

PRAISE FOR *UNDAUNTED*

“Kara is inspiring all generations searching for their own passions to just go make it happen. Take risks. Stop being afraid of failure. And align what you are good at, what the world needs, and what makes you happy. Read this book!”

—Sarah Friar,
CEO at Nextdoor, Member of the Board of Directors of
Walmart and Slack, and Cofounder of Ladies Who Launch

“I’ve watched Kara grow Hint and show the world that it is possible to create something healthy that tastes great with love in each bottle. Kara’s work as a female leader shows women that it is possible to challenge the status quo. *Undaunted* takes us through the journey and helps us understand that even when we think it can’t be done, if you can believe it, you can achieve it!”

—Ronnie Lott,
NFL Hall of Fame Legend from the San Francisco 49ers
and Founder of All Stars Helping Kids

“Kara is a masterful entrepreneur who figures out *how* to make the impossible happen. When others quit, she proceeds and makes it look easy. The lessons in *Undaunted* will undoubtedly make you feel like you need to go build something too.”

—Roland Frasier,
Co-Founder of DigitalMarketer.com
and *Business Lunch* Podcast

“Kara Goldin’s story about building a company in the wellness industry is a terrific chronicle about how well-being is front and center in people’s everyday lives. Kara is making an impact as a businesswoman, a leader, and a health activist. She is *Undaunted*.”

—Nancy Brown

“Kara’s leadership is a shining example for women who are aspiring to be and do more. Whether in business, social impact, or women’s empowerment, Kara is a trailblazer, and *Undaunted* provides a vulnerable, courageous, honest look at what it takes to build something that truly matters.”

—Shiza Shahid,
Cofounder of Our Place and the Malala Fund

“Grit and resourcefulness define the best founders I’ve known, and that’s why I was the first investor in Hint and their biggest cheerleader throughout the company’s amazing story. Read *Undaunted*, and you’ll be inspired by Kara Goldin to discover within yourself the intensity and determination that are the primary requirements for success.”

—Geoff Ralston,
President of Y Combinator

“*Undaunted* is a perfect read for anyone who is motivated by pushing boundaries and who dreams of one day disrupting an industry. Goldin shows us how it’s done.”

—Alison Levine,
Team Captain of the First American Women’s Everest Expedition
and *New York Times* bestselling author of *On the Edge*

“If you are looking for lessons on how to get through tough times, or a pandemic, there is no better person from whom to learn. She inspires.”

—Kerrie D MacPherson,
Board Director, Retired EY Partner,
and Executive Sponsor of EY Entrepreneurial Winning Women

undaunted.

OVERCOMING DOUBTS + DOUBTERS

kara goldin

Founder and CEO, Hint Water

with John Butman and Theo Goldin



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To all who have helped me throughout my journey,

My family. My friends. My teachers and mentors.

My children, Emma, Kaitlin, Keenan, and Justin. Sadie and Buster too.

Each teach and inspire me in their own way.

And to the women on whose shoulders we stand, who give me hope.

And finally, to my Theo, who always believed in me. From Day 1.

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IF I CAN DO IT . . .

When you're the youngest of five kids, you can easily get lost in the family shuffle, which I did a lot. But you can also learn to fend for yourself, which I did eventually. And, ultimately, you can achieve more than anyone might have expected of you.

I never thought I would become a leader, run a company, or do anything particularly great for that matter. But when an executive at one of the world's largest beverage companies told me no one would want my unsweetened flavored water, something clicked. I decided to prove him wrong.

And I did.

This is the story of how I overcame a seemingly endless series of *no* and *you can't* and *it's impossible* to create a unique product, build a thriving company, compete with some of the biggest beverage companies on the planet, and live a life filled with rich experience and constant learning. Today, my product, Hint Water, is the number one flavored water in the United States, and Hint is an iconic brand loved by millions of customers.

