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[00:00:34] Ryan Newman: This is Dare to Disrupt, a podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman, and today we have sisters Corey Verona Corneal and Nicole Verona Cancelmo on the show. They are the co founders of EcoA, where Corey serves as COO. Nicole as CMO. Akoa specializes in providing clean, natural, curly hair care products designed with the Latina community in mind. Akoa has been featured in Forbes, the Today Show, Business Insider, and more. It was honored as the inclusivity champion at the 2024 Beauty Independent Awards and won best hair care for its hydrating curl cream at the 2024 GQ Grooming Awards. Corey holds a bachelor's degree in business from Penn State Berks and an MBA with a concentration in finance from Penn State Great Valley. Nicole also earned a bachelor's degree in business from Penn State Berks, followed by a social media certification from Georgetown University.

[00:01:45] Ryan Newman: Welcome, Corey and Nicole to Dare to Disrupt. This is a first for us. Not only is this the first time we've had two guests on on the same episode, but also sisters. We're excited to speak to both of you. Welcome.

[00:01:58] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Thank you so much. Ryan. We're so excited to be

here. [00:02:00] Cory Varona-Corniel: Thank you, Ryan. We're so, so happy to be here.

[00:02:03] Ryan Newman: Thank you so much. Well, we'll get started as we normally do, which is at the beginning. And Nicole, maybe I'll turn the question to you to talk about your earliest experiences, both starting the business, but also where it all began for you all.

[00:02:15] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Awesome. Well, thank you for the question. I'll introduce myself. I'm Nicole. I'm the younger sister and one of the co founders of Akoa Beauty. How we started this journey, it's crazy to think about it. It's almost been six years, seven years that we're since we started the journey to something that led to Okoa, which we didn't think it would. We started with just the idea when I Woke up one day and said, what happened to my curly hair? It was completely fried, damaged, and I wanted to bring my curls back. But before that, we actually grew up in the Dominican Republic. We grew up in the island where society tells you that your hair is bad, which in Spanish is pelo malo. And so growing up, we hated our curly hair. Actually, all we wanted to do was go to the hair salon with our mom and get our hair straightened. We just grew up not really enjoying things because our hair was straightened. And we would not want to get our hair wet because then it would turn into curls, which we hated. Fast forward moving to the US about 20 years ago, just discovering so many things in this country, ingredients, products that we didn't grow up around because curly hair care was just not a thing. Fast forward to that one day where I said, what happened to my curly hair? I went into this whole journey of discovering what to do for my hair, and I obviously had to tell my sister about it. Pulled Corey in, she got super curious. We started to think about, like, what goes into making products for curly hair? What are the ingredients? How can we make this better? Can we even find a way to make our own products? That was just like the initial question in the One Seed. What happened to my curly hair? And from there, it started to blossom and it became what it is now.

[00:03:50] Ryan Newman: Well, I'd love to really dig into your time in the Dominican Republic. Corey, can you share with us what it was like growing up in Dominican Republic? What were some of

your earliest childhood memories? Just about growing up?

[00:04:02] Cory Varona-Corniel: Yeah, absolutely. And thank you. And I'm Corey. I'm the older sister. Growing up in Dominican Republic was beautiful. We would grow up going and visiting our family in Ocoa, which is where the name came from. Our family comes from San Jose de Ocoa, and Ocoa is in honor of our mom and our family. But we grew up going there. We grew up going in, into. It's more like a countryside. There's a lot of mountains, eating a lot of mangoes, which you're gonna find a lot of mangoes and the butters in our formulas. So everything is an inspiration of our childhood and our memories and how we grew up and all that we bring together into okay. Overall, it was a great childhood. Moving to the United States from the Dominican Republic was also a challenge for us. But being sisters, we had each other. We're close in age, so that was definitely a transition. That wasn't as hard because we had each other and we grew up very close to each other overall. That all developed into what now is a business that we are founding as sisters.

[00:05:05] Ryan Newman: Nicole, can you talk about, first of all, what is the age gap, Nicole, between you and Corrie? And can you talk about from your standpoint, what it was like having a big sister and some of the earliest impressions you had of your sister? Cori?

[00:05:16] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Of course. Yeah. So we're two years apart. We're very close. I'm an Aquarius and Cory's a Sagittarius. So that tells you right away. But actually, when you look at the signs, those are the signs that pair the best together. So thinking about it now, we're like. It was, like, meant to be. Like, somehow we were going to start something together. And we've always done that everywhere we go. No, no doubt that something was gonna come up, like how it did now, growing up with a big sister, obviously I wanted to do everything that she was doing, learning everything from her. She's more of the adventurous sister, and I'm more of a cautious sister. So I think having her kind of directing all the adventures, thinking about it now, even just, like, all the things that we've done always been together and, like, what Corey was saying, coming here and having her doing those things, those things first, like, going to high school first here, having her as that, like, mentor and person to look up to, was amazing to have. And I know she knows this. Like, obviously she's my role model because she's the first person that kind of has led the road for me. Right. To follow. And we actually have two younger sisters, so it was like a very different dynamic when they came 10 years later because we have a huge gap. It's always been her kind of directing all three of us now. So I'm very, very proud to have her as my older sister.

[00:06:32] Ryan Newman: Corey, that's got to make you blush at least a little bit.

