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# BUILDING THE BUZZ

ONCE AFRAID OF BEES, TEEN  
INNOVATES TO SAVE THEM



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# The Bee's Knees of Business

17-YEAR-OLD PRODIGY MIKAILA ULMER  
MAKES LEMONADE OUT OF STINGING FEARS

BY ALYSON DUTCH

**H**OW DOES a 4-year-old react to parents who insist she must earn the money to buy the toy she wants?

In the case of now-17-year-old Mikaila Ulmer, it spurred her to become one of America's youngest and most delightful entrepreneurs.

The tough love she experienced forced her to literally make lemonade out of what could have been a sour situation. Today, she and her family are selling about 2 million bottles of Me & the Bees Lemonade annually, with that figure projected to double this year; the product has more than 4,000 distribution points; and the company is listed on the Inc. 5000 list, awarded for its 317 percent year-over-year growth from 2018 to 2020.

## Stinging back

Mikaila buzzed into the beverage industry because she was stung by a bee. Two, in fact.

Her parents, on a mission to create self-assured kids, encouraged her to learn about bees instead of fearing them. Soon after, Mikaila set up a lemonade stand in her native Austin, Texas,

neighborhood, using her great grandmother's flaxseed lemonade recipe but replacing some of the sugar with honey.

By that time, the pint-size businesswoman had gained enough empathy for the insects that she donated proceeds to a local beekeeper to help fund the plight of bees. The insects' precious pollinating citizenry has decreased by 30 percent in Texas alone.

Mikaila had wind under her wings—the equivalent of ardent stage parents behind her who put together the dream. One of her brothers serves on the marketing side as the company's No. 1 salesperson.

The family makes it work while Mikaila attends school full time. She describes her long days as starting with school, followed by dinner, then homework. Often, the business conversation does not begin until 11 p.m.

Sharp, precocious and particularly eloquent, she said, "I don't consider myself gifted. All the kids in school are doing amazing things.

"I'm there to support my friends—but I am living two different lives."

Mikaila Ulmer was 4 when she began her lemonade business.

Thirteen years later, she is CEO of a lemonade company that is on the Inc. 5000 list and created a foundation to help stem the decreasing bee population.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ME & THE BEES





Among the amazing things she has done: met former President Barack Obama three times; spoke on the Assembly Floor of the United Nations; and was chosen to speak about the gender gap at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, alongside musician and Officer of the British Empire Dr. Annie Lennox, the former prime ministers of Australia and New Zealand, and others.

(Near the end of Obama's second term, he said: "I will be back on the job market, so I hope she is hiring.")

Mikaila is pun-happy and expertly media trained. She describes the interdependent culture she and her family have built at the company: "There's always help back at the hive."

### Rock-solid foundation

In the business's fledgling stages, the family used rented production kitchens, churning out 10 cases a week of Mikaila's honey-kissed elixir.

Her father led the operations; Mom drove her around to retailers in the Austin area, where she sampled the product to customers.

Dad Theo Ulmer, who is chief operations officer for Me & the Bees, said the company's operational details were founded on creating optimal efficiency and consistency.

"We needed to find sources that could provide reliable quality and cost-effective ingredients. Once we had a solid formulation and recipe, we identified a co-packer that led to packaging partnerships and bulk purchasing opportunities.

"Being a small company, we enthusiastically negotiated fees for logistics and warehousing. As the business grew, so did our needs for fulfillment, production and customizing labeling for different geographies, laws and larger retailer needs.

"We eventually grew into brand-dedicated facilities, so we had every chance to grow and scale."

### Money swarming

Understandably, consumers were dazzled by the little girl: "Once I told them that I created this, they'd buy it right away."

Her first customer was Eastside Pies Pizza. Within the first year, the local Whole Foods Market (the headquarters of which happen to be in Austin) followed.

In-house publicists at the supergrocer took notice of the young entrepreneur and guided the family to their first outside funding. A \$10,000 influx from the Whole Foods Local Producer Loan Program—a low-interest lend—was created to give local producers a "hand up instead of handout." In a brilliant on-brand marketing move, Whole Foods also guided Mikaila to teach workshops where she talked to kids about bees in schools.

With Mikaila's irresistible story front and center, looking for capital was not something this company had to do. It came to them.

More money came in the form of investment funds from a group of NFL player investors. All of it was poured back into the company to support added distribution, which next landed the brand in Wegman's and into the national supply chain for Whole Foods Market.