In this book, I share the lessons I've learned about how to get things done instead of letting real or imagined obstacles stop me in my tracks. The story starts when I was a little kid, but don't worry, this book isn't an autobiography. It's part business, part life lessons, and it's all about the most important things you need to know to be a successful entrepreneur.

I call myself an *accidental entrepreneur* because I came to the world of start-ups on a different path than many other entrepreneurs. Founding a company was never my goal. I didn't go to business school. I was in my midthirties when I founded Hint. I had held a number of media and tech jobs, lived in New York and San Francisco, got married, and had kids.

Then, like many other people in the early 2000s, I discovered that kicking the diet soda habit and drinking more water helped me lose weight and get healthier. But I learned I could only drink so much plain water before I got bored, so I threw some slices of fruit into the pitcher to make it tastier.

That was the start, but I wasn't the first person to put fruit in water or try turning unsweetened flavored water into a product. I was, however, the first to create a successful product, while others made compromises that led them astray.

I let my passion and commitment to making a great product be my guide, and I stayed focused on what mattered most about the product—taste.

I started Hint in 2005 with my husband, Theo. At the time, enough consumers were making the move away from sugary and diet-sweetened drinks to bottled water that the large beverage companies, as well as a few entrepreneurial brands, started to include the word *water* in the name of their newest sweetened drinks. Brands like vitaminwater attempted to give consumers the feeling they were making a healthy choice, when actually they were getting more of the same.

Hint, by contrast, made water taste great without turning it into a sweet soft drink. No sugar. No diet sweeteners. No preservatives.

At first, I wasn't confident I could get the message across in this confusing, highly competitive marketplace, but I wanted to show people that drinks could taste great without having to taste sweet.

I didn't anticipate how technically difficult it would be to turn what I made in a kitchen into a product that went on the shelf in a store. Everyone in the business told us we would have to use preservatives or other chemicals to ensure the product had a reasonable shelf life. I refused to make that compromise. I asked Theo to research the issue and, after weeks of phone calls and visits to other bottlers, he told me, "There's no way to get the taste you want and still have enough shelf life to distribute this product around the country."

Theo assumed this was the end of our young project. I wasn't willing to quit so easily.

"Well, what *can* we do?" I asked.

"We can have a product with a very short shelf life that we deliver locally out of our Jeep in a limited area in San Francisco."

"Perfect, that's what we'll do. We'll find out what people think of the product and if it's worth trying to solve this problem."

We went ahead with confidence, but on the inside I was filled with doubts about whether we could pull this off. We started to distribute the product to local stores, achieving some positive responses from consumers and retailers. It gave me enough encouragement to begin networking with industry people to see if I could find someone who could advise us about the shelf-life issue.

When I'm facing problems I can't solve on my own, this approach—reaching out and asking questions, learning as much as I can, digging into the problem rather than running away from it—proved invaluable for getting Hint to where it is today.

Through one of those weird six-degrees connections, I was put in touch with a senior executive at Coca-Cola. Somehow, in the back of my mind, I figured this top leader of the most famous beverage maker in the world could solve our problem, just like that.

I called the exec at his office in Atlanta. He had no obligation to take my call, yet he was cordial and engaging. I told him about our

unsweetened, fruit-infused water. About why I had started the company. How we had gotten good distribution in local natural foods markets like Whole Foods. But that we were up against an issue we couldn't solve: shelf life.

He launched into a long discourse on the technical issues involved—bottling and preservation, additives, transport, and warehousing—and he told me about some of the many past efforts related to the shelf-life issue that had failed. He seemed to know everything and everybody. He used technical jargon and business lingo that went way over my head. The longer he went on, the more I thought it was over. That my company could never succeed as anything but a nice little side business.

When the exec finished with his discourse, I felt defeated and more discouraged than ever. *I have no idea what I'm doing. I know nothing about this industry. This is all way beyond me. Why did I ever get involved in the first place?*

I was ready to throw in the towel. I even asked him: “Why don't you just take over my company? I don't care if you pay me anything. I just want to get this product category out there, and you seem to have the resources to take on the challenge.”