[00:06:35] Cory Varona-Corniel: Yes, I'm here. She's going to make me cry. She's already starting, but, yeah.

[00:06:41] Ryan Newman: Well, Corey, you mentioned your mom, and.

[00:06:43] Ryan Newman: You mentioned your mom being one of the inspirations for the business. Can you just tell us, Corey, a little bit more about your mom, the type of person she is and where that inspiration came from?

[00:06:50] Cory Varona-Corniel: Absolutely. If you meet my mom, you're going to say, wow, she's very quiet. She's not very adventurous or outgoing. However, I see her as the most resilient and risk taker that I ever met. Like, I see her as a very strong person because actually bringing her family from my country, she doesn't, you know, she moves her family to a country she doesn't know. She doesn't know the language. She doesn't know how we're going to grow up and what's going to be our lives. And that, for me, is a huge risk. I don't know if I would be like, oh, let me just

back up and go somewhere else that I don't, you know, I don't know anything about. I don't know anybody there. So she, for us, is someone who's so strong and who brought education from day one. Like, she believes in education so much. So she instilled those values in us very early in our childhood. And she. She knew that we needed great education. She knew that moving to another country, obviously learning another language, but never forgetting that the main goal is an educated person can make a life for themselves. So she. She instilled really great values. And that's a person that, you know, I look up to. She's my mom. She's my role model. She doesn't. She hates to get the credit, but I always tell her, like, without you and your. And the risk you took, we wouldn't be here today. There's a lot that we feel proud of, and also where she comes from, the people there are very kind, very hardworking people. And we wanted to highlight her background and her family and bring it to America. And just showcasing this beautiful culture just shows the resilience, the love for each other, and how the love for family is a priority, and that's something that builds us and has created this Persona for our business. And people relate so much to that amazing Nicole.

[00:08:33] Ryan Newman: Corey spoke about the big, bold decision, the courageous decision your mother made to come to the U.S. can you talk about, Nicole, how old you and Corey were when you ventured on this journey to come to the US and what was that earliest experience of coming to the US Like?

[00:08:46] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Nicole, I was a tween, and Corey was a teenager already. And it was the hardest part of moving to a new country. When you're, like, going through those big transformations as a kid, right? Like, I didn't want to leave. I was like, I'm not leaving my friends. That was a huge thing for us. And looking back on it, it's a monumental time. And it was a time that we had to leave everything behind and start over. So I'm getting emotional just thinking about it. Learning a new language, having new friends again. Just a lot of things that you don't want to go through as a kid, right? So I was starting middle school, and Cory was going to high school. So that was like, the time frame, which is the hardest time, right, to leave everything behind and start over. We are now based in Pennsylvania, but we actually moved to Massachusetts the first year that we, we came to the US and it's like a place where, like, no one spoke Spanish. We didn't have a community. We were like, what are we doing here? I want to go back. And again, having our mom working so hard and being like, no, you have to be educated and you have to learn. And being in ESL classes and learning English and even going through things that we never went through in Dominican Republic, like getting a C or a D on, on a paper because we didn't know what we were doing, even those type of things. Looking back on it now, we were so strong to have gone through all that again. I'm like, just choking up, not talking about it. But it's. It was a hard time, to be honest, and to come out of that. We went to high school, we went to college, we had professional corporate careers. That's an accomplishment on its own. Yeah, it was very hard.

[00:10:25] Ryan Newman: Not to mention your entrepreneurs, which we're going to get to. [00:10:27] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Exactly.

[00:10:28] Ryan Newman: So, Corey, for your, from your standpoint, can you talk about that same experience in terms of coming to the US how, how much English did you and your sister know? And then what was the migration from Massachusetts to Pennsylvania?

[00:10:41] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Corey?

[00:10:41] Cory Varona-Corniel: So we had zero knowledge. So we didn't know how to speak English at all. I remember that, like, you know, in our, in our school, they would give classes, but it was more like learning the numbers or like basic hello, goodbye. So that was the knowledge. We

didn't really know anything. The first year was specifically hard because we were in a secluded, like in a smaller town in Massachusetts, actually, closer to New Hampshire, and there was no ESL program. I remember my first. It was technically ninth grade. I was in a room with four other people and my teacher didn't even know Spanish. So we were just communicating almost like sign language. It was, it was very challenging. But I laugh about it now because it was just, in a way I say it now is it was the best outcome that, you know, I was put to and the best challenge because it forced me to learning even more. And I remember our parents bought us this little translator. It looked like a phone and it was like a big calculator and you would type in the word and it will tell you the word in English. And you're like, oh, this is what I mean. This is what I'm trying to tell you. Even though we were in Dominican Republic, we would listen to the music from here, from America. So we would listen to it over there, and we liked the rhythm. We didn't know what it meant. But then moving here, we would look at the lyrics, and we would translate the lyrics to Spanish to understand and see how people were speaking at that time. It was very crazy, but it really helped. So I think being in that challenge, of course, is still learning faster because we didn't have any family members. We had nobody in Massachusetts. My mom reached out to this one cousin in Pennsylvania in Reading, which is where I'm based, and this cousin said, you should move over here, because it could be closer to me. But also there's a community where there's actually more of a Spanish population. We visited one summer. It was a summer. It was literally our first summer in America. We visited, and my mom liked it, and she's like, well, I'll be closer to my cousin, and I can purchase a house. We're moving within few months. I mean, within weeks, I think we were planning to move to Pennsylvania. And we literally grab our car, van, and we grab everything. It's like you already went through a traumatic move, and then you move again.

