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Entrepreneur Series: Growing Up and Doing Business With... Suki Kramer

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Suki Kramer's story inspires. She's a wealth of experience and information, and isn't afraid to share it.

The seeds of Suki's entrepreneurial success were planted decades ago. Teased for her troubled skin, young Suki couldn't find a cure (and a non-toxic one at that), so she took matters into her own hands. Night after night, while juggling multiple jobs, she tested, tinkered, and toiled in her kitchen to find a solution. Given her hard work, savviness, and research, success was imminent.

Today, Suki is better known as the founder and president of suki® skincare -- the woman who formulated high-potency skin products, made with 100% pure botanics and patented TLC technology™, that have been clinically proven to produce results. She is also a role model to many around the world. *Know your beauty*® is the core of her brand's philosophy, and it is a message she uses to empower young women everywhere, from Bay Path University in Massachusetts to Komera in rural Rwanda.

This powerful second installment of "[Growing Up and Doing Business With...](#)" focuses on Suki Kramer.

What kind of kid were you growing up?

I was not a popular child. I was the kid in the corner, shy, with no friends, bullied and teased, who never wanted to go to school. I escaped into dance, and through the stories I made up. I struggled with obvious skin problems and extreme skin sensitivities, which only made things worse and enabled a lack of confidence. I also went through what many girls and some boys go through: trust, boundary and self-esteem issues created through, let's say, inappropriate closeness and physicality with someone in my life who I later learned shouldn't have done the things they did. I felt reluctant to participate fully in life, hid myself in oversized clothes, hated my body and had an eating disorder when I was a teen. It took quite some fighting and therapy to get to where I am today, but, I am certainly, if nothing else, a fighter! ♡

What did you want to be? (profession)

A dancer.

Who were/are the major influences in your life?

My parents, and the people in school who teased me - all the things "good" and "bad" shaped the sometimes defensive, sometimes very strong, and always very sensitive person that I am.

My half-sister, who was my first guardian angel. She came from nowhere and found me when I was 7, quite literally saving my life; sending me books to help me out of the many crazy situations I was in, teaching me about psychology, self-esteem, setting healthy boundaries and helping me with my separation anxiety, helping me find a therapist when I moved away from my home to the east coast at the age of 18 (and in with her) so I could get healthy.

Another one of so many angels in my life, "G," a man with an amazing family I met in high school, who saved me from being self-destructive and helped me realize that to do anything more than being average in life, I had to work a hundred times harder than anyone else. He taught me that I had to focus on my goals with a honed-in depth of clarity and detail, that I could never ever give up no matter how hard or silly or insane my dreams seemed to me or anyone else. He gave me strength when I wanted to slack, mostly from the age of 14 until I left my home town at 18, but he stayed my mentor for many years and is still in my life.

And to whom I owe so much, my first husband John, the sweetest, most wonderful, gentle man in the world, who helped me through the most difficult times I have gone through as an adult and truly loved me as me in my entirety, a thing I think I experienced for the first time through him.

My second husband Paul, who supported me when I had the crazy idea to start suki® skincare, without whom I never would have done it. Even though he didn't want to, he still took the risk and went on a wild ride he had no interest in, giving me the opportunity to go through all of this, learning and growing so much. Gosh, there are so many people I can't even begin to name them all...

Lately, I've been heavily influenced by my dance teacher, Gunnar, who is so unyieldingly positive and so perfect for me. He's helped me become so much more confident, strong, positive and better about not having to be perfect all the time, pushing me in the right ways so that I have released a lot of negativity and fear I had before. It's been such an amazing experience I am so grateful for.

Also, the people who say I've helped them through suki®, who have written me the most touching letters, you can't imagine. Those letters have kept me doing my business. They are such a gift to me, the best reward for all of the struggle and an inspiration to me. They make me feel I'm doing something important with my life, and that my life has meaning. What's more of a gift than that?

My friend Ron, who is a source of constant support and love and teaching and inspiration...I could go on and on...

Tell me about suki® skincare and why you started the brand.

My history, struggling with skin problems and sensitivities throughout my life, inspired me in my twenties to start investing and living a more holistic lifestyle. It was then that I began creating herbal tinctures and salves and learning about traditional medicinal treatments. I had tried everything, from pharmaceuticals, to synthetics that temporarily blocked symptoms but made my sensitive skin inflamed and irritated (what I call the volatile synthetic active - VSA - response), to "gentle naturals" that at best, moisturized with no effect as naturals and pseudo-naturals often do, not being truly scientifically formulated even to this day, though sadly most say they are blending "science and nature." I began educating myself on the true nature of skin problems and combination skin, which is all about what goes on beneath the surface - systemic imbalances like inflammation, which is huge, bacteria and oil imbalances, allergies, etc. And I realized that if you treat only symptoms, which are what the science of topical treatment is all about, you begin working a frustrating cycle that offers no real solutions for people with serious problems or sensitivities, nor any truly transformational skincare for anyone!

