

Modern Life – Episode 10 – Akilah Releford

Title: Next Gen Entrepreneurship | Akilah Releford | Fidelity Modern Life

Transcript:

Akilah Releford: Work on whatever you're passionate about for an hour a day. As long as you're involved in the smallest ways it will compound and consistency is key and you will be ready.

Jamila Souffrant: Akilah Releford, thank you so much for joining us on Modern Life to talk entrepreneurship.

Akilah: Thank you so much for having me.

Jamila: Now let's take it back to the beginning. I want to hear all about your entrepreneurship journey. How did you go from making the products in your dorm room to now selling it worldwide and having it be such a big business?

Akilah: Yeah. So I've always been into beauty and DIY skincare. I was always the little girl who would sit and watch my mom do her makeup in her vanity. So it was something that always sparked an interest in me, but I went to Howard University on a pre-med track. I thought that going to medical school would give me that stability I needed. So when I was in my dorm room, instead of doing chemistry homework and coming back from class I would be making skincare products with what I learned in chemistry.

I was the girl on dorm would always have a face mask on. And I would share them all the time with my girlfriends and girls who lived in the dorm. So I didn't realize at the time that that was a focus group. And one of them suggested that I put it online and start a side hustle. My dad is also serial entrepreneur, so he was very excited about the idea of me starting a kind of a side project.

Initially it was just something that I used to just have extra spending money to go downtown with my girlfriends and we'd go out to eat and go shopping. But I realized that this could really be something interesting when a few girls said that they weren't just using a face mask I created as a face mask, but they were using it as a body polish as well. So I thought that was a super important piece of feedback. I would package the face mask in my dorm room and put it online but orders came in and so I had my dad make, ship, package, label all of the skincare products and then after hours he would ship out all of these boxes to teenage girls across America. I would use Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and word of mouth referrals to get some of our initial sales. So that summer before my senior year my dad said that it was time for me to take control of my business and to just take a semester off to kind of get a hand on the brand. So that semester off turned into two and a half plus years off and me focusing on the brand full-time and developing new products.

Jamila: Now was the name always Mary Louise? Back in college, also?

Akilah: Yes, the name was always Mary Louise. My dad helped me come up with a name. Mary Louise is also my middle name. My maternal grandmother is Mary and my paternal is Louise. We both thought it was a fun, feminine, quirky, kind of classic name that would kind of fit the brand and went well with the kind of ingredients we were using. We used a lot of ingredients initially that weren't as available or accessible to the market at affordable price points. Usually you only saw them in premiere, prestige skincare products. So offering such high-quality products to a Gen Z audience was something that was unique to us and we thought the name was a good fit.

Jamila: Now how did you know that these products were so coveted or that the elements to put in the products would be something that would differentiate you? Was it your chemistry background that allowed you to know that?

Akilah: So my chemistry background combined honestly with my DIY background, from experimenting with different masks really gave me at least the stepping stones and foundation on how to make a basic face mask. It was an original recipe of ours that actually worked. I have eczema so I've always been big on natural ingredients. Making a DIY oatmeal honey egg white mask is really great for soothing eczema. So I was always familiar with clean beauty products. My parents are complete health freaks, so we were really, me and my sister and I were really educated early on on clean ingredients that make you glow from the inside out.

Jamila: So now talk about the tweet that went viral. I would love to know what set you apart in the beginning because there are a lot of beauty lines and people on Twitter and Instagram talking about their products. So what was it or what was that tweet about and what made you stand out from the crowd?

Akilah: Before I started the company, I was sharing tips and hacks on my Twitter on how to achieve clear skin. And so one day I created a thread of about 40 beauty tips and hacks on how to achieve clear skin. The list included DIY face masks, detox waters, natural body exfoliants. The thread was active for a few months actually, and then all of a sudden, I woke up with thousands of retweets on a thread I created prior. So it really was completely unexpected. I had girls DM-ing me asking me, "Well, do you know what ingredients work with this, so I can get this? It really gave me a chance to build an early following for the brand of people who were super interested in natural products to begin with and DIY components as well.

Jamila: And what was the moment that you made the decision to drop out of school, because that couldn't have been easy.

Akilah: The business was growing rapidly to the point where I was spending 12 plus hours a day manufacturing and packaging products. So making that move to find a manufacturer and a fulfillment center to me was the point in which I said to myself, "Okay this to me is worth taking a break from school to focus on the business. We have traction. We have momentum. We're growing at a super rapid rate and I don't want to miss out on this potentially amazing opportunity to grow an amazing skincare brand that I truly believe in."

Jamila: Did it take some encouragement from your father or friends that you could do this, or you were pretty confident from the get-go?

Akilah: I definitely had serious imposter syndrome. We were making at the time mid six figures in revenue, but I still didn't feel comfortable referring to myself as a founder or a CEO or an entrepreneur. I feel very grateful to have and have always had a super solid support system with my parents. I remember my mom she was the very first customer on our website. Early on I would check who was buying from us because if it wasn't my mom it was one of my mom's friends or one of my many aunts. So to come from family members who are always amazing supporters to people all over the country to me was a sign that it was worth exploring this opportunity.

Jamila: And I mean you're young, you're a black woman, you know I can imagine that breaking into these spaces and walking into rooms, right, like people underestimated you. So can you talk a little bit about that journey?

Akilah: Well I think that that was also my superpower. I didn't realize how much work it is, and it was, and so kind of looking at things through like rose tinted glass you see everything is, "Oh this is we'll just figure this out, and we'll figure this out." So I think that not having experience at all in business or skincare or the beauty space in general kind of was something that gave me strength. I didn't know what to anticipate. So I kind of did things and maneuvered in a way that was unconventional just because I didn't know any better.