So that was part of the story.

[00:12:59] Ryan Newman: Nicole, what was that like, having that traumatic move from one location to one foreign location to another? Missing home all along the way, I'm sure.

[00:13:06] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Yeah, it was obviously hard again. We just built something here, and now we're moving again. So it was hard, but I think it was actually the best thing that could have ever happened to us because we ended up being surrounded by a Latino community that was thriving and growing and seeing people that looked like us going to the high school. They had a better ESL program. My mom and my stepdad were able to get better jobs here. Off the bat, it was like a better experience. So we're like, okay, we can do this, right? Like, it's not as hard as what we thought it was going to be like. We went to a high school where the population is majority, you know, writing high school, majority Latinos. And it was just easier for us to kind of have friends and be involved and do things that we didn't get a chance to do back in Massachusetts. One of the programs actually was through Penn State Berks. They had programs at the high school, and that's how we were introduced to the Penn State community. So I think overall, it was a blessing in disguise, to be honest, and something that we didn't think it was going to be as great. As what it turned out to be.

[00:14:08] Ryan Newman: Well, Corey, she mentioned. Nicole mentioned that big word Penn State and Penn State. Burke. So, Corey, you were the trailblazer at being the.

So, Corey, talk to us about the decision to attend Penn State. What went into that decision? Being close to home, presumably. Walk us through that.

[00:14:23] Cory Varona-Corniel: Oh, yeah. And like Nicole mentioned, I am very adventurous, and I really like a challenge. So I remember, like I mentioned, I got here. I was in 9th grade. Most people are looking at colleges in 9th and 10th grade, and I wasn't. I was trying to learn English. I was trying to get out of the ESL program and kind of like get adjusted to more of a regular curriculum to. So

I could be ready for college, because college was definitely the goal. I just didn't know which one I was going to. Everybody that I spoke to suggested I would start at a community college. Then, like Nicole mentioned, we were introduced to Penn State Berks. And I said, Penn State is where I want to go. And I remember talking to everybody and saying, maybe you should rethink that maybe, because, you know, the language and everything. And I said, you know what? I'm going to do whatever it takes to go there. And I did, thankfully, through different programs and visiting. I applied and I got in. And I remember I told my mom, I'm like, I know this is going to be harder, but I'll do whatever it takes to get good grades. I did an English class before I even started the fall semester, and that helped a lot. And then Nicole would go to the campus, and then she would see what I was doing. It just, you know, encouraged them to say, I also want to go to Penn State. So I'm glad that I took that decision, and I'm glad that Penn State Berks was so close to the high school that it allowed me to see that that was a possibility. Without that education, you know, I wouldn't have the corporate experience that I have now. And also even building a business later on, it just opened up the possibilities, and it opened up so many different things that I didn't know I could do.

[00:15:55] Ryan Newman: Amazing. So, Nicole, what was it like watching your big sister embark on this amazing challenge to step into the unknown? Penn State Berks. And when did you first get the first inkling that this is maybe something you would want to do, too?

[00:16:08] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Just seeing her go through it, even getting to go to the camp, I was ready to go. Having those two years to really, like, have that opportunity to learn from her and see what she was going through, that was a great experience. Even having the tours right from the high school, taking us there early on, kind of knowing already what the roadmap was. And it was always like, she's the trailblazer, right? So I was just following her footsteps. But I think it was that community that she was building was what I kind of wanted to build, too. And that encouraged me to go the same route and decide that I also wanted to go to Penn State Berks.

[00:16:43] Ryan Newman: And, Nicole, you bring a great point. And, Corey, I'd love to get your perspective on this. You know, the Berks community, that the actual campus, the culture of the campus. Many guests may start at a Commonwealth campus, but not necessarily end up at a Commonwealth campus for all four years. Corey, can you talk about the community of Penn State Berks and how that appealed to you and the culture?

[00:17:02] Cory Varona-Corniel: For me, it was perfect because I was getting the education, but in a smaller setting. It was great because I got to, like, meet people, people that could help me with classes. And then there were so many clubs available and different programs that I could get involved and then just learn and meet new people. I just got so involved. But one thing that really created this love for Berks was that when Nicole and I were together at birx, we wanted to create something for Latinos, but not specifically just to get Latinos together. We wanted to help other people like us get a little bit of money incentive or a scholarship to attend BIRKS and encourage more people from Reading High School to come over to Berks. So that was what really tied it, like, connected us even further to Berks. So we created the first Latino organization at birx, and it had a different purpose because most of the organizations were just to get together, congregate, and meet other Latinos on campus. But what we wanted to do is get together, do fundraisers, so we can just help another Latino that would go into Berks have a little bit of, like, financial help their first year. So that was, like, a huge goal. And that got us even more connected to the faculty, the staff, everybody that saw what we wanted to build, and they're like, we want to be involved. We want to help you grow this. And to this day, LUC is still an organization at Penn State Berks and is growing and thriving. You know, I think about it, I'm like, yeah, this is the reason why we. We stayed because we grew something, but we also brought other views to the campus.