“Listen, sweetie,” he chuckled. “I've been in this business a long time. There's one thing I know. Americans want sweet drinks. Sure, you might sell your fruit drink in places like San Francisco, but outside of your friends in Marin County, no one really wants unsweetened drinks.”

All I heard was “sweetie.”

Did he really call me sweetie!?

It hit me then that people like him were so deeply invested in sugary and diet-sweetened drinks that they would never do what I was trying to do. Sweet was all they knew, and sweet drinks were all they wanted to sell. That was our big and very real advantage over them—we had the commitment, the understanding, and the passion for a new approach. If only we could solve the technical and business problems.

I realized the Coca-Cola executive did not have the answers I was looking for. I thanked him, genuinely, because he had given me valuable perspective and insight into not only what I *didn't* want to be, but also what we were up against.

Over the next two years, we built an early base of passionate fans of our product. As we expanded distribution, we incrementally improved the product's shelf life with a variety of expensive and proprietary methods. Then we had a breakthrough. We came up with our own solution in a way no one could have predicted, without help from any industry insiders. That enabled Hint to grow, widen distribution, win over more and more consumers, and confound industry heavyweights.

Today, Hint is a \$150+ million company, our product is distributed in all fifty states, and we are the kind of brand known for products that make the healthy choice the most amazing choice.

Now I spend a good deal of time telling the Hint story at live events, in the media, on my own website, and in my podcast, *Unstoppable with Kara Goldin*. I am constantly amazed at how curious people are about how I started and built the company. Many want to create their own enterprises or further their careers within their companies. Everybody wants to find a way to live according to their values, both in their work lives and their personal lives.

In this book, I tell the Hint story. Not for its own sake, but as a way to offer insight and practical guidance on these issues. If I had to boil down the message to a single word, it would be the book's title: *Undaunted*.

That is the quality that, above all, is necessary to achieve success in creating an endeavor you can proudly call your own.

We all have doubts about our capabilities. I certainly did. My dad let his doubts derail his entrepreneurial ambitions. I refused to.

We all run into doubters who are too willing to tell us why we will never achieve what we envision. The sugar-soda exec dismissed me. Instead of giving up, I chose to take inspiration from that conversation.

We can't change the way of the world. What we *can* do is look our doubts and doubters in the eye and refuse to be stopped by them. It's not about high IQ, elite credentials, super skills, or any of those other traits we often convince ourselves we must have but are afraid we don't.

I wrote this book not because I want to hold myself up as the ideal model, but because everybody needs a little encouragement and advice to help them push away the doubts and doubters and achieve everything they believe they can.

If my story proves anything, it's that if I can do it, you can, too.

I submitted the manuscript for this book to Harper Leadership right before a novel coronavirus turned the world upside down. New York, second home to my company and family, quickly emerged as the epicenter of the pandemic. I considered making changes to incorporate this once-in-a-century event into Undaunted, but decided to let it remain as is.

No one at Hint knew this pandemic was coming, but we've been fortunate that the things we did to build a strong, adaptable business, along with selling through multiple channels of trade, are also allowing us to adapt quickly and successfully to consumers' needs. I hope that some of the stories I've shared in Undaunted will help its readers find the courage and strength to chart their own course forward and upward as we emerge from these difficult times.

undaunted.

ONE

open a lot of doors.

I grew up in Scottsdale, Arizona, right next to Phoenix, in view of Camelback Mountain. My four siblings were always busy with school and sports and part-time jobs. My dad traveled a lot for business and, when he wasn't working, he was coaching baseball or football. When I was in kindergarten, my mom took a job working retail at a local department store and pursued arts and crafts projects on the side. So I was kind of on my own. Not neglected or ignored, just independent.

If I had a dominant trait as a kid, it was persistence. You have to be persistent when you're the youngest of five. If I wanted something, I had to figure out how to get it. Sometimes I had to argue, pester, or fight for it. Like those bright green pants with colored Life Savers printed on them I saw in a store window. My dad kept saying I didn't need them, and I kept pestering him to buy them for me until he finally came around.

