

Student entrepreneur builds her brand, while benefitting pediatric cancer patients

By Aien Du & Aila Jiang

In elementary school, Julia Wykoff's classmates would secretly order lip balms from her by depositing sticky notes in a designated locker. The young entrepreneur would collect the orders at the end of the day and distribute her product the next day in the carpool lane. Today her "underground operation" has evolved into Zeal Cares, a lip balm business that donates products to patients with pediatric cancer for every tube sold. Over the past seven years, Wykoff has partnered with more than 30 hospitals across 18 states. Next year, she will attend the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University, and she plans to continue expanding Zeal Cares.

counters where patients could choose from 16 standard flavors, including key lime, raspberry pomegranate and chocolate mint, as well as a few limited-edition ones. Because cancer patients often experience higher sensitivity to scents and flavors, Wykoff has created products with a range of potency.

"She has clearly done her research," said St. John's parent Rebecca Hunt, who was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. "Even at a young age, she was well aware of what these patients needed."

In 2018, while Wykoff was hosting her first flavor counter, Kendra Scott was also hosting an event at MD Anderson. A similar concept to Wykoff's, Kendra Cares brings custom jewelry-making to the pediatric wards of hospitals. Tom Nolan, the CEO of Kendra Scott, loved the mission behind Zeal Cares and offered to give Wykoff some pointers on how to grow her business. Nolan later reached out and invited Wykoff to the Kendra Scott headquarters in Austin.

"I love the brand she has built, and I love what she stands for," Nolan said. "I wanted to help."

By the time she entered the Upper School, Wykoff had been featured by multiple publications and was selling products in local outdoor markets and stores.

Not only did Wykoff impact those beyond school, but she also helped within the community. After finding out about Hunt's cancer diagnosis, Wykoff dropped off lip balms of every flavor at her house, along with flowers and a card.

"It's odd when you find someone so young that you can look up to even when you're older," Hunt said, "and she's definitely someone that I look up to."

Wykoff has also collaborated with parents to design cards and create little inserts to include with Zeal Care's lip balms as teacher's gifts or charitable donations.



Senior Julia Wykoff founded her lip balm business when she was in elementary school. Now, her balms are available in hospitals in 18 states. **COURTESY PHOTO** | Julia Wykoff

still looking for ways to ensure her dorm room does not become a product laboratory and shipping warehouse. Wykoff says that her goal this summer is to spend a lot of time figuring out a place where she can manufacture the lip balms.

While creating a business from the ground up has not been easy, Wykoff has discovered that people are often willing to help. Founding Zeal Cares has given her opportunities to learn skills such as product research, development and marketing.

"I've definitely grown a lot," Wykoff said. "I'm more confident with who I am as a person, which has helped me run my company."

Beyond hospitals, Zeal Cares products are currently available at Kuhl Linscomb, Magpie's Gifts and online at zealcares.com.

Additional reporting by Ellison Albright

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REBECCA HUNT

Before she cornered the preteen lip balm market, she learned about a friend who had begun undergoing chemotherapy treatment for cancer. Wykoff discovered that many patients experienced dry skin and lips, an often overlooked side effect.

After making hand exfoliant as a Mother's Day project at her Montessori school, she was inspired to branch out and make lip balms.

Wykoff began her search for the perfect formula at Sephora and down the skincare aisles of grocery stores. She attempted numerous reformulations and conducted exhaustive research into lip balm ingredients before finally landing on a recipe that worked. Today, she still makes small batches of her products in her kitchen, melting and mixing shea butter, argan oil and jojoba oil over the stovetop.

Wykoff then had to make a brand for herself. When searching for a company name, she landed on the word zeal, meaning "great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause."

After establishing her business to launch the philanthropic component of her mission, she contacted hospitals to ensure that her lip balms reached patients in need. When she contacted MD Anderson, she was prepared for rejection: "What's the worst they can say?"

After some dead ends, a "logistical miracle" eventually connected her with a pediatric program manager who approved her proposal.

At MD Anderson, Wykoff hosted flavor



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TOM NOLAN

"Her work really opened my eyes," Hunt said. "I have always wanted to give back, and to see someone so young with such big passion was inspiring me to take a chance and try something new."

Wykoff is determined to continue expanding her business, possibly making other skincare goods or adding SPF to her lip balms. While she will continue managing her company in college, she is



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