This episode of Beyond the Bottom Line is brought to you by the program on entrepreneurship at the Yale School of Management where we're educating students for business and society.

Welcome to this week’s edition of Beyond the Bottom Line. Today, we are so delighted to have in the studio with us, Anna Cirelli, who is the founder of darling June, which is, I would say a making accessibility awesome company. So Anna, I would love to hear a little bit about the products that you’re working on right now, your first product iteration, and what inspired you to bring this brand into the world.

Thanks for having me. I'm so happy to be here. And one thing I am working on is my tagline, so making accessibility awesome is awesome, and I'm going to hold on to that one. So my first product is a pediatric walker and Darlene June is a public benefit corporation, so we are not nonprofit, but we have to prove that we are a brand that has social impact. So one way we are making accessibility awesome to start is developing a pediatric walker and the market right now basically looks like a bunch of 80 year olds walkers that have been shrunk down.

So while I think that market could also use a little face lift, I'm focusing on the pediatric population and it speaks to me in a special way also because my child has Hypotonia, which is a condition where your muscles and joints are hyper mobile, less supported than the typical child, and so they require additional support. The pediatric walker I'm hoping to make available to all children who could use access to more mobility options and who also want to look as awesome as they should.

So I would love to hear a little bit about your background and then jump into what the past year has been like because you have made incredible progress with this product over a very short period of time, and I think people will be in awe to hear a little bit about the nuts and bolts of how you were able to do that.

Sure. So I have a background in nursing. I started as a clinical nurse in 2007 and while I love helping people, I quickly realized that I needed to be further from the bedside and I loved process, I loved improvement, I loved what made a system work, what wasn't working and how could I improve it. There were different rounds for me in my professional role where I got further from the bedside but was still able to make an impact, and so right now I am still in operations oversight at Yale New Haven Hospital and this past year has been a whirlwind. I do my nine to five at Yale New Haven Hospital and China is 12 hours ahead of us, so I do all of my China work and my Darling June production at night, in addition to going for my graduate degree in organizational effectiveness and leadership.

The past year, it was just August that I said to one of my best and oldest friends, Erica, that I wanted to develop a pediatric walker, and really I wanted to develop one for Serena and a couple social media posts later, I just had an
incredible influx of people, incredible humans who were not affected surprisingly. But I reached out to people, kind of a plea for those in the stroller and cycling industries, because that was an aesthetic I really liked and knew existed and I thought I could Frankenstein something together using that aesthetic.

Jen McFadden: So let's talk a little bit about the product and what is existing in the marketplace right now and how this product is different and really how that making the accessibility awesome piece of it is front and center, and the prototype that you've already developed.

Anna Cerilli: Yeah, so often people, their first question is what physical therapist have you worked with? What engineer has designed this for you? And really fundamentally, it's not changing a what a walker should do. It should provide access to mobility for a child. What it should not do is harm the child.

Jen McFadden: So about a year ago, you come up with this idea, you tell your friend about it, you develop this video, you put it out on social media, you do a GoFundMe, and you raise over $37,000 and you happen to find a friend of a friend who works in the stroller industry who says, I can't help you, but I will give you advice for an hour and a half once a week. So you have somebody who's holding you to account, and I think one of the interesting things that you talked about in your talk earlier was the way he framed you trying to figure out what that should look like. So I think it was something about, I don't want to have you solved the problem for me. I want you to go a little bit into that.

Anna Cerilli: Yeah. So he said, you know the problem, now tell me about the problem. Identify problem statements. So that's what I did. And he said, don't you dare come up with any solutions. So I wrote down problem statements until I feel fully understood what I needed to achieve. And then once he gave me the go ahead, I came up with solutions, potential solutions to address those problems. And I referred to him as my Mr. Miyagi, because he makes me visualize what I want. And then he said, as soon as I could close my eyes and essentially touch, feel, smell, everything, that walker all around me, at that point he would put me in touch with a designer who could take my vision inside of my head and with my words, put it onto paper, which is what happened.

Jen McFadden: So August you come up with the idea, by November you’re sitting with a designer up in Providence and January and February you had your first prototype printed at CEID?

Anna Cerilli: In March, they printed it for me. I had been working with the engineers to develop the 3D design before that. So I had the overall design, but we didn’t have the 3D elements.

Jen McFadden: Okay. So then tell me once you see this for the first time, 3D printed in a five inch tall by five inch wide model, what's your reaction to that?
Anna Cerilli: Overwhelming sense of definite pride but also just realizing that this is going to happen. I could imagine it around Serena, my daughter and I could imagine other children looking at it in a way that makes them want to play with it, which is what I'm trying to achieve. The current models are cold, medical and stigmatizing, isolating, which are two words that I really hold onto and try to highlight for folks because it is so important at this age and at any age to not be isolated by something that you require around you.

