Jen McFadden: 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.

Jen McFadden: So welcome to this week's edition of Beyond The Bottom Line. This week, we are so excited to have with us Annie Brown, who is the founder of Natural Annie's Essentials. Annie, welcome to Yale. Thank you so much for taking the time and for coming to the We at Yale breakfast this morning. We'd love to hear a little bit about what you're doing, what the inspiration was for the brand.

Annie Brown: Thank you so much for having me today. As you said, my name is Annie Brown, and I am the owner at Natural Annie Essentials, where we create an all natural line of soy candles and bath and body products.

Annie Brown: The inspiration behind the brand started back in 2014 after the birth of my first daughter, Tiffany, and Tiffany was born with spinal bifida and shortly after we came home from the hospital, her skin was started to break out. So we needed some alternative to help to heal her skin, and that's when I turned to natural products, natural butters, essential oils, and we finally got some relief for her skin.

Jen McFadden: So you grew up in Jamaica? Moved to the US when you were 18, came here, went to college.

Annie Brown: Yes.

Jen McFadden: How was that background part of the inspiration for the brand that you've built?

Annie Brown: So I grew up with my grandparents in the very rural parts of Jamaica, so a lot of what we used either around the house from medicine or food was a lot of plants and herbs. So I had that background and some knowledge of what to use and when, and how that is kind of infused into my brands. I now use a lot of those natural products, and I also like for our branding, it's very vibrant, so it's-

Jen McFadden: Beautiful.

Annie Brown: Thank you. It's a lot of the culture, the colors from Jamaica being very colorful that I love to incorporate into the branding.

Jen McFadden: So 2014 you have your daughter Tiffany, you're still working.

Annie Brown: Yes.

Jen McFadden: So talk a little bit about that balance that you had or didn't have and when you decided to go fully into this.
Annie Brown: So with my daughter, I feel like there was no balance being an entrepreneur, being a mom, being a full time employee. It's just a lot of, I like to call it juggling. So what does that, whatever's happening at that time, it happens until it falls off and then you kind of pick back up. But as time went by, I worked my corporate job for about four years while I had Tiffany and doing the business on the side. And in 2018 I finally left my corporate job to focus fully on the business and my family.

Jen McFadden: So you've got this set at the time, you started with the essential oils and with some facial products. Can you talk a little bit about something that you did discussed this morning about calling the product line or deciding when it was the right time to stop doing something and moving on to something else and how you continue to make that decision?

Annie Brown: So one of the essential oils, because all our facial products are scented with essential oils. And one of the oils that I'd used earlier on even with my daughter was lavender and lavender is well known for being very relaxing, very soothing and calming. So that was definitely one of the oils I wanted to use on my facial products was because I wanted to transfer that energy into the product and it happened to be the face butter, moisturizing face butter, that that we use the lavender for.

Annie Brown: And I find that a lot of customers are or have said to us you, I do feel very relaxed or calm after using the butter and it's super moisturizing too, so that's an added bonus.

Annie Brown: We actually only introduced candles about two years ago. So candle is still fairly new in our product lineup, but it has done so well that... I think I told you guys this morning, it now accounts for 80% of our business. So, and that idea actually came after we did a market in Brooklyn and a number of customers, they were starting to ask, because the scents from the products were very pleasant. So they would ask if we had a candle to go with it. And at the time we didn't.

Annie Brown: So on our ride back, my husband actually mentioned, "We should probably introduce candles into the line." I'm like, "No, are you going to make these candles?" Because that's just added work to what, all the things we were already doing. But for some reason, it excited me and we started looking into it on that very same ride back home.

Annie Brown: We started Googling and when we got home, we actually bought our first candle making kit to try it out on Amazon. So that came in and we started playing around with the idea for the candle. And I'll be honest in saying the first couple of months, it was bad. It wasn't as fragrant as we wanted to. It wasn't as fragrant as we wanted to and it wasn't burning as clean as we wanted to.
Annie Brown: So we had to do a lot of testing and through constant testing, I feel like now we're at a point where we've... I love where we're at now with the candles.

Jen McFadden: Yeah, they smell beautiful and they look beautiful. So congrats.

Annie Brown: Thank you.

Jen McFadden: And you also have this new line, so did you start with the floral line and then move to Thoughts?

Annie Brown: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jen McFadden: Tell us what some of those Thoughts are.

Annie Brown: So the Thoughts Collection, we actually launched in August of this year and it was just from working from home, being around a lot of entrepreneurs, moms. We get these thoughts daily and the collection has five thoughts. So as I have no idea what I'm doing, because I feel like at some point we all go through that phase. Get shit done, which is a good inspiration to get up and do-

Jen McFadden: Good reminder every day.

Annie Brown: Yeah, every day, do what you have to do. I have no idea what I'm doing. Currently overthinking is also one, which is, personally, I overthink everything and sometimes for me it's just hilarious at the things that I would just try to figure out. It could be the simplest thing and I could just go on and on about it.

Annie Brown: And the other one is I'm winning right now, but I don't know about later. And I feel like, especially being a mom, that is so true because one moment you feel like you've got it all together, and then in a flash everything just goes south. So, the line is meant to be relatable and fun, but also inspirational.

