

Dr. Julia Harper

Davie, Florida



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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Dr. Julia Harper:

Dr. Julia Harper's story begins in the most unlikely of places – a shoe box. Born premature at 27 weeks, her parents were given the option to allow their daughter to die at home or in the hospital. They chose home and, because she was too small to hold, they were given a shoebox instead of a car seat. Through a “force” that Dr. Harper points to as her motivational drive, she, not only survived, but has since used that experience to change the world.

“I was born in Trinidad and Tobago, but moved to New York with my mom when I was young,” Dr. Harper said. “We struggled for a long time. My mom worked in people's homes and we lived on food stamps. I started off from extremely humble beginnings. Eventually I went to college on grants and graduated with a degree in Occupational Therapy

(OT).”

Dr. Harper then took a route similar to most OTs. She spent approximately seven years in Brooklyn, NY, working with children dealing with various challenges. Towards the end of this chapter, Dr. Harper felt a growing desire to go in a different direction. That “nudge” from the universe was something she couldn’t ignore any longer.

“From my experience as a preemie, I grew up believing that whatever I did in life had to be something worthy,” she said. “It had to change the world. I initially became an Occupational Therapist to do just that. However, I found myself dissatisfied. I didn’t feel like I was making the right impact. The kids I worked with were getting better, but not in the way I wanted. Certain skills were improving, but their life function wasn’t shifting. That’s when I decided to leave OT.”

In 2004, after reaching the top of her game as a traditional therapist in New York, Dr. Harper not only was on her way out of the field of OT, but also moved to Florida. She left a practice that was generating significant revenue to find a quiet spot and figure out her next move. During this hiatus, she made two discoveries that reshaped her future and ultimately lead to the formation of TheraPeeds.

“For one, I realized, after about a year, that I was not PTA material,” Dr. Harper said with a laugh. “Even my daughter, who was six years old at the time, said, ‘Mom, don’t do this’. During my departure from traditional therapy, I also bumped into a life-changing word – Neuroplasticity. Our brains are capable of change throughout our lifetime. When you’re able to access the brain, you’re able to change how the brain functions, thus changing how people function in their lives. When I discovered

Neuroplasticity, I went on an excessive rampage to learn everything I could about it. Along the way, I also found a small one room office to start treating patients again and began to integrate my work around Neuroplasticity into traditional Occupational Therapy.”

From Startup to Second Stage

The results were transformative. Word quickly spread and, as a result of increased demand for her services, Dr. Harper expanded in 2008 from her one room office into a 6,000 sq ft space. Her practice also grew to include 20 employees. Along the way, she created several intensive intervention programs, including the H.O.P.E. Method, to allow patients to understand the brain and how to use it for change. As oppose to other “hit or miss” strategies, with H.O.P.E., Harper is able to treat patients using three steps: Identify where in a patient’s brain the breakdown is occurring, select the appropriate tools and use those tools in a specific order to expect a specific outcome.

As Dr. Harper shared, another powerful model was conceived and built after evidence showed that certain results weren’t “sticking”. Upon closer examination, Dr. Harper discovered that it wasn’t the children, or even the therapy at fault, it was the parents.

“We were treating kids and doing well, but when the kids would go home to their parents, and the parent’s weren’t changing, the changes made in the brain were available, but the parents were not supporting the kids to use their new skills,” she said. “That’s what made me do my PHD in Psychology with a focus on creating a theory on what it means to be a parent of a child with special needs. Research shows that 93% of these parents fail. Also, the divorce rate is 80% for parents of kids with special

needs. The parents needed support as well. This represented a new market and a new opportunity. We decided to create a model that would use Neuroplasticity to change the minds of adults. We called it, 'the WAY (What About You) Method'. Since processing disorders have a genetic component, many of the parents also needed treatment for their brains as well as their minds. Parents had friends, siblings and other family members that also needed help. With one in 25 people has a processing disorder, our business really took off treating the entire family and adults around the world with these challenges."

Today, TheraPeeds employs 62 people and occupies 30,000 sq ft of space. Their state-of-the-art stand-alone facility is 100% dedicated to treating the brains of people across the lifespan with processing disorders. The first floor is dedicated to pediatrics, while the second floor caters to teens and adolescents. In addition to therapy, Dr. Harper and her team teach life skills and talk about things like money, sex, problem solving and decision making. They've grown through word-of-mouth and are committed to delivering lasting results for the families and people that they work with.

