



Nurturing Balance

Meet Louisiana's "Young Entrepreneur of the Year."

BY KATHY FINN

NOT ALL BUSINESS START-UPS SUPPORT THE ADAGE THAT necessity is the mother of invention, but there's something satisfying about coming across an entrepreneur who fits the rule to a tee. Benardett Jno-Finn nails it.

Her fledgling business, called Sénica LLC, offers a line of body care products that she says are dedicated to "holistic beauty." Her bath, body, hair and home products contain ingredients with "natural therapeutic and restorative properties that create and nurture balance," she says.

During the four years since she began making the products, Jno-Finn has found a welcoming market that has kept her scrambling both to expand the line and to keep up with demand.

Her efforts won her the 2011 Small Business Administration Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award, presented a few months ago by the state of Louisiana. The award recognizes a person under the age of 30 who demonstrates the entrepreneurial potential to achieve long-term business success.

But for the founder of this company, the best reward so far was finding a product that solved a problem for her.

Here is the story:

Jno-Finn was born on the island of Domenica, an independent commonwealth that lies in the Eastern Caribbean archipelago, between Martinique and Guadeloupe. The island is rich in unspoiled beauty highlighted by tropical forests, lakes, streams and waterfalls. The people there speak English with a French lilt and hints of the native Créole patois.

When Jno-Finn was 5 years old, her family emigrated northward to St. Croix, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands. She lived there until she journeyed off to the mainland United States to attend college. And thus began her problem.

Jno-Finn had chosen Syracuse University, a school in

upstate New York that lies smack in the middle of one of the coldest and snowiest regions of the country. (Syracuse received more than 14 feet of snow last winter.)

Now, it's not hard to imagine the potential adverse effects on one's skin of relocating suddenly from →

Look and feel good

Sénica (SAY-NEEKA) is a word derived from Benardett Jno-Finn's native country, the Commonwealth of Dominica in the Eastern Caribbean Sea. The prefix "Sé" is Dominican Créole for "it is" or "to be," and the suffix "nica" derives from the island's name, Dominica



Below are some of the products in her line.

Find more details at SenicaNaturals.com.

Bath Salts. This luxurious bath treat soothes aching muscles and relieves tension while maintaining the skin's natural radiance.

Soy candles. Long-burning, fragrant candles are made using exquisite essential oils and premium fragrance oils.

Soaps. Each bar is made using rich emollients that gently cleanse the skin.

Shea moisturizers. Head-to-toe products formulated using generous amounts of shea butter and skin-nourishing oils. Helps relieve dryness and itching caused by eczema and psoriasis.

Senk Shampoo Bar. Olive oil and coconut blend to create a solid shampoo bar that provides a rich cleansing lather.

Blemish Balm. Cocoa butter and Vitamin E blend with an herb-infused jojoba oil to produce this light moisturizer that evens skin tone.

a Caribbean climate into a brutally cold snow belt. Jno-Finn soon found herself with symptoms of skin conditions that included eczema and dermatitis.

Her search for help led her from one doctor to another, and from one pharmacist to another. She battled the problems throughout her college years, and she says the effort was not only long and costly, but also mostly disappointing. Her skin issues persisted.

At some point it dawned on Jno-Finn that the solution might be closer at hand than she had thought. After all, she had just graduated with a degree in biochemistry. And the two islands where she had grown up were rich in herbs, spices and substances that people had used successfully for centuries to enhance their health.

Jno-Finn's family knew well the benefits of brewing sour sop leaves to consume as a sleep aid, drinking nettle tea for kidney health and using noni leaves to relieve joint pain. Why not tap into products from her homeland to alleviate her problem and maybe also help others?

She went to work, researching, testing and making contacts to get the supplies she would need. In time, Jno-Finn developed a product that worked its magic on her skin. She didn't realize it then, but she had sown the seeds of a company.

"I started this as a hobby," she says. "I developed the product and began sharing it with friends." But friends kept asking for more.

It was in 2007, after Jno-Finn had moved to New Orleans to participate in recovery efforts, that she began to get more serious about her products. She started participating in the Freret Street Market in Uptown New Orleans, and the Sankofa Farmers Market in the 9th Ward. Then she started a website.

"Suddenly I thought, 'Wait a minute, I have a business going here. I need to decide where I want this to go,'" she recalls.

From that point on, Jno-Finn's business development was almost by the book. She reached out to entrepreneurship professors she had known at Syracuse. "I had taken business law classes and done business competitions, but never thought of myself as [one who was] starting a business," she says.

She wrote a business plan and registered with the appropriate local and state agencies to get the permits and legal documents she'd need. She worked with a counselor at the Good Work Network, a small business support agency in New Orleans.

Along the way she won a business plan competition held in New Orleans by the Allan Houston Legacy Foundation of New York. That got her into the Lenovo Small Business Incubator program. And she further expanded her support network by becoming an associate of local business accelerator Idea Village.