I started suki skincare® in my kitchen about 20 years ago but incorporated formally a bit later. I was looking to create a cure. At the time, natural products were very limited and one brand was the king but was only clean, not scientific at all, as I said, as it still is today. So I was looking to create something entirely new in the industry - 100% toxin and synthetic-free, scientifically-advanced, clinically-proven effective formulations, for myself really, knowing if I was looking for this many others likely were, too. Not knowing anything about business, marketing, design or hardcore chemistry, I sought out progressive-minded chemists to mentor me and worked with them for 2 years during my experimentation process. Most traditional chemists, in fact 98% of those I reached out to, flat out said what I was looking to achieve - formulating a pure, results oriented, advanced, high-powered cosmetic where all the actives come from non-synthetic sources - could never be possible, much less as effective as a synthetic.

Well, as they say, necessity is the mother of invention. I was always an entrepreneur at heart, never loved working for others, always independent-minded and not just a little rebellious ... And it always takes a fresh perspective to invent something new. That was definitely the case here. I persevered and became a formulator myself. I also fought my way through the early, rollercoaster, emotional years of wondering what I was doing with this and was I wasting my life, was it a crazy thing to try and do, especially with absolutely no money, etc. But I learned and performed every job myself, an undeniably beneficial experience to have gone through, but certainly not for the impatient, the weak of heart, or those who aren't VERY determined! While working odd jobs and maintaining my freelance

writing gigs, I fought my way through learning how to design, do PR and marketing, bookkeeping, sales, everything I had to (with the help of the local Small Business Association and helpful friends who knew about these things). At the time I spent a great deal of time at a place called the library! Oh, the time I would have saved today on a computer! I had a lot of failures on my way to my own proprietary formula, working with labs in creating new actives. Eventually, I launched a 4-piece line that I took around to stores and sold. Little by little, I had enough money to hire a person (still not paying myself of course!) And here we are today, global and ready to take off in a major way in 2015.

What were the most challenging aspects of going into business?

Honestly, each step along this journey has been brand new and full of challenges, fear, insecurities to meet and master, risks, sacrifices and self-doubt. On the other side of course, there is the reward of mastering fear, experiencing the kind of success I've had, even getting to the point where we've been attacked and lied about! Now THERE'S when you know you're a success! Going into this with nothing and giving it the time it needed to really see if it was viable was incredibly hard.

Staffing is always particularly difficult when you have success and need higher levels of help in a particular industry, and in a particular area where it's not teeming with knowledgeable, experienced staffing. Getting to the point where you can trust the people you empower will actually care about the business in any way like you do, which you can never expect of course, but being able to at the very least trust they will cover their jobs so you do not have to follow along behind...developing more of a "CEO coating," or thick skin has been hard for me, as I am not at all like that -- I'm far too honest! I've been on the receiving end of a lack of understanding I used to have for entrepreneurs and bosses when I was younger. But, I've learned how to let that stuff go more and more, and allow business to be business, and personal to be personal.

As a woman in the business world, it is true that you get underestimated and misunderstood. I mean, there's a reason more women go create their own companies because of the lack of truly infinite growth that can occur for us in traditional business settings. You do have to learn how to not be too gregarious and not too overbearing. That comes with time and experiences and requires experimentation to find the right balance!

I am often questioned for my decisions and second-guessed; I must explain myself on an ongoing basis in a way I see men do not. I've tested this "theory" quite a lot ... But what can you do but continue to be successful? A life well lived and all that...

Who are your mentors? And how have they helped you?

The cosmetic chemists and traditional herbalists I collaborated with to build my brand were my mentors as they believed in my vision and mentored me to become a cosmetic formulator myself. Also other women in this industry, of course, but mostly what inspires

me are just people everywhere, everyday, who either continue to challenge themselves no matter what obstacles come into their lives, or people throughout history who went against the grain and created something out of nothing, bravely standing by themselves against the odds to do something they believed in. My friend's daughter, going through cancer this past year, and her ever present glowing smile in every picture, what an inspiration...inspiration is everywhere, no?

What qualities do you most admire in people?

Honesty, individuality, positivity, guts in the face of their fear, a strong sense of silliness; sense of humor, strength of character, and being able to be openly affectionate.