According to Dr. Harper, even though TheraPeeds has experienced a tremendous amount of success, there are two barriers preventing them from reaching even more people. "The first is awareness," she said. "Think about your brain like your iPhone. Your iPhone, like your brain, might look great on the surface. Now imagine there's a reoccurring glitch with your calls. From the outside, you can't see this glitch. It's like trying to run an iPhone 10 with iOS 3. It's a software issue. This can happen in the brain, it might look intact on the surface, but you might be dealing with a glitch in your social, motor, communication, emotional,

attention and learning skills causing problems driven by a processing or 'software' disorder under the surface. The second barrier is money. Our center is private. We're not insurance based. This can create a limitation for some people."

A Workforce Built on Shared Values

According to Harper, TheraPeeds workforce is constantly growing and adding more personnel. Employee benefits are extremely generous and include, extra time off during spring break, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's, onsite child care for new mothers, spa days, birthdays off and a week dedicated to employee physical, mental and financial wellness. As Harper shared, "If we're not taking care of ourselves, we can't take care of anyone else." The culture of the organization is defined by three important values.

"The first is change," Harper said. "The number one value we have is change. Whether it's change on the inside or outside, it's important to live it and embrace the discomfort of change. Our second value is compassion. We do what we do for others. Our third value is service. The energy of our company revolves around being here to serve our clients."

In addition to serving their clients, TheraPeeds is also very active when it comes to serving the community. Last year, they donated over \$500,000 to those that couldn't afford their services. Harper's policy is that we need give back. They've also donated \$50,000 worth of supplies, furnishings, clothes, etc. to families with special needs during the holidays. They participate in various holiday drives throughout the year and actively support, through donations and Harper's time as a board

member, an organization dedicated to helping adults with autism. Most recently, TheraPeeds made a \$10,000 donation to support Hurricane Dorian relief efforts in the Bahamas.

According to Harper, operating in Florida is beneficial for a number of reasons. “I travel around the country and know a lot about services for kids in different areas,” she said. “A practice like this wouldn’t do as well in New York. They have more state services there. People are primed to look for private practices in Florida. With my state contracts in New York, I’d provide private services but the state would pay me. In Florida, parents know they’re responsible for finding their own services. A local advantage is that we have access to talent through nearby schools including Keiser University, Nova Southeastern University and Florida International University.

What it Means to be a Florida Companies to Watch Honoree

“We’re really excited about it,” Harper said. “Primarily because we see ourselves occupying such a small corner of the world. We’re in awe of the fact that we’re able to focus on doing what we can to service families and to be recognized for that is special. We have people coming from all over the world to get these services. All we’re doing is keeping our head down and working hard, but people see us. Now Florida is showing their appreciation to have us and recognize our importance. It feels good.”

Harper continued, “In terms of why we were selected, I think it has to do with the fact that, at every level, we’re creating real change. Our change is organic and it touches everyone, including staff, our business, our clients, the state of Florida, the United States and beyond. I’m at peace

because I believe we're changing the world."

Harper was quick to thank GrowFL for recognizing, in her words, "a small company in Davie that's impacting the world". Even though she admits to still seeing herself as "one woman in a small office doing her thing", Harper has firmly cemented TheraPeeds as a distinguished company with an impressive track record and the potential for tremendous success.

Looking ahead, Harper is focused on continuing to expand her services to support more teens and adolescents. She wants to bring increased awareness of processing disorders worldwide and to keep innovating within her field. She's also focused on creating a nation-wide network of trained therapists to help the one in 25 individuals dealing with a processing disorder get the support they need. Therapists will become H.O.P.E. certified and will operate under a licensing agreement.

Advice for Aspiring Entrepreneurs

"Trust yourself," Harper said. "The whole time, I bet on me. This was especially true in 2004 when I was facing the fear of closing my practice in NY. I listened to myself and did what felt right, even though I was making good money and getting accolades for being a top therapist in NY. I had to listen to what was right and peaceful for me. Trust yourself."

Awards and Recognition

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