Through it all, Jno-Finn worked to perfect her product formulas that made use of ingredients such as bay leaves, jojoba oil, sweet almond oil and essential oils of lavender, orange and tea tree. Some products are particularly designed for people of color, but the skin-care items are suitable for all skin types, she says. Jno-Finn continues to make and package the products herself. "I do production runs based on FDA good manufacturing standards," she says.

She sells and ships her balms, moisturizers, shampoos, conditioners, soaps, bath salts and scrubs both to individuals and bulk buyers. While she has assistance from a few friends, she could soon be looking for more help.

Jno-Finn says she's focusing on expanding the network of retailers and boutiques that carry her products. "As we bring on more retailers, then we'll look at whether to move into contract manufacturing," she says.

Meanwhile, she intends to cling to S nica's commitment of "ensuring a natural, beautiful you." ❁



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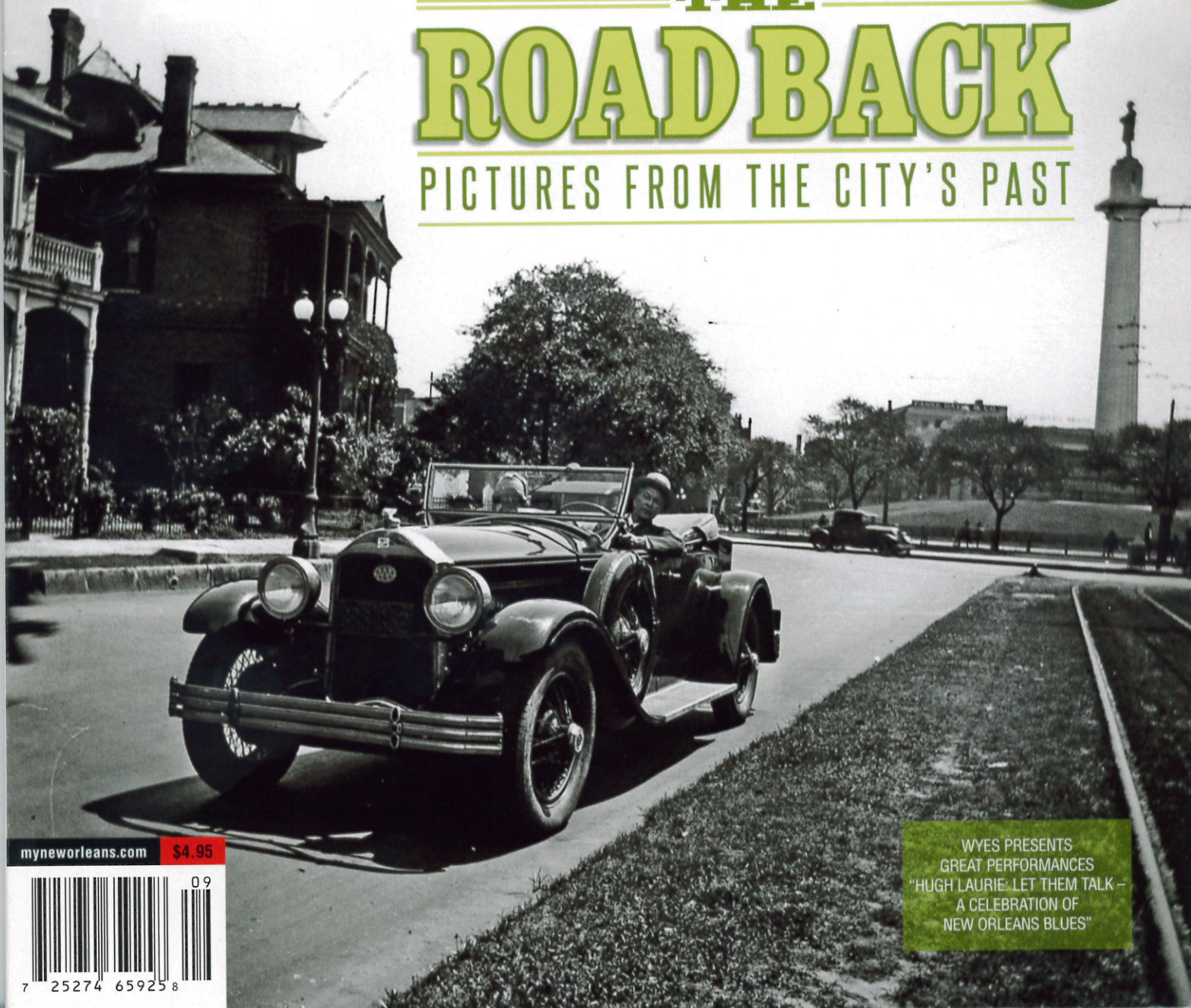
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