

Emily McHugh

Fort Pierce, Florida



CASAURI

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Emily McHugh:

Emily McHugh, co-founder and co-owner of Casauri, launched her business based on a business school class project at Columbia University, in New York City. The class was Managing New Ventures and her assignment was to write a business plan. The concept could be imaginary or something that could actually be turned into a legitimate business. McHugh explained her idea and how the timing was ideal.

"It was 1999 and everyone had laptops," she said. "They were everywhere and so were these really boring laptop bags. Any decent looking bags were astronomical in price. I approached my sister, Helena, who was a graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and asked her to make me a laptop bag. After she did, a lot of people asked me about my bag and how they could get one. It seemed like the perfect fit for my project, so that's the direction I chose. When it came time to

present the business plan, I was the only student to have a tangible product."

After graduating from business school, Emily worked part time here and there, she played her violin in the New York City subways, but more importantly, she continued to pursue the necessary steps to turn her class project into an actual business. Emily and Helena finalized designs, identified a manufacturer, built a website and, after nine months of hard work, they officially launched Casauri. They focused on design and affordability and found trade shows to be an excellent platform to showcase their products. They attended the New York International Gift Fair, MacWorld Expo and many trade shows and conventions. Interest picked up and so did the orders. Before long, McHugh was selling her bags at places like The Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, Bloomingdales and even Apple's corporate store in Cupertino, CA.

By 2004, business was still good and Casauri was growing at a steady pace, but McHugh and Helena had had enough New York blizzards and were ready for a change of scenery. After some research, they discovered their new home in Fort Pierce, situated along Florida's beautiful Treasure Coast. The work continued, but not without new challenges.

"Even though our business is mobile and we can pretty much work anywhere, we definitely underestimated how much we relied on New York City," McHugh said. "Any resource we needed was at our fingertips. Starting after we moved and going through 2008, we had to re-imagine our business model. There was so much new competition. We had to

evolve from producing more than just one product. Our goal was to become a mobile travel lifestyle company, supplying bags and cases for whatever device someone was carrying. We had our ups and downs for sure, but we remained focused and determined to build the business."

Outside of Casauri, McHugh does international trade consulting for the local Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Indian River State College. She also conducts entrepreneurial workshops, speaks at events

like the weVENTURE IMPACT Business & Leadership Summit and recently published her first book. The book, inspired by McHugh's then nine-year old niece asking if she was too young to start a business, is titled "The Little Girl's Guide to Entrepreneurship - What I Know Now That I Sure Wish I Knew Then". McHugh explained that the premise of the book is that you're neither too young nor too old to start a business.

Looking ahead, Emily and Helena are focused on growth and rebuilding the business. "Helena is working on a new collection," McHugh said. "We're hoping to launch that collection before the end of the year. We're also making some limited edition items in-house. Maybe one day we'll have our own factory right here and become a major economic engine for the local community."

McHugh offers up some great advice, based on personal experiences, for aspiring entrepreneurs. "Over the years, we've had offers from investors to buy our business," she said. "I always thought to myself, 'Why do I need them involved when I'm already doing it?'. Looking back on those thoughts, we didn't need to struggle on our own. We should have taken the help. We could have grown faster and built on the growth we already had. My advice, as it relates to this, would be to think more

long-term. The entrepreneurial mindset is to be flexible and to see things from different perspectives. Don't get caught up in short-term tactics without looking at the big picture. To do this, you should build time into your schedule to step back and reflect on your business, meet with mentors and other third parties. These people can give you different perspectives. Even consider a board of directors. There's always someone willing to help you out and to be objective about your business. Also, don't be afraid of change. In fact, plan for it to happen and you'll be more receptive to it. Finally, how you react to change is key. How will you adapt and set yourself apart from your competitors? Don't become accustomed to doing what you've always done. This will inhibit your personal growth and the growth of your business."

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