What skill do you wish you possessed?

More patience, better trust of my intuition, the ability to speak in public and on camera without such fear, and more time -- can I ask for that?

What has been your greatest work achievement?

Doing this at all has been incredible. Remember I had no money and no experience when I started. I think also though, when I started I vowed I would never go against my ideals of what my products would be. I wouldn't skimp or sacrifice on what I believed in for anything. And I would always tell the truth. I stated out loud that I knew I would be tested by greed or some other human emotion at some point, and I would just stick to my guns and know things would all work out if I just stuck to THAT one thing... And things always do work out, because of this! No matter what problems lurk behind the scenes that need correcting (and things can get rocky in a small business sometimes, they can get hard). Sometimes you, as the boss, do not have all the information you need, and that is really challenging. It has cost me accounts in fact...small accounts. But you go on. If you have your integrity, you have EVERYTHING. That has to be my proudest achievement. Even a monster company once tried to discredit my brand in an attempt to make themselves look better, which is so cheap I find, but we end up coming out clean because we always have been, and always will be, who we are and who people know us to be.

How do you find balance in your life?

Well, the honest answer is I don't really. It's a constant struggle for me. I do not have enough time to do the things I need and want to do, so balance is not easily achievable. I always find time for dance, and rarely do I take that out of my life. But otherwise, I've been on a quest for more time for friends, calm time to myself, writing and reading for fun, and the other things I do love to do. You know how it goes though, and I do what I can.

I love writing, driving long drives in the sunshine, crisp fall air, singing in my car, swimming, and cooking. I actually love going to the movies by myself. But my true love is dancing. I started finally finding time for myself again about 6 years ago, about 14 years

after I started my business. Before that, I literally did nothing but work on my business from morning til morning!

I had an interest in learning ballroom dance for some time. It took about a year at least to fully commit my time to it, but, I finally did, and since, I haven't looked back. I'm really lucky and grateful that I get to dance because it is the one time of my day I don't think about anything else - not the stresses of my business or personal life at all and gives me so much, as they say, as much as I put in. I practice about 4-5 times a week for about 2.5 - 3 hours, after the early part of my workday, then I'll go to my trainer to lift weights and do cardio or to yoga, so I'm at least in shape enough to compete at my level. Open in my age group is a very competitive group of high powered women, incredibly strong, some CEO's, business owners, some with nothing to do but dance (lucky)! A tough group of women who also happen to be very good dancers, so it's a challenge on many levels...exactly what I need...and they are all fabulous and interesting and cool!

After dance, I head back home to start my work in the evening, answering the many emails I received in the afternoon while peacefully working in my home office. This year I competed as many as 11 times and in fact as I write this, I'm on my way to compete at the Disney, Florida. I've focused solely on international ballroom style this year but next year I'll begin my open American Smooth style as well, so I m going to need to be in much better shape! I'm trying to do Latin as well, but there really is only so much time, especially to commit to becoming really good. Dance, and my wonderful teacher, have helped me in so many ways as has growing through my fears, which is exactly why I decided to compete at all...

My next goal is to face my deathly fear of public speaking.

Where do you see yourself in 20 years?

Right now, I'm pretty much running around like crazy trying to fit everything in, making sure I don't let anyone down and keep all my deadlines. I jump from task to task, editing, writing, proofing, marketing, sales, design, finance, etc., trying to ensure things get done. I move down the line and try to stay in the loop a lot with my various teams, to make sure we keep up with opportunities we are offered and don't miss out on things. We are still a company in the "small" stages and I do wear a great many hats, but as a result, most days are a bit schizophrenic! But, I'm used to this type of work environment, having been a waitress for 17 years, having 3 jobs when I was in college as an adult, and then going right into creating my company, doing every job along the way. It just keeps evolving - The next steps, I hope, are less job titles for me, continued growth for suki® skincare, chasing that sense of daily centeredness, and perfect dance footwork ...

COMMENT ON:

Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, or Instagram?

I go straight for my notebook, actually, and close my computer as soon as I can on my own time. Guess that makes me officially old! But if it came down to it, Facebook I suppose.

Book or Kindle?

Book

Favorite fictional character?

Khaleesi, right now!

Best decade? Why?

70s. Because music, TV, and fashion.

Kale Chips or Potato Crisps?

Both.

Snow or sea?

SEA!!!

Coffee or tea?

Tea

Mac or PC?

PC!! Although, I have a Mac, sadly.

Where is home?

Chicago, although I live in Northampton, MA.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Stop wasting time feeling bad and just focus on moving forward.

Thank you Suki!