Jen McFadden: So there are a couple of other brands out there, larger brands. Target has done a lot in this space, Nike as well. Can you talk about those brands that are kind of stepping into the accessibility space and what you find so inspiring about them?

Anna Cerilli: So Target I really like because they have children with special needs in their advertisements. They don't just have... Their Cat and Jack line is an adaptive clothing line, but they don't advertise it that way, which is traditionally how you have to find things that are adaptive. You have to search for adaptive clothing, you have to search for adaptive mobility. But, for Target they have the Cat and Jack line. It happens to be adaptive, so the seams don't bother the children. They have holes in the hoodies so you can give your insulin or check your blood sugar, administer medicine through a gastric tube without the child feeling like they are of another brand of another type. They get to have the unicorn and the sequins that are reversible and have fun. So that is really what has been missing is the fun, functionality and visibility. So these brands are not just kind of getting the street cred by saying that they have a line, they are putting it on the front line. So in Target they have, over the boys' clothing section, they have a boy in a walker. So you're not seeing a kid kicking a soccer ball. He's in an awesome outfit in a less than optimal walker and he should be in mine.

Jen McFadden: But he will be on yours.

Anna Cerilli: Yeah he will be. But they are in commercials. Children are in walkers and wheelchairs and so they are putting it out there. It's not about, see this, you know different thing. It can be okay, this is a kid, this is a child. They don't have to be delineated in a special way. They are here to have fun just like the rest of them.

Jen McFadden: Back to March, you've got this prototype now. I would love to hear a little bit about, because I think this is an incredibly important point that you made this morning. You have done a really good job of finding somebody who knows somebody who has a bit of information for you to help you move things along really quickly. So how have you gone about doing that and how did that lead you to the factory in China that you've been working with?

Anna Cerilli: So I put a lot of faith in people, I generally trust people and I assume the best of people and I put Serena's story out there in a joyful way and not in a way that felt like I was exploiting her, which I'm very sensitive to but revealing my story was very difficult. I had a hard time, I was wanting to shield her from judgment.
and I had to acknowledge my own biases and understand that I was putting some judgment in there myself. So putting her story on social media was a big step, also because that's a face of something. It's no longer a story. It's, this is my child. You see that gleaming, beaming smile.

Jen McFadden: She just exudes joy in all the pictures.

Anna Cerilli: Yeah, she does. People call her the mayor, she takes 10 minutes to get through a five foot hallway and not because she's slow, it's because like she says hello to everyone and everyone knows Serena. So I think sharing the story on social media and then understanding that every conversation is worth having. So it wasn't, who are you? Are you worth talking to? It was, thank you for talking to me. I'm so happy you have the interest. And sometimes it was just a good story to share with one another. Sometimes it resulted in support, either for me or for that person.

Anna Cerilli: And then sometimes it was, you know, I'm sorry I can't help you, but you know who I think you should talk to. And it could be five conversations away, but that's how I found my engineer. That's how I found my designer. That's how I found the factory in China. And again, from people who were generally unaffected, these weren't people coming from the community that I now identify with, with low tone or special needs, adaptive equipment. These were people who just heard the story and right pair of ears, right story, right time.

Jen McFadden: So you find the factory, you've got the designs and you now have a fully functioning prototype that is ready for fabrication. Tell us a little bit about where you are now.

Anna Cerilli: Well, I can't believe it, and I just keep riding this wave. So all the momentum, which is why I sleep very little because I don't know when the wave will crash. There are ebbs and flows, but the factory came to me again through one of those friend of a friend of a friend, social media bit, and now I have this prototype, which is so amazing and I brought it to the group this morning and I know you saw it and just recently realized it wasn't as kid-friendly as I wanted it to be with a lot of black on it. So took it to a mechanic at a body shop who was super cool, great choice, glad that we did that. And now I have something concrete. I have the prototype, so that I can actually say I'm no longer a nice person with a great idea. This is real, it's happening. And yes, if all goes as planned, which things rarely do, we could be manufacturing in the spring, but I'm not trying to hold myself, as I was telling you before, to these expectations and timelines. If this happens, wonderful, amazing. If it doesn't happen this spring, I have not failed. It's just a matter of when.

Jen McFadden: You have been incredibly capital efficient so far. So you've raised this $37,500 and you have a prototype and you've spent how much money so far?
Anna Cerilli: So, in the six weeks I raised just over 37,000, closed it and in the past year have spent just about 9,000 and the prototype was 3,000 and that was just a few weeks ago. So until then, 6,000 and that again though is due to a bunch of incredible humans who have believed in me and believed in this product. A business attorney team in New York, Foley Hoag, who have deferred their fees up to 25,000 until I've met certain goals and their intellectual property, their IP team also deferred up to 25,000, so there have been resources used but I haven't had to dip into the funds.