[00:18:35] Ryan Newman: Amazing. So inspiring. Nicole, what was that experience like for you?

[00:18:38] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: It was awesome. I mean, so, yeah, we started the first Latino Latino United for Change. Is the name of the club. Luc. It was great to see something from zero to then growing an organization where we started as the founders and then we had other people lead the group. And that was awesome to see the leadership and just overall community that we were building and then fundraising and just meeting so many people that wanted to see us bring more people in and just keep growing the club. Overall, it was a great experience and that connected us to other organizations like the Line Ambassadors. We were doing student government. We were involved in so many different groups. That really just made the experience even better.

That's why we both stayed for all four years. Right. It was that connection to the campus and like everything around the campus and everybody who was there, which was so amazing. And it's kind of magical to see actually. We're still to this day so close to everyone there and we feel like we are part of that family. And I think that was like the first step and setting stone of us creating something together.

[00:19:41] Ryan Newman: Amazing. Well, Corey, again, once again having to be the pioneer, the trailblazer. Although it sounds like Nicole is going to get her time in the sun in a moment here in terms of the starting of a koa, but there had to be the decision to leave the campus and to start your career, Corey. So you were obviously the oldest one, pushed out of the nest first. Once again, getting pushed out into the big world. What was your first experience like working after graduating from Berks? And what was the direction that your career took initially after leaving?

[00:20:10] Cory Varona-Corniel: I actually did business in a concentration in finance and accounting. So I was very in the financial side. And it's funny because my mom, when she was in the Dominican Republic, she worked as an accountant, she was at a bank. So that right away, like I wanted to just do that here. That was like my lead in my path. Right. And I worked at, it's called FDI Investments and I was a hedge fund accountant. That was my first job right out of Penn State Berks. It was an amazing experience to be able to learn from bright individuals, like super smart guys who were doing all these investing and all that. And we were. And I was working on the financial and then reporting side. So that was like awesome. Like for me it was just a new world learning what it took to. To do like the financials of these huge organizations. It was definitely an experience because I was in a team surrounded by guys. So it was. It helped me be very sharp and strategic when it came to like anything that they were doing. So I learned a lot. And then after that I transitioned my career to a bank. So like my mom, I actually was working at a bank in the controllership team, one side of the financial statements, accounts payable. So I did so many different areas and so many departments feel like learning from these teams and just learning overall, different perspectives from a job that was more men, you know, driven and kind of like more guys and girls to move into a banking operations where it was led by older individuals, that gave me a different type of learning and exposure, all of that together. Without that learning and that experience, I don't think we would have been ready to build the business that we are building now.

[00:21:53] Ryan Newman: Is it fair to say, too, Corey, that because you're describing a lot of folks that are of the male gender, I haven't really had you talk much about diversity in terms of these early jobs. Is it fair to say that in much the same way when you left the Dominican Republic and went to Massachusetts for the first time, or even, quite frankly, when you left Massachusetts and went to Reading and then to Berks, that these experiences of going into unknown environments where there's not as many people that share the same background as you from a heritage standpoint or from a gender standpoint, that you were exercising the same muscles once again, but perhaps with more confidence now?

[00:22:25] Cory Varona-Corniel: Absolutely, yes, for sure. I think, you know, having the experience

From Berks for Penn State Berks, I knew better English by then. I was exposed to a lot more things. But it's just being exposed to constant change. It kind of trains your brain to accept and adapt faster. So I think it's like it was that journey of, wow, we have been, like, moving, doing this, and kind of like, constantly every few years, that it just comes natural to us. We're just quickly to adapt and quickly to just move on and say, what's the next challenge? And how can I tackle this? And how can I work with people with diverse backgrounds and diverse mentalities, too? And overall, now I see it, and I don't think I kind of evaluated that before, and I think I was just going with the flow, but now I think about it and like, wow, yeah, we were just exposed to so much change that it just helped us to adapt better.

[00:23:17] Ryan Newman: Well, Steve Jobs famously said, only in hindsight did the dots connect. And it sounds like that's what was happening here. So let's take a freeze frame, Corey, on your experience. You're in a bank. You had this SEI experience, now you have a bank experience. And let's switch over to Nicole's path of early career stardom. Can you talk about Nicole, what it was like first? What was it like surviving at Berks without your big sister on campus anymore? Something tells me you did just fine. And then what was the early start into your career like? Nicole?

[00:23:45] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Yeah, so I was filling her shoes because she was a line ambassador and then I was inducted to be a line ambassador. So for the next two years after she was gone, I was in more groups, getting involved, student government, line ambassador, a lot of things.

Orientation leaders. One thing that I got to do that I was very proud was to study abroad, which was something that I know Corey actually wanted to do and she didn't get a chance to. But again, I was exposed to it and so I got a chance to do that the spring of my junior year and then have my last year at Berks was an awesome experience. And funny enough, obviously I ended up working at the same place that Corey went to. So I followed her footsteps, actually had an internship because I focused on marketing. I did business management and marketing. I had a marketing job when I was doing event planning and I thought that that's what I wanted to do. But financially it was not where we thought it was going to make me start earning enough money to be on my own. So still living with our family. So I see Corey's at SEI and she's growing a lot and moving and she started as an analyst and now she's a supervisor and like all these things, right. So of course she's like, there's a lot of roles there. You should get an interview and see how things go. So I ended up landing in fun accounting, which is still the same unit that Corey was in, but a different department in a very fast moving world. Again, not very diverse as far as genders, very, you know, have to adapt, change fast. A lot of different technologies, a lot of people that were coming in and out because very fast moving job. And I knew that it wasn't the place that I wanted to be. Like my dream was to, if I was going to go to a corporate role, to end up in the marketing department somehow, which I got to do four years after I did the fun accounting. I then moved in the same company to the marketing department, which was my dream job, which I left to pursue entrepreneurship.