Mikaila explained the company's growth pattern.

"National exposure alone didn't make people care. But for those who heard our story, it made them want and demand it of their retailers. Our customers have grown from those who love our history and mission."

A key element of that mission is the company's creation of the Healthy Hive Foundation. Me & the Bees invests a portion of profits from

the sale of lemonade to organizations fighting to save bees with education, research, protection, and to inspire social entrepreneurship in others.

Mikaila says the "Save a Bee" element is "a constant, and it sets us apart as a purpose-based brand."

### Dreams put to action

Resplendent in a sunny yellow sweater behind an iconic lemonade stand, Mikaila was featured in a national TV commercial for Target and named one of *Time* magazine's Top 30 Most Influential Teens.



**"The 'Save a Bee' element is a constant, and it sets us apart as a purpose-based brand."**

—MIKAILA ULMER



Me & the Bees has been a family production ever since the family was renting production kitchens to make 10 cases a week. "There's always help back at the hive," Mikaila says.







At the time of this interview, she was packing her suitcase to fly to Los Angeles to visit the University of Southern California and the Claremont Colleges. She's also entertaining possibilities at Yale, Duke, Emory University and Spelman College, among others.

For now, excitement in her voice is palpable while talking about building robots, taking apart remote cars, 3D printing, dissecting brains, learning about neuroscience and “ooooh, incubating my own flora.” Mikaila even started a sign language club in her school, intensely interested in how to use it to communicate.

She is focused on opportunity, as opposed to the limitations that adults learn while making

mistakes in their lives. She calls it “dreaming like a kid.”

Her book has the same call to action.

She wrote it at 15 in order to share her exciting journey, love of social responsibility and entrepreneurship. “Bee Fearless: Dream Like a Kid” serves as guidance for young readers interested in pursuing their own venture.

Mikaila's inspiration for the book: “I want to instill the bee-lief that young people can achieve their dreams.”

### Measuring milestones

She said the inspirational aspects of being an entrepreneur are crucial to the basics of building a company. She speaks about this for other corporations and to her age peers.

Mikaila considers the evolution of the company in terms of peak experience milestones—as opposed to decisions that might have been made to be a brand, private label or on-premise beverage company.

She recalls the company's first purchase order system as an important growth milestone.

Last year, Mikaila and Jitters Espresso & Spirits founder DeWayne Steagall of Austin, Texas, teamed to make a summertime drink with lemonade and lavender syrup.



“The inventor part of me enjoys the ideation stage of the process—dream-scaping concepts for products and offerings. But to bring these ideas to life, we need the infrastructure, project management, tools, and the managerial skills to help ensure long-term success.”

Another milestone was appearing on “Shark Tank”—Season 6, Week 22 in 2015. Despite the show's typical deals—low in capital and excruciatingly high in equity position, making for high-drama television—Mikaila and her family agreed to Shark Daymon John's offer of \$60,000 and 25 percent of the business.

She was 9.

They instantly took a liking to each other, attending the 2017 NRF Foundation Gala in New York City. Mikaila remains in close mentorship contact with John, with whom she re-connected at the renowned South by Southwest (SXSW) media festival this March.

### Extended efficiencies

Thirteen years into the company, Mikaila said, “We've built out a team who now oversee

manufacturing, procurement and logistics. We have scaled to a point where we can accommodate customers at 2,500 points of distribution nationally.

“We have implemented systems for production planning, logistics, scheduling and fulfillment. Our team is relatively small, but by utilizing collaborative tools such as Microsoft Teams and well-thought-out processes, we can ‘punch well above our weight class,’ as my dad would say. With all this in place, we are buzzing with efficiency.”

Asked what she envisions for herself 25 years from now, she does not hesitate: “at the helm of another invention that does good.”

**Alyson Dutch** has been a leading consumer packaged goods launch specialist for 30 years. She operates Malibu-based Brown + Dutch Public Relations and Consumer Product Events, and is a widely published author.



## MIKAILA ULMER

### Favorite invention:

The internet

**Home:** Austin, Texas

**Nickname:** Miki

### Favorite animated show:

“Demon Slayer”

**Astrological sign:** Libra

**Favorite book:** “Dune,” by Frank Herbert

### Favorite movie:

“Black Panther”

**Hobbies:** Rock climbing, caving, roller blading, learning languages, reading

