WOMEN of INFLUENCE
GREENWICH
THREE ENTREPRENEURS following their DREAMS, making BIG THINGS HAPPEN
Screen Queens
HOLLYWOOD takes on GENDER EQUALITY with the help of these GREENWICH WOMEN
125 YEARS OF FAMILY CENTERS
Stories of courage and hope—and the women who started it all
MINDING THEIR OWN BUSINESS

Ambitious, focused and smart. The three women we profile here each took a leap of faith and followed their dream. For one, that meant coming back to the town where she was born, and launching a unique skincare line. For another, that meant pulling up roots and settling in Kenya to help young girls get the educational opportunities they lack. For yet another, that meant a midlife career change—from home furnishings designer to fashion designer. In each case, they are following their passion with a purpose.

BY JAMIE MARSHALL

Marisa Vara Arredondo

BUSINESS: PHACE BIOACTIVE

STRIKING THE PERFECT BALANCE
Spend time with Marisa Vara Arredondo, and it's hard to believe she has ever suffered a moment of insecurity. Smart, vivacious, accomplished, Marisa had what sounds like an idyllic childhood: parents who supported her, two sisters she adored. She was a standout athlete, an honors student. But throughout high school she was plagued by severe cystic acne; as a young adult the skin affliction resurfaced, albeit in a less severe form. "I was always worried about my face," she says. "Once you suffer from acne, you don't really forget those feelings of insecurity."
Because of that experience, she vowed to one day create a skincare line that would help women look their skin and feel good about themselves. Last year, she made good on that promise when she launched her company, PHACCE BIOACTIVE. "When I aspire to something, I generally try to make it happen," Marisa says. "I'm a big believer that anyone can manifest any kind of dream they want or have. When you put your energy and focus on something, it's amazing how fast that happens."

Born and raised in Greenwich, the forty-one-year-old comes by her entrepreneurial chops honestly. Her father is a real estate developer and entrepreneur who founded Westys Self Storage, among other successful ventures. Her older sister is the founder of Yahoo in Europe.

Marisa attended Greenwich Academy for ten years before transferring to Deerfield as a sophomore. She did her undergraduate degree at Stanford, where she majored in science, technology and society. It provided exactly the skill set she needed. "It taught me to think critically, to analyze complex topics, and boil them down to three succinct points," she says. Most important, it reinforced her desire to pursue her dream. "When I graduated from Stanford, I knew I would start a skincare line."

Upon graduating, she began to put the pieces in place. First step: She spent six years as an analyst and assistant portfolio manager at a mutual fund, covering the cosmetic, biotech and drug sectors. Second step: She pursued an MBA from Harvard to learn leadership and operational skills. Third step: She spent another six years in New York, working as a portfolio manager for a hedge fund. Once again, she covered the cosmetic and biotech sectors. She expanded her network to include dermatologists, industry experts, heads of R&D and sales and distributors. "I learned, soup to nuts, how a company operates in this space," she says.

It was a routine meeting with the head of research at Merck Pharmaceuticals that gave shape to her vision. "He talked to me about the importance of pH levels in skin," she recalls. "Especially in the outermost layer called the acid mantle. It acts as an antioxidant, seals in the moisture and inhibits bacteria and inflammation."

As she learned more, she realized all the years she spent scrubbing her face with soap and other products had been hindering—rather than helping—her fight for clear skin. A lightbulb went off. She would create an all-natural skincare line that focused on nurturing the skin's optimal, slightly acidic pH level. The goal?
To help prevent dryness and wrinkles and restore a youthful, radiant glow. As she says, “I give women a solution. I’m not creating world peace, but at least I’m making them happier, and happier people are more productive people.”

In January 2011, with the financial resources and connections in place, Marisa left her full-time job. She moved back to Greenwich, bought a townhouse downtown and got to work. She spent four years developing the current seven-product line ($38-$104), which includes a vitamin C-based illuminating serum, a detoxifying gel cleanser, and a regenerating night cream. The products are packaged in sleek glass bottles; they are non-toxic, fragrance- and paraben-free, hypoallergenic, and dermatologist tested and approved. Each features a unique combination of biotech and botanical ingredients (think willow bark extract, licorice root, grapeseed and pomegranate). “I use these products every day, this is what I live by,” she says. In a nutshell, the brand is a true reflection of the balanced life Marisa seeks. “Simplicity is key,” she says. “It’s important in the way I live, the products I make and the way I convey my message.”

Initially, she launched on her website. From there she established a partnership with several high profile vendors including Saks and Saks.com. “They hadn’t taken on a new, unknown brand to sell in their stores for years,” she says. “Now they have rolled us out across the country.” Next year, she will become the face of PHACE, when the brand launches on QVC. She is in talks with Amazon about becoming part of its new luxury beauty platform. “From an awareness and a business perspective, it’s a huge win,” she says.

From the outset, Marisa has been a very hands on manager. She works with a team of twenty-plus consultants—from chemists in Florida to bottle manufacture designers in Milan, to graphic designers in New York—and she is involved in every part of the process, developing formulas, designing the packaging, overseeing marketing and communications. She is capitalizing on the move from standard brick and mortar stores to the world of online shopping, and has embraced the fast-growing world of bloggers and vloggers (video blogger). “The world of marketing has changed” she says. “The power of celebrity is declining or being diluted by bloggers and other influencers.”

Bottom line: It’s no easy task launching a niche brand into an extremely competitive environment. But she has an edge. “I can relate to my customers,” she says. “For me, it’s truly a labor of love. Having that degree of authenticity is very relatable,” PhaceBioactive.com