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# COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 5

**48 RADICAL  
ENTREPRENEURS**  
FROM ALL OVER THE GLOBE

**WISE  
BRAVE +  
UNDISCOVERED**

**COFFEE BOY TO  
MILLIONAIRE**

HOW TO  
CREATE A  
DISRUPTIVE  
START-UP

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ZUCKERBERG  
JOBS + DORSEY  
HAVE IN COMMON?**

YOKO ONO  
COLLETTE DINNIGAN  
GRACIE OTTO  
MOVEMBER  
TROPFEST

*Jessica  
Mauboy*  
**THE WORLD  
IS WATCHING**

SHE'S PERFORMED FOR  
**OPRAH, ELLEN + OBAMA**  
+ TOURED WITH **BEYONCÉ**  
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FASHION / DESIGN / FILM / FOOD / TECH / ART / SOCIAL CHANGE / TRAVEL

# Little lesson big impact

WHILE AIMEE MARKS *wanted to redesign tampon packages so they looked HALF-DECENT when they dropped out of a handbag, she ended up REDESIGNING tampons altogether. Now she's taking her high-school BUSINESS IDEA to the rest of the world.*

WORDS: EDWINA STORIE

**I**t's a horrifying thought: the average woman uses 12,000 tampons in her lifetime and they're typically made from plastics that take seven years to break down; wood pulp, which goes through synthetic processing; or cotton, which is the most heavily sprayed crop on the planet and literally strips the earth back to lifelessness. It's this thought that made TOM Organic founder Aimee Marks squirm. And it's that squirm that turned the then high-school student into an entrepreneur while she worked on a research project for school.

TOM — which is an acronym for Time of Month (sorry, guys) — was the first organic female hygiene brand to be stocked in a major supermarket anywhere in the world, and Aimee was just 25 years old at the time.

Today, TOM produces more than 5 million tampons every year, with sales expected to grow by 50 per cent this financial year alone.

And while she's impacting women on a very personal level (Aimee receives heartfelt emails every day from women who have spent their lives enduring horrific reactions to the plastics and chemicals in tampons, thanking her for giving them freedom again), she didn't set out to conquer the challenges of people's environmental and personal wellbeing.

She simply wanted to improve the packages of tampons, so they wouldn't be jiggling around the bottom of her handbag or roll across the office floor in the middle of a job interview (yes, it has happened). But Aimee ended up on quite a different journey.

When launching her product, Aimee was up against giant conglomerates with a huge chunk of the market share and no doubt with a whopping marketing spend.

But after only three years in business, TOM tampons made their way onto supermarket shelves right beside those multinationals' products. And with an entrepreneur's mind and an environmentalist's heart, this businesswoman is now preparing to expand the range and take it global.

And it all started with that school project and a small, yet influential realisation. Aimee was copying out the standard tampon ingredients on mock-ups of her tampon packages for the design project when she was shocked by the list.

"Very quickly it became a more meaningful, life-changing journey when I realised what was inside those

*{movers}*

boxes was not going to be inside my box of tampons," she says.

Aimee went on a research rampage and discovered 23 years' worth of findings by a New York academic, which suggest that chemicals and plastics in tampons are directly linked to Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS).

"I was up in my bedroom at 11.30pm one night reading this report thinking, 'How did I not know this?' I remember feeling so frustrated as a woman having already used thousands of these products."

She called the professor to check if this meant her organic tampons could genuinely have impact on women's lives. He said a product like TOM would do justice to his research and help prevent young girls from suffering TSS.

That was the light-bulb moment. Aimee suddenly felt a responsibility to share this information with others and realised business was not necessarily about the product but the impact you could have on the world and people's lives.

"Those experiences are pretty high-impact and definitely contribute to [encouraging us to continue] doing what we're doing," she says of the daily dose of "you've changed my life" emails from her customers.

From that insight, Aimee's vision grew from creating just a tampon company to an impetus for women to enjoy a more organic way of living.

While the marketing of many brands is disempowering — "you need this to fix that" — Aimee says her business is simply about encouragement and the happiness of natural living.

Right now, the TOM blog is filled with delicious recipes (for treats like maple syrup and cinnamon omelettes and organic chocolate-hazelnut mousse, no less), which sit alongside articles on natural PMS remedies, plus interviews such as the one with the NYC doctor who swapped his stethoscope for secateurs to become an organic florist.

Aimee says TOM's message is about empowering women with positivity instead of drowning them in negativity, showing them they're not forced to buy products that harm them, and that living an organic life can be easy, fulfilling and beautiful.

It has created a word-of-mouth following, with women becoming advocates of TOM as they move into a less chemically constrained lifestyle.

Aimee has always had an entrepreneurial mind. When she was just eight years old, she says, she was making bracelets to sell, and a decade later was busy conjuring up TOM.

She took up a degree in business and focused on entrepreneurship, developing her ideas while she studied. She surrounded herself with incredible female mentors such as Boost Juice founder Janine Allis who told her, "As soon as your gut is telling you something isn't right, you must act on it, because it won't go away."

*THE FIRST STEP is to write it down and make it FEEL REAL, because no one will do that for you. Make it feel TANGIBLE, throw yourself HEADFIRST into it and don't be afraid to look back, because one thing really does lead to another.*



TOP: TOM HQ. LEFT: AIMEE AT THE OFFICE. PHOTOGRAPHY: AMBER MALONEY.

"I remember a conversation with my dad early on, when I was focusing so much time and money on TOM. He sat me down and said, 'It's okay — you're still employable if it doesn't work out,'" Aimee laughs.

"And I think that scared me because I was so headstrong. But because I had that light-bulb moment and fire in my stomach from talking to the researcher, I just knew I had to make this product accessible."

Despite her father encouraging the importance of a backup plan — and her refusal not to have one — Aimee grew up in a savvy family, with parents who built a small company together.

"I saw from a young age that there was no recipe for running a business

and that a lot of it came from a set of values and a deep belief that if you feel passionate about something, you can make anything work," she says.

Aimee says TOM's success has all been motivated by three integral elements: a belief in the cause behind your idea ("You have to get out of bed for something"); a close network of people who both support and challenge you ("I really owe everything to the people I've surrounded myself with. Surround yourself with 'yes' people who support you, but also 'no' people who will challenge you"); and being resourceful without a lot of resources on-hand ("I think what that does is constantly challenge the way you think. If we want to do marketing, we sit down and say, 'Ok, we have no budget, what can we create, who can we talk to?'").

To women with a business idea stored away in the back of their minds, Aimee says, "The first step is to write it down and make it feel real, because no one will do that for you. Make it feel tangible, throw yourself headfirst into it and don't be afraid to look back, because one thing really does lead to another."

And that's what those little yet life-changing realisations come down to; a new lesson that shifts your perspective and gives you the courage to make a change in your life, whether that be sketching out the plans for a global business, or choosing organic tampons. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: TITIAN LINLEY