[00:25:39] Ryan Newman: So Nicole, after you're at, you're at sei, you're working in that role now. Take us to the initial seedlings of your entrepreneurial vision. When did that start? How did it start? And most importantly, you're in this comfortable financial job, clearly earning well. You've literally left event planning to go into finance. And now all of a sudden, you're thinking, I'm going to leave all of that to start something new. Take us inside your thinking.

[00:26:04] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Yeah. It didn't start out that way, actually. So I moved out of my house, got an apartment. I was working at sei. And then one day, I really got into wellness. It was the beginning of 2016. I started going to the chiropractor. Was really into what my body's feeling like eating better, looking at the ingredients, and that affected everything that I was doing. And then I was like, I want to do that for my hair, but my hair is naturally, like, completely fried. So it was just the one day I woke up and I said, what happened to my curly hair? Then we also

Have the Internet at that point where I'm like, googling things going on YouTube. How can I bring my curls back? So I started to stop going to the hair salon to get my hair blown out. And it happened for like two years or so where I was like, okay, I'm trying to do this. Then, like, I told Corey about it. And then we had this group chat where we were doing it with a friend, and we were like, can you tell me what you're doing? What products are you using? Sharing tips and education and like, how do you do this? Where are you going? To the salon. First thing, too, was getting a curly haircut and telling Corey about it. Things that just we didn't learn, we had to find out on our own. And then because I'm always the ideation person, between the two of us, then I'm thinking about, how can we do something about it. Cori is getting super curious. How do you make this? I want to know the inside and the out of everything that goes into hair care. So she gets enrolled into a formulations class, starts to learn how to formulate products. And this was in 2018. She's like, I just want to learn. I just want to learn how to do it. There was nothing about, we're going to start a business. She just enrolls herself in the class. She's doing this online. And then I kind of semi did it after, but I was still not completely bought into it. She starts to make the products. I'm trying the products as the guinea pig. And I'm like, wait, this is better than the stuff that I'm buying. It's actually making my hair feel better than what I'm using. And it's less steps. I'm using five products. And with your stuff, I'm using two. So from there we're like, wait, this is something like maybe we can create and expand it to a bigger audience. It doesn't just have to be us. How can we make it different? And then from there, it's where all the research and development started to happen.

[00:28:16] Ryan Newman: So, Corey, what was the motivation for you personally to take this class to start to actually learn about the ingredients? And I have to ask the most important question. Was your hair curly back then? Was it always curly? You know, Nicole talks about how her hair, she describes it as being fried and she was getting blowouts. Were you, Corey, also at this time of life getting blowouts? Or had you already kind of transitioned back to your natural curly hair?

[00:28:37] Cory Varona-Corniel: No. So it's funny that you said, like, you know, I always start something. I'm kind of the pioneer in this case, Nicole is my inspiration to get my hair curly. And so Nicole starts and she's like researching and I see her and I'm like, okay, well, she's doing something different. Like she's not doing the routine. Like the routine is to get it strained, right? So she tells me, maybe you should try it too. And I'm not buying it at that point. But then I saw a family. So I have my son and my pregnancy was different. It was something different for our family. I have preeclampsia. Nobody in our family had it. So we're learning about all these things that are happening to me. And it's a very serious condition. So my son, he's born premature. He's born at 34 weeks. So very, very little. And I'm seeing, you know, myself, I'm a new mom with a premature baby, no time on my hands. I definitely do not have three hours to go Saturday to get my hair straightened at the salon. Like, that's definitely a the window. My life is changing and I need to adapt again. And Nicole is bringing all these things. I'm like, well, maybe I can try this at home and it will be easier for me to take care of my hair. So that's kind of how it started. And then I have in my, in the back of my head, why did I get preeclampsia? I was a healthy 26 year old, never had any issues, that this never happened in my family. Why did I get this? And then I started seeing like natural doctors and I started like looking and researching. And a lot of it was the things I was eating and the personal care that I was using. So I want to like do a whole transformation, right? Taking better Care of myself, just eating better things, cleaner stuff. We're talking about hair. So we start changing our products too. But then I look at the back of the label and I'm like, I can't even understand what this is. All these names are weird, all these chemicals. So is this also affecting me? And imagine, like, getting chemically treated procedures at the salon that can be good and frying my hair. So I'm just getting very curious about the ingredients. I'm like, okay, I need to change everything. And I don't think anything that they're putting on these curly hair products are also helping me in this journey. So I want to learn. And that's when, like, curiosity came about and I just wanted to formulate it and literally was ordering raw materials and mixing it in my kitchen.



