contest was sponsored by Peapod which led to the co-creation and launch of 2 meal kits for the slow cooker in the Chicagoland area on Peapod.com that fall.

2017 has been equally exciting as we are now in over 50 stores around the Chicagoland area, Oregon and Northern California. Distribution of the meal kits has expanded to New York, New Jersey, parts of Connecticut, Maryland and Virginia. We've expanded the number of adults with developmental disabilities who work on packaging our products to over 30, have become a Certified B Corporation, and our latest spice blend won a Society of Food Industry (SOFI) Award for best new product - which is the equivalent of winning an Oscar in our industry.

In addition to building our for-profit business we also teach complimentary cooking classes and have donated slow cookers to adults in underserved populations, for slow cooking is a safe and economical way to cook.

Representative Schneider knows I am a big believer in Conscious Capitalism and feel that for-profit social enterprises can help create solutions to challenges we face as a society. And while I think it's small grass roots organizations and small businesses that are the best pathway for supporting underserved populations, I do believe that the Federal Government could play a role in helping expand that vision.

One way is in supporting social enterprises like Planet Access Company. They have created employment within their warehouse for adults who have severe intellectual disabilities, and also provide employment in their fulfillment center for adults who need less supervision. They need additional support to grow their facility, provide additional job coaches and resources. I feel that the government could play a role in using them as a model, and also providing assistance in helping them expand.

An area that would be helpful to my business is making it simpler to navigate the constant change in food packaging regulations. We had to pay close to \$2,000 to have someone independently review our labels to make sure they were in compliance with the FDA. This would not be an issue for a big CPG company, but there should be a less expensive way of ensuring compliance. I would think a set of templates could be placed online that our designer could download as a starting point, making the cost of verifying that we meet the standards much more economical.

When I started my business I became the second member to join a new business incubator in my community. It provided unbelievable support and access to mentors, markets and the small business administration in Lake County. Today, I'm part of a larger incubator in Chicago called The Hatchery. I believe that anything the government can do to support the growth and expansion of business incubators would be valuable to the start-up community.

My final comment centers on B Corporations. We recently became a B Corp, which is a rigorous certification process for for-profit businesses that have a vision to be a "force for good in the world." I would encourage the Government to suggest all businesses use their online assessment tool to measure their social and environmental impact. I would also consider using B Corp certification to as a way to determine early stage companies who merit access to any benefits that the government might help make available for early stage firms.

Thank you for the opportunity to shine a light on our work.

#

#

#

Prepared by: Meg Barnhart  
Date: December 6, 2017