“Kara,” Dad would say, “you always think that ‘no’ means ‘maybe’ and ‘maybe’ means ‘yes!’”

I drove him crazy sometimes, but he got a kick out of my unwillingness to give up. Mark Twain, who was also known as a feisty kid, said something similar about his mother: “My mother had a good deal of trouble with me, but I think she enjoyed it.”

I did not give up easily on my interests, even when things got difficult. My best events in gymnastics were the vault and the uneven parallel bars. I wasn’t great at them, but I kept at it. I broke every toe in both feet, some of them more than once, but that never stopped me. My friends and family got used to seeing me on crutches, and my mom and I spent a fair amount of time in the emergency room together.

“Maybe you could be a little more careful, Kara?” she would ask. But she never told me to stop.

I was curious and asked a lot of questions. I liked to hang out with my friends, and I always wanted to learn their stories. I would rain questions on them and their parents. *Where did you guys move from? What brought you to Scottsdale? What do you do?* I would get so engrossed that Mom would have to call and remind me to come home for dinner.

Throughout my life, especially when I haven’t been certain about my next step, I have asked questions.

I was particularly curious about my dad. He worked for the Armour Food Company, which was later acquired by ConAgra, the big food conglomerate. He had dreamed of being an entrepreneur himself, but ended up taking the corporate job to support the family. I remember going with my mom to pick him up at the Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport after he flew in from a business trip. There was only one terminal back then and no security, so I could run right up to the gate to meet him as he came off the plane. On the drive home, he’d vent his frustrations about working for a big company and not being recognized for his contributions.

It seemed to me that Dad had a legitimate complaint. He had invented a whole new line of frozen meals that was eventually marketed as the Healthy Choice brand, which became a big seller for

open a lot of doors.

ConAgra and is still popular today. It all started when Mom went to work and Dad had to get dinner for us kids. He experimented with frozen TV dinners, but he thought they were awful—tasteless and unhealthy—and figured other people must feel the same way.

Armour let him engage Julia Child, who was famous for her pioneering cooking show on TV, *The French Chef*, and he worked with her to develop the new line of frozen meals. The Healthy Choice line he created made millions for the company, but my dad didn't benefit from it financially himself.

In the early 1980s, after the Armour acquisition, ConAgra decreed that all managers at a certain level had to have an MBA degree. Dad only had his bachelor's so, after a lifetime of service to the company, they told him it was time to take early retirement. His frustration, understandably, turned to resentment. Ultimately, the company offered him another job, but he would have to move to Omaha, Nebraska. He decided to take it. The plan was to work for four or five years and save up as much money as he could for retirement.

I wondered why he didn't go out on his own since he had been so successful with Healthy Choice and had a million ideas for other new products. I asked him why, and I'll never forget his response.

“Oh, Kara, it would be too hard.”

I'm pretty sure my dad could have been successful if he had just gone for it. I could feel his frustration, but I couldn't figure out why he held himself back.

My mom, too, was frustrated. She had earned a degree in art from the University of Minnesota in the 1940s, a time when only a tiny minority of women went to college. She loved sewing and was a lover of arts and crafts, but apart from her own projects, she never pursued a career or followed her true passion.

My parents weren't unhappy, and we were comfortable as a family. But they both had personal dreams and had chosen not to fulfill them.

I had other models to look to, though. My oldest brother, Kevin, knew he wanted to be a lawyer. He needed money for law school tuition and didn't want to take on any debt, so he started a house

painting business and got work all over Scottsdale. When he wasn't painting, he was running a second business reconditioning and reselling old Volkswagens. His drive and ultimate success made a big impression on me.

My dad had been daunted by what he thought he couldn't do. Kevin had overcome obstacles to achieve what he could.

