

UHART GRADS
JULIA PIRI '17 +
KEVIN WINDHEUSER '16
STARTED A LIFE
AND BUSINESS
TOGETHER

Clean + Green

If you have a good idea, if you want to do something that will have a positive impact on society, just do it.



Julia Piri '17 remembers her first trip to the University of Hartford all too well. On the day the New York native traveled to neighboring Connecticut for her college visit, the traffic was dreadful and the weather as lousy as it could be. A less sensible and responsible teenager might have considered it a bad omen.

Not Piri.

"When I walked onto campus and found out about all the schools and degrees that were available, I knew this was the place for me," says the Barney School of Business graduate who is now a promising young entrepreneur. "I said to myself, if I like it here on one of the worst days, I bet I'll love it when it's sunny and calm."

That speaks to Piri's optimism, resilience, and instincts—three ingredients necessary for any entrepreneurial venture. UseMe LIFE, the company she founded and runs with her boyfriend, Kevin Windheuser '16 (College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture), markets reusable metal straws which, once in wider use around the world, will have a considerable impact on the planet's fragile environment.

Plastic straws are unfriendly to the ecosystem, and paper straws have a limited functional lifespan. Metal straws are entirely renewable. They're also safe, save consumers money in the long run, and have a built-in marketability factor because of their personalized nature—sort of like having your own coffee mug.

"Before college, I really didn't know what I wanted to study, although I knew that conservation would always be a part of my life," Piri says from her office on Long Island. And while awful traffic and lousy weather will probably always be part of our world, UseMe LIFE is

poised to make it a far more environmentally responsible one. Piri's ecological concerns began long before she met Windheuser—with whom she served in UHart student government—but it was a trip to the United

Kingdom she took with him a little more than a year ago that really sparked the idea for a renewable straw company.

While visiting Windheuser's family in Ireland was nice, the sparkling cleanliness of the Emerald Isle—from air to land to sea—was a welcome and pleasant surprise. Piri and Windheuser already knew that when it comes to the environment, every little bit helps. But it was only when they sat on that cross-Atlantic branch of Windheuser's family tree that inspiration truly struck.

As Piri recalls, when she got home from Ireland, the idea was already swirling strongly through her mind, but the look, feel, business model, and even name of the company came to her in a flash while riding the subway to her job. She wrote all those thoughts down right away so that she wouldn't forget. Those subway scribbles became UseMe LIFE.

"Some people ask if renewable straws really make a difference. The answer is a definite, unqualified yes!" Piri says, ably embodying the spirit not just of the company's co-founder and co-leader, but also its spokesperson and public relations director.

UseMe LIFE is a two-person enterprise. And while there are quite a number of lucrative companies that started out just that

way, it takes more than just a good idea and a little luck; entrepreneurs must also avoid any temptation to slow down or surrender when the going gets tough.

Piri and Windheuser had the courage of their convictions to see their inspiration through, and never once hesitated during the early days when the recent college grads had to learn the intricacies of running a business. The whole idea was as fresh to them as the ink on their diplomas.

Renewable straws may sound like a relatively simple concept, but heading an e-commerce company is never easy. (It's made even more challenging by the need

for both Piri and Windheuser to hold down other jobs for the time being, she in banking, he in engineering.) They forged ahead and not only designed and molded the product line, but also selected the manufacturer and set up the digital trade platform. Today, they continue to monitor the manufacturer's progress, manage the website, and fulfill their orders. In their current business model, each straw comes with a wooden holder, a cleaning brush, and a travel pouch. UseMe LIFE also accepts custom orders. The duo is always thinking of expansion plans, too, including the possibility of adding other items to the line, such as coffee mugs.

From day one, Piri and Windheuser have had plenty of people in their corner to learn from, to help them, and to consult with. Growing up, Piri counted her parents as mentors, since they were small business owners from whom she eagerly absorbed some of the concepts about running a company. She still reaches out to some of her parents' colleagues for advice from time to time.

At the University of Hartford, she also had plenty of people who were mentors—long before she started a company for which mentors were needed. She calls them part of her UHart network of support.

The University still provides a steady stream of support to UseMe LIFE from a number of faculty members who are skilled in management matters, and also from a few fellow classmates who now work in public relations and branding. UHart is also a customer, purchasing the straws as giveaways, supporting young alumni and helping the environment.

"If you have a good idea, if you want to do something that will have a positive impact on society, just do it," Piri insists. "If you're not entirely certain how to start, start anyway, and then figure it out along the way." She points to the University of Hartford as a community that supports students and graduates in all efforts to build a career. "When someone has an idea for a product or a business, they know they'll have the full encouragement of almost anyone at the school they

ask. My advice is to always reach out to classmates and professors. Chances are if they don't have the answers you need, they'll find someone who does."

Between online marketing, a few trade shows, and the power of word-of-mouth promotion, Piri and Windheuser are confident that an Ireland-like landscape and seacoast is in their near future—right here in America. "My goal is to have our straws in every home in the

United States," Piri asserts with confidence. The couple's other and even more immediate goal is to make UseMe LIFE their full-time gig. "After all," Piri contends, "e-commerce allows us to run the business wherever we are, and at any time of the day."

Of course, there may be challenges along the way. Most business consultants would say that's inevitable. But Piri undoubtedly knows that—and is likely not terribly concerned. It wasn't all that long ago when she eagerly ran for president of her eighth-grade class on a platform of environmental responsibility—and lost. Five years later at UHart, Piri found her voice to accompany her passion—along with a boyfriend. Together, they started a company and are talking up a product that's playing a decisive role in helping to quench our planet's thirst for environmental responsibility. **H**