

Interview with Accidental Pren-her Laura Varn and Julie McWherter

S: Hi! My name is Susan Reid. I'm your host, and today we're talking with business partners Laura Varn and Julie McWherter of prettySMART! (Copyright ©2008 prettySMART! LLC). Laura and Julie have a unique business partnership. You are not going to believe this, but they are sisters! Sisters working together, and they divided up their wonderful business in this way, Laura is the CEO and President, and Julie is the Creative Director of prettySMART!. Together, they have this totally cool and much needed product called Azula. In this podcast, we're going to find out about Azula and hear about all the amazing ways that it can be used. We're going to find out what it is like working together as sisters. And most impressively, we're going to hear how these moms, who are not only business owners but also are a full-time mom and a full-time working woman, make this all happen. Welcome Laura and Julie!

LV: Hello!

JM: Hi!

S: Laura and Julie, it's fabulous to have you here. The first thing we all want to know is- how did you become Accidental Pren-hers?

LV: Thank you. We had a hunch for an idea, as we were always ruining our bathing suits from sitting at the edge of the pool, and getting up and down chasing after our young children. We thought there has got to be something out there, but we couldn't find anything. Then we thought this is a simple enough idea, let's invent something. Our parents instilled in us a sense of going after what we want and not letting anything get in our way. So we took off with that.

S: I love that. Julie, how did you decide on the name prettySMART!?

JM: Well growing up, one of us was always tagged the "pretty" one, and one was always the "smart" one. You know, the way that friends and parents and relatives tag you with these characteristics. And so we thought we would take these two adjectives that had framed our entire life and turn them tongue and cheek into our business name. Thinking that people would think our idea was "prettySMART!!" and tie it in that way as well.

S: I love that! It makes it personal, it's whimsical, and a fun thing-

"prettySMART!"! So it begs the question, which one of you is the pretty one, and which one of you is the smart one?

JM: We like to think that we are both pretty and smart, now as we have matured and grown into women with families. We embrace both of those adjectives now!

S: And that is a "prettySMART!" answer, let me tell you! So what is it like being in business together as sisters? What is working, and what's challenging?

JM: It has been so much fun to work together as sisters, and has brought us a lot closer. Having grown up together, we know each other's strengths and weaknesses, and that has really benefited us quite well. Laura is much better at being the CEO, the running of the business, and the PR type things. While I am much more organized and do a lot more of the behind the scenes type things. For us, having our business and working around our schedules has worked out really well. We tend to have our business meetings at around 7:30 in the morning as Laura is driving into work for her full time job and corporate world. And I am just sending my kids off to school on the bus and they have gotten out of the house. That is when we have our morning business meetings, which is kind of funny!

S: Are you both in the same parts of the country? Where are you?

JM: We're both on the East Coast. Laura is in South Carolina where our business is head-quartered, and I'm in North Carolina. So there is about 3 hours difference between us. That has been one of the challenges to running this business is having that distance between us. Especially when we have large orders come in or something big happening with the company and it takes more than just one person to put it all together.

S: Now I love the name Azula, and I love the product. So tell everyone what it is, what does it do, and what are it's many uses? Laura, let's hear from you.

LV: Sure, we originally designed the Azula to be a fashionably designed mat that women place at the edge of the swimming pool to sit on to keep their bathing suits from snagging and getting picked and pulled. So our customers are using it for that, and people are now telling us that they have begun using the Azula for a wider variety of things. Anything from picnics, boating, putting it on the bleachers at sporting events, using it at the beach so sand doesn't stick to them, out door festivals, at the ice skating rink. Some moms tell us they use them as a changing mat to

change a baby's diaper, or put them in a car seat. So they work anytime you don't want your bottom to be hot, wet, cold or dirty. They are fabulous. And there is nothing else like it in the market place that we have been able to find.

S: I know that it's not only me, but every woman listening to this is thinking that she knows what that is like. You haul yourself out of the pool, and scratch, right across that cement. And the bottom of the bathing suit is ruined!

LV: And it is so hard to find a bathing suit that you like, fits you well, and is affordable, and then to have it ruined is so annoying! And sitting on towels, well they get wet and bulky. So this is lightweight, water resistant, you roll it up with the attached cord, and you're on your way.

S: Lots of different uses, I love that! So Laura, what are the specific audiences that you are going after with this product?

LV: Well certainly it is a female-focused product. And we are thrilled that we have been in business for only one year and we are already in 20 states and a lot of that is through the trade shows. It has been phenomenal. We see ourselves moving towards custom audiences such as swim teams, resorts, and also reaching out to the sorority and collegiate logos. Because of the simple design, we are able to put custom logos on the Azula fairly easily. We think these are a really great unique product for under \$20. We think we've hit that sweet spot with pricing as well as custom logos. A lot of stores get them monogrammed as well. So there are a lot of different audiences of women, and the products have a real practicality to them as well.

S: Very practical. Now you mentioned trade shows. What is the most valuable thing about going to trade shows?

