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Drifter Organics' mother-daughter team: Business partners and best friends

By Diane Claytor



Micaela and Dawn Marie Hoo work together and love it. Photo provided

Every day must feel a little like Mother's Day to Dawn Marie Hoo. Not only does her 22-year-old daughter, Micaela, still happily live at their Moraga home, but the dynamic mother-daughter team own a business together, working side by side on an almost daily basis — and thoroughly enjoying all this togetherness.

Ever since she was a little girl, Micaela Hoo endured both digestive and skin problems; stomach aches, bloating and eczema were constants in her life. Diagnosed three years ago with leaky gut, a condition that affects the lining of the intestines, Micaela Hoo went through a total detox of every item she ate and everything she used on her skin, forcing her to reevaluate all her food and skincare choices. Changing the foods she ate was relatively easy but finding acceptable skincare products was far more difficult. At that time, she learned she couldn't tolerate citrus, a common natural preservative found in most natural beauty products, even those labeled holistic.

Desperately wanting to help her only child, Dawn Marie Hoo took to the internet, researching everything she could about natural skincare and DIY beauty products. "I figured Micaela couldn't

be the only one on the planet with these issues," Dawn Marie Hoo says.

She studied labels to determine the ingredients on products already available; she read blogs, finding recipes for different natural skincare products. And then, with her daughter by her side, she went into her kitchen and started "cooking up" natural skincare creams. Her husband served as the guinea pig, testing each concoction. "He'd tell me one is too gritty or another is too oily," Dawn Marie Hoo said. "When he finally said 'this stuff is pretty good,' I knew we had found the right recipe."

"Micaela's skin and digestive issues soon cleared up and changed her entire outlook on life," Dawn Marie Hoo said. "Through our research, we discovered there were a lot of people with the same or similar issues. So we decided that, with all the homework we had done and all the time we had already invested, we should start a business."

With the help of a successful Kickstarter campaign, Drifter Organics, described by Micaela Hoo as the "skincare solution for anyone who wouldn't rub anything on their skin they wouldn't trust eating," was born.

Certified organic by Oregon Tilth, a leading nonprofit certifier, educator and advocate for organic products, the gluten-free, soy-free, paraben-free, plant-based Drifter Organics products are made in the Hoo's Moraga kitchen by the mother-daughter team. There are four main body butters — one unscented, three scented with essential oils — described by one beauty blogger as containing "super-thick and moisturizing shea butter mixed with a trifecta of oils that rejuvenated my dry, itchy, cold-weathered skin." Sold primarily through their website, drifterorganics.com, Drifter Organics products, which are for the entire body, can also be found in several local boutiques.

The mother-daughter duo had been working together for several years before founding Drifter Organics. Micaela Hoo writes a fashion and lifestyle blog and her mom takes most of the photos for the blog. "We've always been close," Micaela Hoo said. "It's funny, we do actually finish each other's sentences. We can both be thinking the exact same thing at the exact same time. I can look at her and just know what she's thinking."

Micaela Hoo admits that she's more high-strung than her mom, a characteristic that her mother believes may be attributed to her youthfulness. "She does occasionally have to calm me down," Micaela Hoo acknowledged. "But we really complement each other."

Dawn Marie Hoo spends about 25-30 hours each week being the "crazy mad scientist" for the skincare company while Micaela Hoo said she spends "a steady" 40 hours per week on company business, primarily handling the marketing through social media. An online student through the Savannah, Georgia College of Art and Design majoring in graphic design, Micaela Hoo describes herself as a "blogger, photographer, (sometimes) videographer, business owner, entrepreneur, (sometimes) illustrator, (sometimes) model, and holistic health nut."

Still happy to be living at home with her parents, Micaela Hoo offers a description that every mother hopes to hear someday. "She's my best friend," Micaela Hoo says about her mother, "the yin to my yang." And that is, perhaps, the best Mother's Day gift ever.

Local Experts try to predict Lamorinda's retail future

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It was jointly organized by the Orinda, Lafayette, and Moraga Chambers of Commerce.

The panelists in the informal evening discussion in a program at the Orinda City Offices on April 25 were Lafayette City Manager Steve Falk; Irene Chen, owner of fashion accessory business Parker Thatch, which conducts much of its sales activity online; Saint Mary's College business professor Tomas Gomez-Arias; Orinda Interim City Manager Steve Salomon; and longtime retail business consultant Larry Tessler. All agreed that the retail business is undergoing rapid and dramatic changes nationally, and that these changes are reflected in various ways in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda.

Nationally, retail businesses are failing at an increasingly rapid pace, victims of e-commerce and a glut of stores, particularly department stores, electronics and apparel shops, according to a recent Bloomberg News report. In Lafayette, Falk has observed dramatic changes in the urban fabric along Mt. Diablo Boulevard during his tenure of more than 20 years as city manager:

There are no longer shoe stores or a camera shop, and the last electronics store, Radio Shack, closed recently. He attributes these changes to internet buying, and to traffic and congestion, the latter ironically due in part to the local success of other retail food stores and restaurants.

Retail stores that sell an experience involving more than merely buying merchandise are increasingly attracting customers, such as restaurants and spas.

"You can't get that online," says Chen. "The challenge is becoming nimble" to create a desirable experience that will bring customers in and keep them there, she says. She uses new tools like Facebook Live to achieve this with her brick-and-mortar stores.

Transportation is also a key factor, says Salomon, and it is changing fast with the advent of companies like Lyft and Uber. Throughout most of his career in city government everything has revolved around parking, but this will be altered dramatically, he predicts. Not only is sharing rides a new trend that changes the equation, but the advent of new kinds of two- and three-wheel ve-

hicles is playing a part, too.

Salomon sees the internet as a phenomenon that is driving the reduction of square footage by successful new retailers like Amazon, which uses different merchandise stocking practices than traditional large retail stores. Malls are just not going to make it in the world of mixed-use development, predicts Salomon. In an era when retail is an experience, malls will have to be entertainment centers, Tessler agreed.

So what will Lamorinda look like in 10 years? People want the experience of a hometown, says Falk. In Lafayette this has translated successfully into growth of the city's downtown restaurant row, and he expects to see more. As to the proliferation of like businesses in a retail neighborhood, there is a "secret of clustering," he says, which accounts, for example, for the substantial increase of Diablo Foods' business after Trader Joe's opened its store in Lafayette. Contrary to the intuitive assumption that such competition is destructive, customers seem to be drawn to clusters of similar businesses for their shopping experience.

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