Jen McFadden: So we talked a little bit about this morning, your pricing strategy or lack thereof initially. Can you talk a little bit about how you came up with the pricing for the products and how that evolved over the course of you being an entrepreneur?

Annie Brown: So initially when I started out, I really was just pricing. I had no idea what a pricing strategy really was. I was just putting a price on something, and I thought that was good enough and it was selling, but of course because they were priced so low. But after growing, I kind of... A coach of mine actually, sat me down and said, "Well, if you're going to do this as a business, you may just want to make a little bit of money at least."

Annie Brown: And so we kind of went through what is a person's strategy and how to price your products for growth. And another area I was branching into was wholesaling. And that's another way to boost your business for, to grow your
business easily or a little faster than strictly retail. So wholesaling was actually the point that really pushed me to get it together when it came out to pricing.

Jen McFadden: So you now have product in 50 stores.

Annie Brown: Yes.

Jen McFadden: With the goal of getting to a 100 for the next couple of months? Talk a little bit about how you got into that first store, what your strategy is to approach stores now and what you see in the future.

Annie Brown: So I use Instagram as a starter for a lot of my stores, just because it's so much easier to picture the stores, the aesthetics and to see if we're a good fit. So once I kind of find a few, I then try to reach out to them via email, because I've found shop owners hate to be called and I'm fine with that because I hate to be called also.

Annie Brown: So I'm finding them on Instagram and then emailing them to see if we're a good fit. And out of 20 emails, you may get one response. But out of that very first battery, I think it was about in that 20 range too, where one store actually got back to us and said yes. So out of all the nos you get, it's just that one yes that you need to kind of boost you to keep doing it.

Jen McFadden: Let's talk about Instagram for just a minute because I think you have a beautiful Instagram account that is so colorful and vibrant and really speaks to the brand that you're trying to build. Can you talk about how that's led to other lead generation opportunities for you, like the opportunity with Maker's Mark?

Annie Brown: Looking at our Instagram today is totally different if you were supposed to look at it a few years back. I look at it as a resume for the brand, where this is where you want to put your best foot forward because not only are you trying to attract customers, but people will find you there too. And as you had mentioned, Maker's Mark found us on Instagram. They loved what we were doing. They loved the aesthetics, they loved the packaging, and they reached out to us to do custom candles for them.

Jen McFadden: Which is now when you're kind of looking at this landscape of opportunities for you, something that you're doing, you're doing more white label opportunities for the candles, right?

Annie Brown: Yes. Yes, so that has opened up doors for us to do a lot more candle making for either other companies or for gifting purposes. So if companies just want gifts, they could custom label their gifts or even candle makers who truly don't want to go through that whole process of learning the candle making experience. They'll also get those.
Jen McFadden: Talk a little bit about worst day we had some conversations about failure, and the fact that failure is sometimes not discussed, but worst day and then best day that you've had so far.

Annie Brown: I've heard a lot of worst days and I feel like a lot of entrepreneurs have a lot of worst days. I feel like I've cried more as an adult then since I've become an entrepreneur. It's wild. But one of our most recent worst or worst weekends. We did a show down in New York, a trade show in New York, and we came home with zero sales after investing about five grand into the show. And that was heartbreaking.

Annie Brown: I remember driving from New York to Connecticut every day I was crying. I was emailing my coach, I'm like, "I'm going to go bankrupt." I'm emailing my husband. I'm like, "This is crazy." So that was really rough. But would I do that again? Absolutely because it's a part of the journey, it's a part of the bigger goal, and I'd feel like to get there you need to go through all these little steps. And that was actually one of the stuff's that, as hard as it was, I needed to go through it and it has now prepared me to do so much different and better for the next one.

Jen McFadden: So best day.

Annie Brown: Best day, during the summer when we were working on that Maker's Mark candle production, I wanted to do it so good that they would come back or that it would attract others. So I threw a little making party, because I make all my products. We've converted our garage to our making studio. So we threw a little make's party and it was just candle making all day. We had music, we had Maker's Mark drinks.

Jen McFadden: Always a good way to incentivize free labor.

Annie Brown: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Oh yes. We had food. It was literally like a picnic and work at the same time, and we had it recorded so we did a whole video production for it. So that was super cool and that made me see that once we... This is somewhere I would like to work where it's not just work but it's also fun. You can enjoy what you're doing with people around you that's also enjoying it, and just to see the whole creative process come together was awesome.

Jen McFadden: Wow. I have one final question for you, which is the question that I ask everyone. What book would you gift or recommend for this year?

Annie Brown: I would give them the book, The Entrepreneur's Startup Game Plan, and it's by Sharon Beason. She's based down in, I think, Brooklyn, New York, and it's a really easy guide, no BS, to the point giving you factual points, steps that you need to take to be an entrepreneur, things that you need to be doing. And it's great if you are just starting out and it's great if you're mid level or even at the top. It's a great reference to have. So, that would be my book.
Jen McFadden: Awesome, Annie. Well, thank you again for coming to spend the morning with us, and we look forward to having some of the candles in our office and also look forward to watching you and all of your success over the next couple of years. So thank you very much.

Annie Brown: Thank you so much for having me.