[00:30:46] Ryan Newman: Unbelievable. Nicole, what was it like when you saw Corey literally mixing these ingredients in her kitchen? I mean, what did you think about your sister? What was she up to now?

[00:30:54] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Nicole, I know it was actually fun. It was something so out of left field that we were like, what? We're into beauty now. Like, this is completely outside of everything that we've ever known. So it was actually really fun to get to try things and create again.

[00:31:10] Cory Varona-Corniel: Right.

[00:31:10] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Like, we were creating something together and just knowing that maybe this experiment can turn into something bigger. And it did.

[00:31:17] Ryan Newman: So let's talk about the experiment turning into something bigger. When did this turn into an actual business? And let's get really serious and let's actually, dare I say, think about leaving our secure jobs to actually start starting this business.

[00:31:30] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: The action taker out of the two is always been Corey again as the older sister. The one thing is that we actually didn't mention is that we've always wanted to start a business together, but we didn't know what it was going to be. We actually were like, oh, we're going to have this venue for, like, events. Oh, no, we're going to have a wedding dress shop or whatever. We always had all these again, ideas because that's sort of my forte. But we never executed against any of them. And this was the only idea that we finally put a business plan together. It wasn't perfect, but we had a business plan. And Corey's like, I'm going to start an llc. And she started the LLC and starts the bank account. Of course, that's the first thing she does. Starts the business account. And I'm like, okay. Like, it's not that serious. It doesn't have to be that serious. She's like, no, this is the first thing you do, right? Like both being business majors and obviously working in financial field. And then she researched to find a manufacturer, which is the first thing you need when you're going into cpg. So I'll let her take that on a little bit more.

[00:32:29] Cory Varona-Corniel: And what a journey that was. I mean, that was, I think, the hardest part of this whole thing. First, because we wanted very clean ingredients. Part of the inspiration, it was going back into our roots and our culture and bringing innovation to hair care, which is what we didn't find when we were using all these other products. First, to get someone on board to create something that is completely different and that takes longer to build and test, that was hard. I literally started calling. I called local places. A lot of people said, I don't know what you're doing. And they wouldn't answer me. I emailed, nobody would answer me. So finally we find a location and they say, yes, we'll take a look. Back then we had an idea of five products. We wanted a whole collection. And they're like, okay, yeah, we can work on it. We worked with them for about a year and a few weeks right before we were going to launch this manufacturing company. This lab catches on fire.

[00:33:22] Ryan Newman: Oh my gosh.

[00:33:23] Cory Varona-Corniel: So we don't even get to see a production run. This whole thing now gets behind. And now this is, I'm talking about 2019, early 2019. The manufacturing, I think, closes. We don't have anybody anymore. So we're back to zero, looking for manufacturing companies. So I started emailing, started calling, and honestly, we got nowhere. We were literally at that point, we were like, nobody wants to take us because at the end of the day, it's these two sisters who are self funding this with our own funds. We don't have a venture company or someone backing us to do this company. It's just literally us with this idea and our own formulas. So finally we get a meeting with the manufacturer in Pennsylvania and we go and

we bring little bottles of our samples that we want to create.

And they're like, honestly, like, you're very small. You don't have like a backing of funding or things like that. But just the fact that you brought your own formulas and you have this passion, that's what we want to see on entrepreneurs and that's what bring us joy. So because of that, we literally got in. Instead of doing five products, we focused on doing a really good one product, a one styling product, which is our current curly hair cream. And that was it. And literally that's what Started it. There's always challenges in the road, right? So you're working with someone new. It takes time. And the new chemist, before you know it, we're all actually affected by this global pandemic. So right when we're about to launch comes 2020, and we can't launch because there's a global pandemic. The journey to get here has been one filled with challenges, but a lot of learning and a lot of opportunities that have made us grow and see the business side in a different way.

[00:35:03] Ryan Newman: Amazing. So Nicole, picking it up where Corey is putting a lot of false starts to actually getting a product out the door, how did you overcome the challenges of the pandemic and then the period through that to actually launch? And then what was your early success or what was your early experience like? Sort of driving towards a successful outcome?

[00:35:20] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: It was a blessing in disguise that the manufacturer that we worked with actually had an incident because we re looked at everything. We said, we don't have money for five products. We're going to go back to one. What's the one that we actually need that we can make the most different and is the most different in the marketplace? And we were also like, wait, this new manufacturer is actually even better. They have a better service, better quality, and what we're making is actually better than what we expect. Looking back now, it's like, wow, if we didn't have that change, that one thing that stopped us to look again, maybe we wouldn't have found a great partner that we have now at the moment. Then that pause from the global pandemic also kind of made us rethink the whole marketing plan. Because initially it's like, okay, we're just going to launch and people can buy it online. Yes. But you have an opportunity to do more marketing in person, which after the pandemic, we couldn't do. So we had to be like, very scrappy and turn it more into a digital world where people can actually find a product easier and try it out in an easier way. Because we couldn't be in a local marketplace and we couldn't be at a fair or a show because that was all canceled. There was nothing happening. We actually, because of the Burks launchbox, got connected to a mentor who was in beauty. Because that was another thing is like everything that we had gotten to, to that point was us googling and learning on our own. There was nothing that we had like a strategy behind or anything like that. It was just like, okay, we want to make this product. We know there's a need. And we're the users of the product because we're the ones testing it. And we know the community that wants the product, but we have no knowledge of this industry that we're jumping into. But because of this connection and having those resources, we connected to a mentor who was in beauty, and he suggested that we were trying samples so that people can try the products first. Because we're a new brand, nobody knows who we are. We're like, okay, well, how do you make samples? And thankfully, our manufacturer had the capabilities to do that. So we launched our collection with sample sizes so that people can try the product online. And so what we did was offer the samples free so people could just buy them for free and only pay the shipping, because we wanted to simplify the routine, because at first we were using five products and we simplified it to two. We launched our second product in June of 2021, which we launched in March 1, 2021, with a cream. And then in June, we launched with the gel. So for us to kind of rethink everything through that one year that we had to pause was actually the best thing that could happen to us. And then because, you know, we like to spice things up, nine months into the business, which was a different name, we connected again with more people who were ahead of us. And they're like, oh, I think you guys should, like, rethink your branding, because your products are really good. But people can't see the product. They have to be, you know, catchy

