



# Monica Leonard

St. Petersburg, Florida

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## *Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Monica Leonard:*

On Christmas Eve, 2005, Monica Leonard and her husband endured one of the most difficult things to face as a parent – the death of one of your own children. The stillbirth of Leonard’s fourth child, Molly, was shocking and tragic, but for Leonard, who spent the previous 11 years as a pediatric nurse, the experience also left her with many unanswered questions. Why did this happen? What caused the stillbirth? Leonard began to research and read everything she could find about stillbirths. What she uncovered was disturbing, but also ignited a fire and a passion that ultimately led to the formation of Molly’s Suds.

“What I found was that In the United States alone, 80,000 chemicals were approved for use by the TSCA (Toxic Substances Control Act) and yet only 200 of the toxins were tested for human safety,” Leonard said.

“Each year, the list of chemicals change. Furthermore, a report by the US Department of Health and Human Services proves that mothers pass chemicals to their babies via pregnancy and breast milk. Newborn baby cord blood and amniotic fluid had multiple non-natural toxins detected in it! Traces of nearly 300 of the chemicals were from toxins in food, personal care, environmental and household products. I knew right then, we had a responsibility to teach others about these toxins, and to make a difference.”

Leonard’s initial quest was to discover safer household products for her family. Along the way, she discovered many safe alternatives to household cleaning agents with one exception – laundry detergent. After doing some additional research on non-toxic ingredients, Leonard went to work in her Georgia basement and created a safe, yet effective laundry detergent. She began selling her detergent, under the name Molly’s Suds, at various farmer’s markets. Word spread quickly and so did the popularity of her non-toxic detergent made with ingredients that are safe for humans. When Leonard’s husband’s job took the family back to Florida, Leonard continued to sell her products at farmer’s markets before a pivotal experience changed everything.

“I accidentally double booked myself at two different farmer’s markets,” Leonard said. “I wasn’t going to cancel on one, so my husband took two kids and I took two kids. Later that night, we were talking and he was shocked at how many people loved our products and experienced great results. He said, ‘I think there’s a real opportunity’. I agreed and I cashed in my 401(k) and started working with a chemist from Oregon to manufacture the laundry detergent in bigger quantities. They shipped a 55 gallon drum and we’d scoop it into bags and package it for shipment

to customers across the United States. We had a good online presence and the business was growing.”

By 2013, Leonard stopped selling her products at farmer’s markets. The logistics became increasingly cumbersome and online sales were taking off. She also landed her first deal with a local retailer. Rollin’ Oats, a small natural grocery store chain, agreed to stock her products. By 2014, business was steady and the operation had outgrown Leonard’s garage.

“We basically got kicked out by the city,” she said. “We had semi-trucks picking up pallets from our house. We didn’t know at the time, but apparent you’re not allowed to do that. That’s when we rented our first warehouse.”

From 2014 through 2017, Leonard continued to sell her products through the company’s website and through local retailers. By the end of 2017, it became obvious that a shift from in-store to more e-commerce was necessary to properly scale the business.

“It’s hard to compete on the shelves, especially on the shelves of large national retailers like Walmart,” Leonard said. “They pretty much own the shelf space and having to go through distribution, to get your products in those stores, eats your margins to death. The way to deal with that is to scale through online sales, and not just through Amazon. We developed relationships with Thrive Market, Grove Collaborative and many others. We also started working with bloggers and influencers in the space.”

Since the start, Leonard’s goals have always been to take care of customers and to create truly safe products that people can trust. By

developing a trusted brand, understanding expenses and creating efficiencies and through ingredient integrity, Molly's Suds has grown from a basement operation with one product to nine SKUs in 2019 and 20 new products for 2020.

"We've launched a full-line of household items, with even more items to come in 2020," Leonard said. "We now have dish soap, all-purpose countertop spray, stain spray, sink scrub and more. We also found a great manufacturing partner that has allowed us to outsource that part of our operation. We have complete control over the ingredient suppliers and can better control our margins. Outsourcing has allowed us to focus solely on shipping, receiving and building the brand."

Leonard shared that what she enjoys most is innovation. She loves sourcing ingredients, working with chemists, creating products and working with her graphic designers to see an idea come to life. Her next challenge is to become a better leader. The business has recently grown from four to 10 employees and managing new personalities will require Leonard to develop and hone her leadership skills.

Looking ahead, Leonard shared her goals for the future of Molly's Suds. "We're going to launch a new liquid laundry detergent in 2020," she said. "We're really excited about it. We'll have seven products to choose from in that line. We also want to continue to grow debt-free and responsibly. Now that we have the space and the right people in place, we also have certain revenue goals we'd like to achieve."

What advice does Leonard have for aspiring entrepreneurs? "First of all, I think it's irresponsible to just take the plunge," she said. "You need to do your market research and make sure your idea is viable and that you can

actually sell it. Before you launch, you need to know if there's a market for your product or service and who your customers are. You might think you have the greatest idea, but if you don't have a viable product with a good market, you won't make any money. Don't be afraid to start small as a way to test your idea out."

Leonard continued, "Also, surround yourself with mentors and with support organizations. We've utilized the Greenhouse in St. Pete. They've helped us with a number of things. Lastly, make sure you have a really good website – don't cut corners here; and don't be fearful of making mistakes. Mistakes are where change happens and change can be good. Remember, you don't have to have it all figured out before you launch."

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