As for me, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do for a career. Quite the opposite. I wanted to try a lot of different things and I ended up having a lot of different part-time jobs during high school. If one didn't work out, I'd try another. Most of my friends relied on babysitting to earn extra spending money, but I was looking for something different.

I landed my first job at age fourteen. It was totally opportunistic. My mom loved to go to a craft store in Old Town Scottsdale and would usually drag me along. She would spend hours studying yarn or fabric or patterns, so I'd wander out of the shop to the toy store next door. One day, there was a Help Wanted sign in the window. I had gotten to know the owner a bit, so I popped in and asked her for the job.

When I got home that day and told my dad that Nancy, the owner, had hired me, he couldn't believe it.

"She hired *you*?"

"Yes, she did."

"You don't know anything about running a shop!"

Nancy initially hired me to help out with the paperwork, but I ended up spending most of my time working the cash register. That was fine by me, because it meant I could talk with the customers. I got to know our inventory really well and, since I had played with most of the toys and read a lot of the books, I could advise parents on what to buy their children. I asked a steady stream of questions. *What kind of toys does your daughter like? What kind of books does your son read? How much do you want to spend?*

Nancy realized I understood what customers were looking for and had a good eye for toys, so she took me along on some of her buying trips to the big toy fairs.

open a lot of doors.

That completely blew Dad's mind.

"That is super nuts! Now you're helping her buy the toys?"

"Yup."

From my first retail job experience, I learned how important it is to really understand what customers want.

In my sophomore year of high school, I was a little more deliberate about my choice of jobs. I had gotten seriously into beauty and was quite proud of my long red hair, so I decided it would be interesting to work at a hair salon. I wanted to make some money, but mostly I was eager to learn the fine points of hair styling and makeup. I did a year as a receptionist at a local salon called Butter. Not only did I pick up a lot of beauty knowledge, but I got to talk with a lot more customers and to learn about their jobs, their families, what they enjoyed, and the challenges they faced. The job I liked best was working as a waitress at a local Mexican restaurant called Tee Pee, just a couple blocks from my high school. I knew nothing about waitressing and I only got the job because I agreed to take the Sunday morning shift, which nobody else wanted. The place was a local institution, and the job brought me into contact with a lot of interesting people who came to Phoenix from all over the world. The restaurant is still there, all these years later, and some of the same people I knew are still there, too. I made a lot of connections at the restaurant, many of them businesspeople.

As a junior in high school, I heard that Arizona representative John McCain (later Senator McCain) sometimes hired high school students to work in his Tempe office, mainly answering phones and corresponding with voters who needed his help. After a quick screening interview, I found myself sitting across from John McCain. His first question: "Why do you want to work here?" I took a deep breath and told him the truth, that that my parents were both Republicans and that I wanted to figure out whether I was a Republican or not. He chuckled, then hired me. While I was one of many working in the office over the next six years, he never seemed to forget who I was or what my authentic answer had been. Occasionally, he would ask,

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6

“Have you decided yet?” Once, I accidentally walked into a meeting where he happened to be sharing my response to his interview question. When I turned bright red with embarrassment, he quickly said, “Kara, never be afraid to tell the truth.” When it was time for me to move on from that job, Senator McCain again asked, “So, have you decided?” I hesitated for a moment and then told him the truth. “No, not yet.” I’ll never forget his response: “I’ve always appreciated your honesty and I want you to know something else. It’s okay to agree to disagree. Most of the people in both parties are deep down good people.” This has stuck with me throughout my life. John McCain was a good person who believed that we make progress by advocating what we believe in and working toward a common goal. I use this philosophy to lead my company and my life every day.

“ I loved figuring out people, what would make them happy and what they would value and that I enjoyed their appreciation of what I had done for them. ”

The most important takeaway from those early jobs was not what I learned about toy stores, beauty salons, restaurants, or government.

It was what I learned about myself: that I loved figuring out people, what would make them happy and what they would value and that I enjoyed their appreciation of what I had done for them. That is what drove me to start Hint three decades later, and it’s what still drives me today.