enough to call their attention. If it's sitting on a shelf, can somebody pick it up and grab it in the way that it was looking before? It wasn't. So we decided that we're going to rebrand at the end of 2021. And we're like, oh, yeah, we're going to rebrand. It's going to take us like, six months. It took us 15 months. We rebranded into Ocoa March 1st of 2023. Through the rebrand and launching Ocoa, we actually launched two new products. So now we have a full collection, shampoo, conditioner, cream and gel.

[00:38:44] Ryan Newman: Amazing. So, Corey, what was it like once that packaging was released? First of all, what was your mom's reaction, Corey, back to the inspiration when you said that the name of the business is now going to be ocoa and talk us through what that packaging was like, seeing your product, and. And how did you really then drive distribution after that?

[00:39:01] Cory Varona-Corniel: First of all, when we said we were going to rebrand, everybody said we were crazy. They're like, you just launched. What are you talking about? You're going to change the name? Like, what is this? But again, that comes. That's natural to us. Like we are risk takers and we are kind of crazy. My mom was the very supporter, first supporter of the name because, okay, well, I mean, she was so emotional. She's like, are you guys like real seriously thinking this? And we said, yes, yes, this is what we want. Again, it was because we were always on the go, go, go. But again, you know, we're running like we're running this side business, right? But we still have our full time jobs at that moment. We are kind of on the rush with this and we.

Again, I'm from more the financial side and has a marketing background, but beauty is a completely different monster, is like a different industry that we have no knowledge on. So we are so grateful for the mentors that actually stop us there and said, hey, you guys have something going, you guys have a great story, you guys have a great product, but you need to elevate it if you want to grow and just relate to more people. One thing that I say that we have is we're great listeners too, so we'd like to listen for advice and we really value when someone actually stops you and says, maybe you should rethink this. After we launched Agoa and we actually sat down and say, what do we want to express with what this brand? What do we want people to take away? Not just getting amazing results from a product, but also that sense of community. And it was going back to that story that we were just sharing about our sisterhood. Right. Besides moving here and the culture and all that is having each other, we always had each other to support, support and to see one as inspiration, another one as support. Even in through this journey of hair, we had each other for that and. And I think that's what we want to share with the world, with the community that yes, we're creating this solution for your hair care needs. But it's because of this passion and this love that we have of sharing with others, truly things that are good for you and also works for you and getting you away from those bigger corporations who are just selling products. But they don't nourish their community and they don't educate their community and bring their community together. So that's what we wanted, that sisterhood, that what we call la familia, our family. So we bring everybody in as if we're all sisters and brothers.

[00:41:18] Ryan Newman: So Nicole, as you sit here today, what's been the community reaction to the product, to the business, and what are some of the accolades you all have received and sort of acknowledgement of what you all are doing?

[00:41:28] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: It's been really an honor and truly amazing to receive all the feedback and the support from our community. I think the biggest joy has been just emails and, like, text messages, pictures, like, before and afters of people saying, like, wow, your products have changed my life. And that's just something that's completely priceless, that you don't really expect when you're thinking you're going to solve a problem, but also impacts somebody's life. And hair care is so personal. And I think because it's been that connection that we started as sisters and now it's a broader community, it's always been personal to us, and it's always going to continue to be personal because we know the challenge and, like, we had that big

transformation ourselves. So to see other people benefit from it is an absolute dream. The support from the beauty community, too, and the fact that we were outsiders and, like, coming in and now people are like, wow, you guys have an amazing brand and amazing product, getting beauty awards. We already received two beauty awards last year. We're super excited to have the recognition as well to, like, say, wow, your products are really amazing. I think the biggest part has been just the community support and the people saying, like, wow, you guys are creating something that brings representation to me. Like, I love the branding, I love the name, and my curls obviously look better. So that's just something that has been irreplaceable that we are really honored to accomplish together.

[00:42:54] Ryan Newman: And how has social media driven your business and the ability of the community to respond and to really affirm your business?

[00:43:01] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Oh, my God. 100% social media is the way that we literally started the brand. And now it's like almost over 20,000 followers with LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, all these platforms where we're promoting and also sharing tips and education. It's from an account that was like, zero followers, zero community, to now having so many people all over the country, even international, know who we are and, like, love the product. And the community is. Is amazing.