Jamila: And as you worked through the last year with COVID, you know, that has impacted businesses tremendously. How were you impacted?

Akilah: So with COVID I really anticipated sales to slow down—not entirely, but I definitely didn't anticipate for them to ramp up completely which is ultimately what happened. I think that being in the clean beauty space is an interesting place to be in the pandemic especially early on. I think people found a sense of comfort in doing routines and participating in things that gave them some sense of control in a time of uncertainty. So the pandemic, combined with people being online and self-educating, really gave us steady sales from March of that year, March of 2020 through June. And then that's when we experienced the height of the social justice movement fueled by the George Floyd murder. So we had the pandemic component combined with everyone wanting to support black owned businesses. So for the month of June alone we surpassed a hundred thousand dollars in sales.

Jamila: Right. And with more people focusing on just race in this country and it becoming more of a forefront, did that help you change or redefine what you wanted your company to be or stand for?

Akilah: We've always stood for diversity and inclusivity as a black owned business, but we definitely used this opportunity to educate customers who were not black women on the products we had. Questions that we got around the brand included, "Are your products just for black women? Are they products just for a darker skin tone?" So this was a great

teaching moment for us to say that our products are for everyone, all skin shades, all skin tones, and that we are a completely inclusive. So we use that to educate the new audience that we had.

Jamila: And with that, can you talk about just the growth and where you can find your products now?

Akilah: So now you can find Mary Louise on Vera Shop, 13 Loon, and Macy's, but for the growth of the brand I definitely see Mary Louise as a national legacy skincare brand. I do believe that people coming back into the retail space, touching, and feeling products, falling in love with brands again, is going to come back. So I definitely think that Mary Louise will be the forefront of natural skincare with people going into department stores and flagship retailers to experience the brand outside of an online environment.

Jamila: So now you said you started to pay yourself through the business. Does that make you look at retirement differently? Because I know when I was in my early twenties I was not as concerned about investing for retirement.

Akilah: A hundred percent and I will be completely honest, this year was the first year that I became really serious about my retirement, my investing, where I see the company and how that correlates to what I will have in a savings and in a retirement fund. Like, I have so many friends who always want to go out all of the time, go shopping all the time, go and take amazing trips. And I go on some of them, but it has made me a lot more disciplined in what I participate in, so that I'm making sure that I'm taken care of, that the company is taken care of, that I have a plan in the next three to five years and moving forward.

Jamila: So you mentioned and alluded a bit to the amount of work it takes to do what you do. Looking back, was this journey worth it?

Akilah: It was a hundred percent worth it. It has been the most crazy journey. Something new and crazy happens every single day but I have zero regrets. I will say that entrepreneurship may not be for everyone. And that is okay. Social media glamorizes and romanticizes the idea of entrepreneurship or owning your own business, but it is the complete opposite. So to those who say that they want to leave their nine to five to become an entrepreneur so they can work their own hours, you will be working more hours as an entrepreneur. So if you want to work less hours, entrepreneurship is not for you. And I don't want people to, especially young people in my generation, to think that they aren't exceeding or excelling if they aren't a 20 something with their own business

Jamila: What motivates you? Because you're so focused at such a young age, I mean, it's so impressive. So what's that thing that does get you up in the morning and continues to get you going?

Akilah: Things like emails from our customers, amazing reviews, make me realize even on the hardest days that what I'm doing is bigger than just myself. It's about redefining beauty for our generation. It's about leaving a legacy for myself, for my kids, my grandkids. It's about, especially as a black founder, it's about generating generational

wealth. So it's not just about myself, it's something that can affect generations beyond me. But there's definitely times where other young girls, especially young girls of color, email me asking me for advice or what things to do, and I'm like, "Girl I have no idea what I'm doing at all. I'm just in the mix like how everyone else is." What I've learned is that no one really knows what they're doing; it's just, "Perception is reality." Everyone is just figuring everything out.

Jamila: And so along with that kind of attitude and determination, what are some other things people should have around them to succeed?

Akilah: Definitely a routine. I like to get up super early. I do the same morning routine. I work out, I meditate, I journal, and I set my intention for the day. It really sets the tone for the day, the week, and gets me motivated and going. So if you tell yourself that you're going to work on your business from 5:00 PM when you get off work to 8:00 PM every single week or every single day, stick to it, do it, and it will put you leaps and bounds beyond your competition, your future competition, and make you ready for prime time.

Jamila: So for someone right now who wants to take that leap, change course, and just create a life of their own, what advice would you give them right now?

Akilah: My advice to anyone who's looking to take that leap of faith into entrepreneurship that may seem a little hesitant right now is to work on whatever you're passionate about for an hour a day. You don't have to leave your career right away. You don't have to make super scary decisions but as long as you're touching what you're passionate about, as long as you're involved in the smallest ways it will compound; and consistency is key. But don't wait any longer to do what you're really passionate about. Start now and when you are stable enough to leave your job or whatever situation you're in, do it. It will be worth it. But, put, if I, things that I learned along the way that I could've told myself three years ago would be to do your homework, do your research. It's so important. You're always going to be learning on the fly and learning on the way but if you are developing a product, test the product, get people's feedback, I have multiple prototypes, get a patent. Do your research. Is this something people want? And if you have that in place, I think you're so far ahead of a lot of entrepreneurs.

Jamila: Oh. I love this. Thank you so much Akilah for joining us on Modern Life to talk entrepreneurship. I hope we have some people out there right now who will go start some businesses.

Akilah: Awesome Thank you so much for having me.

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