Jen McFadden: And you have a patent or [crosstalk 00:14:13]

Anna Cerilli: Two patents have been filed. They were filed in April, provisional. So we have a year to make those final. And the IP attorney that I'm working with used to review international patents, So he's well versed and knows what we should be aiming for, what level of protection, things to consider and the factory in China, which the team is amazing and they are so special. They want distribution rights to Europe, including UK and Russia where they already have those pathways, so they are going to propose several business models when we review the final design in October and come up with the tooling costs.

Jen McFadden: That's incredible. In a year. And just for anybody who, obviously you can't see what it looks like, it is beautiful. It looks like a speedy little racing bike that any kid would use, and it's just a very super cool looking walker and not at all this aesthetic that's been out in the marketplace that is tired and sad. Honestly, it makes people feel sad. This is something that is a very cool accessory for your daughter who loves accessories to be using in her life.

Anna Cerilli: And the last thing Serena would say is feel sorry for me, and this does not say feel sorry for me.

Jen McFadden: This says, I am a super cool kid. We all know that entrepreneurship is not an easy thing, and so what we do like to talk a little bit about him and the podcast is the low side. So I guess, you've had this incredible year, but what has been kind of the low point or have you had a piece of this where you just feel like, I'm too tired to do this, I'm doing too many things? I'm raising kids, I'm working full time, I'm getting my graduate degree and I'm also starting a company at the same time. And maybe you're fortunate enough that that hasn't happened yet, but we'd love to hear a little bit.

Anna Cerilli: Yeah, I'd say that happens daily. I do try to remain conscious of my own health and wellbeing and I find that difficult because, as a mom and as somebody who is providing and I feel like everything else takes priority, but I know that I can't... It's a mantra, kind of. I need to keep myself healthy in order to be healthy and great for others. But it's easy to repeat that, it's a lot harder to do it. So I definitely face challenges daily, wonder if I'm... Not wonder if I'm doing the right thing, because clearly I am. This product, so many people turn to me and say, how does this not already exist? It's not a hoverboard I'm inventing, it's
Anna Cerilli: So yesterday, another incredible human being was reminding me that I wasn’t alone, and every time she asks me if I’ve considered something or done something, I answer yes. And I name a person or an expert that has weighed in on it, so I’m not alone. I get emails from people who are entrepreneurs that remind me I’m also sort of like this pack, like this wolf pack, and that’s helped me identify with people and not feel as irresponsible. I also come from a background where my father was an entrepreneur and at times very successful, but at times very unsuccessful. And so we had accounts drained, we had bankruptcy in the press. I’m very conscious of that and not willing to put my family at risk, which is why I’m working a full time job, excelling in my organization and putting my all into my job because I know that that’s for sure. And I know for sure the walker will happen, but I need to take care of things.

Jen McFadden: So I think it would be interesting to hear a little bit about how the walker is the first and clearly the most important, because it’s closest to you, product that you’re intending to introduce, but how you’re trying to bring this whole idea of fun to accessibility across the board. And what are you thinking about from a brand perspective longer term?

Anna Cerilli: So Nike is kind of an inspiration for me in that way because it’s not about them coming up with what they think people need. They listened to a young man who was going to college and had to wear braces and could not put on his own sneakers. And they listened to him, they listened to what he thought should happen, and they developed Nike Flyease, which is a shoe that adapts so that someone can put their shoe on if they have a brace on and it looks like an awesome sneaker. It is an awesome sneaker. So I think longterm, my awesomeness should be at the core of it all, fun and in highlighting and capital letters in the word functionality, fun is capital. So, identifying what the needs are from the people who have experienced it and being the liaison for that because the walker has focused on what I know Serena needs and I know, as a parent, I've needed for her. So that's what this walker has accomplished with the functional elements. And then understanding everyone has warned me along this journey that I'm going to have to compromise on the aesthetic and to prepare myself. And I've braced myself every time. And the aesthetic is still what it is. It's amazing. So it's possible.

Jen McFadden: So I was like end with a final question, but for you, this might be more tough, more difficult question than maybe for other people because you have such limited time. What one book would you give as a gift or recommend?

Anna Cerilli: When Breath Becomes Air. Easy.
Jen McFadden: Wow, easy.

Anna Cerilli: Yep.

Jen McFadden: Excellent. Anna, this has been such a pleasure. It was so inspiring. And I think everybody who was in the room this morning was so inspired by your story and I so look forward to seeing this product out on the market and all of the other products that are going to come after it. So thank you.

Anna Cerilli: Thanks.