[00:43:30] Ryan Newman: So, Corey, What's. What's the future hold for okoa? What's the. What's the big vision of the business as you look out into the future?

[00:43:36] Cory Varona-Corniel: So there's a lot of plans. We're still a small team, but we're growing and we're trying to. To make sure that we're available and accessible for our customers. So last year, we had a big milestone. We launched our product at Urban Outfitters and then it was our first retail partner in Amazon. So there's just so much growth and so many things that we are working on. We're planning on launching new stuff this year. So the future is bright and the future is to continue to help other women and men and the entire family can use our products, embrace and love who they're born to be with products that are truly nourishing and that are giving you the results you want without complicating a routine. Our dream is to one day also be able to sell in Dominican Republic and to go international in Latin America. Right now, we're continuing to grow our community here in the US and we have great, exciting news that are going to be happening this year. We can't share anything yet, but it's exciting and very, very awesome.

[00:44:41] Ryan Newman: Well, that gives. That gives our listeners an incentive to keep following ECOA and all the big things that are coming.

[00:44:46] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Yes.

[00:44:47] Ryan Newman: Well, thank you, Nicole and Corey, for taking the time today to share your entrepreneurial journey with me. I'd now like to hand things over to a current Penn State student, Kia Jones. Kia is a PhD candidate in rural sociology and international agriculture and development. She is the founder of BlueOrb Co, a platform dedicated to simplifying sustainable fashion. BlueOrb Co provides businesses with a network for sustainable sourcing, customized filters for consumer values, and independent sustainability certifications. She has participated in the Idea Test Lab at Happy Valley launchbox, powered by pnc. Kia. I'll now hand the interview over to to you.

[00:45:27] Keia Jones: Thank you so much, Ryan. I'm really happy to be here. Thank you for having me. Nicole and Corey, my first question is, how has the story of your business evolved since its inception? And what were the key drivers behind those challenges?

[00:45:44] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Kia. It's great to hear from you. Well, it's. It continues to evolve. I mean, as we continue to learn and as we get more people into our community, we continue to listen to what they're asking. Like we were talking about earlier, like, we started with a different name, then we revisited our mission, our vision, what we wanted the business to grow into. And I think going back into our roots was the best thing. Like going back and digging back into the things that we really wanted to highlight and share with the community is what really gave us that opportunity to revisit everything and be able to continue to, you know, tweak our messaging every few months. I mean, literally every month, we're like learning something new as A as a startup. So for us is a continuous improvement, as we like to call it, progress, not perfection, because it's never going to be perfect. So it's just, you know, getting started and continuing to tweak and make things better.

[00:46:38] Keia Jones: Thank you for that. And how do you plan to keep sustainability at the forefront of your business strategy as you grow and adapt to new market demand?

[00:46:47] Cory Varona-Corniel: Absolutely. And I love this question and sustainability, and I love what you're doing too, about sustainability and all that you're creating. But I think overall that's something that we wanted to not only bring sustainable ingredients into our formulations, we also wanted to take a step further and actually be very sustainable when it comes to packaging. It's kind of a challenge sometimes for hair care products because the first solution you have is plastic because obviously you're in the shower, you don't want to create injuries or anything like that. But what we wanted to do is to create a refillable system. Right. So our bottles are very cool and designed in a way that you can flip them. They're bilingual. A lot of people wanted to keep the bottles. They're like, I love this bottle, I love this packaging. It's so cool. Our solution to that was to do sustainable pouches that are bigger sizes so people could refill our bottles. And we will continue, as we bring in more innovation and more products, we will continue to have that as a priority on how we source packaging, because we're doing everything we can to definitely source our ingredients sustainably, because it is a way easier now, but for the packaging. And I think the future of packaging for beauty and overall CPD is going to continue to grow in a way that is more sustainable. So we do everything we can as a small organization to be sustainable.

[00:48:07] Keia Jones: Thank you. And one last question. What are your most important goals for the next few years and how do you plan on achieving them while continuing to grow?

[00:48:17] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Akoa oh, that's a great question. I think our biggest goal is to expand our distribution and that's something that we've been doing slowly. Like Corey mentioned earlier, we launched online on UrbanOutfitters.com we're available on Amazon. We also have over 10 curly hair salons all over the US that carry our products. But our customers keep asking, like, when are you going to be in a retailer? So, like, that has been the biggest vision and goal for us and something that we're really excited to hopefully get to this year and beyond to continue to make our products more accessible.

[00:48:51] Cory Varona-Corniel: Yeah, I have similar goals, but I would say another big goal for us is to grow our team and to bring more people into our team. We started with running this company, having our full time jobs and then transitioning full time, which Nicole hasn't even been a full year full time. So now it's like, okay, getting organized, bringing new people and just growing the team in a way that we continue the culture of what Okawa is, but having more of a structure so we can be more accessible and we could continue to grow.

[00:49:24] Keia Jones: Thank you so much for your answers to those questions.

[00:49:28] Cory Varona-Corniel: Thank you.

[00:49:29] Nicol Varona Cancelmo: Yeah, thank you so much.

[00:49:33] Ryan Newman: That was Corey Verona Corneille and Nicole Verona Cancelmo, co founders of ecoa. This episode was produced and edited by our executive producer, Adie D. Fiore. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe to Dare to Disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.