JM: Well the sales are very key in going to trade shows, but the most valuable thing that we have found is networking with other vendors. You have such a support group with other small business owners, women owners, women entrepreneurs, it is just fabulous! They have such a tremendous wealth of knowledge, and we have been able to benefit from that. We have been able to give advice and gain advice from different people. And though we have only done a couple of trade shows, we still know more than people who have never gone at all. So we have been able to step up and help each other that way. The support system is unbelievable. We have actually car pooled with another small business entrepreneur to a trade show to help save on costs. So it's been a lot of fun doing that as

well. You just have a community of women, other small business owners, sharing their stories, sharing their successes, and those are the women we turn to when we have a big order, or when we have some down-turn. Running a small business is like riding a roller coaster, and those other small business owners have been the people we go to because they know how much hard work goes into those things. And they have been there to celebrate the successes with us, too, which has been phenomenal.

S: You know, women supporting women is what this podcast is all about. I love hearing that *esprit de corps* (group spirit) that you are talking about here, Julie. It is such a neat experience to have, isn't it?

JM: It is, it is just wonderful.

S: So what is the future of Azula, I mean it has just taken off like gang-busters! So what are the exciting things on the horizon?

LV: It has taken off! We are so pumped up about this year. We have launched our new patterns, which we were really inspired by our customers asking for at trade shows. In fact, someone had said to us that we need to invent one that says "Time Out" on it, so the kids who need to will have a spot to behave wherever they are! So we've invented that, and it is one of our best sellers now. And we've also been fortunate enough to land a spot in the summer issue of a national catalogue. So we are thrilled to make our first foray into the national spotlight later this year. And we are also looking at ways to expand our current product line. Our mission is to create products for women that solve problems in a fun, simple and creative way. We have other great ideas for products coming soon.

S: You know, for those of us who have not had the opportunity to see these things, describe to our listeners about the Azula mat?

LV: They are about 17" in diameter, and have very bright colors on them with different patterns. They are made out of neoprene, the same materials as wetsuits. One side grips whether it is on bleachers or the edge of the pool. And it has a small cord at the end of it so you can roll it up very easily, wrap it up with the cord, and put in your beach bag. It has a little cushion for comfort. And we think they are just the right size, as well as portable and lightweight for just about any occasion you need them!

S: And they are fun!

LV: They are fun, they fit for different personalities. We have some with words on them that say "happy", or "inspire" or "relax". We have some

with beach balls, or star fish, the Palmetto Moon that is pink and gold, and some with polka dots. We think that they are whimsical and fun and they are useful! And isn't that what all women want these days? Something that is affordable, practical, and is indicative of your personality.

S: And multi-use! I love that.

JM: Yes, the uses are really endless. Some people have told us they are buying them for their small pets! They put them in the cars for the hot leather seats, because they don't get hot and you won't burn your legs. So the uses are really endless. We have been really blown away by where our customers are taking our products.

S: Well, ladies we're at the end of our podcast, and here are with the last five questions that we ask everyone. So let's go down this, start with Laura then Julie, and you each can do every other one. So, Laura, what one word describes your life today?

LV: Positive, things are very positive and looking up for us.

S: And Julie, what quality or characteristic is most important to you?

JM: I would have to go with 2- passion and endurance. I think that is what both of us need to have to keep going on with this.

S: Laura, what is the least appealing thing that you do as a small business owner?

LV: I would say the juggle of going to the trade shows with having young children at home. It is such a hassle to prepare for who is going to watch the kids, and keep the family running. But at the same time, it is just so worth it to do the trade shows.

S: Julie, who, or what, inspires your success?

JM: I would say that for both of us, it is each other. Having my older sister in business with me, the way we brainstorm ideas, we forge ahead, and we both give 100% towards this business. I think that is very inspiring.

S: And Laura, what's the most precious thing you've learned along the journey from Accidental-Pren-her to entrepreneurial woman?

LV: Far and away, it is the powerful network of our family and friends. I mean

their support has been so instrumental and uplifting to us. Any success we achieve is a direct reflection of their support. It is just a wave of incredible female support.

S: Laura and Julie, thank you so much. It was just a delight to have you on the Accidental Preh-her show. And I know that you have a fabulous special discount for our listeners of the show. So tell us how to get a hold of you, tell us about the discount, and pitch it to us!

JW: Well, you can go online to our website, which is www.myazula.com. And you can see all of the different patterns and designs that we have there. For the month of May, anyone who orders and mentions the Accidental Pren-her podcast, we will offer a 25% discount off of the sale of the Azula. To receive this discount, you have to email us the order. You can email us at info@itsprettysmart.com.

S: That's a "prettySMART!" discount, Julie!

JW: Thank you!

S: Ok, so it's www.myazula.com. And to get the 25% discount, you will need to email them directly at info@itsprettysmart.com. Laura and Julie, thank you for being on the show!

LV: Thank you so much Susan, we really appreciate it!

JW: Thank you!