

OUCARES alum makes a splash with startup soap company

When 16-year-old Spencer Kelly's bicycle was stolen last year, his father bought him a replacement – with one caveat. He had to find a way to pay back the money. Fueled by his entrepreneurial spirit, Kelly started a journey to founding his own retail soap business, aptly named The Expedition Soap Company.

The company's mission is about much more than just selling soap, Kelly says. It's about offering top-quality products, with a focus on promoting health and sustainability.

"I design, print, cut, label, and shrink-wrap every soap bar by hand," he said. "All the soaps are made with natural ingredients, without harsh chemicals."

Kelly's soaps – almost 80 varieties – are biodegradable, with a blended base of vegan oils and organic Shea butter. The ingredients are locally sourced, except for the Shea butter, which comes from Africa. However, the Shea butter in Kelly's soaps is "fair trade," a designation which is part of a global movement to improve economic conditions in developing countries.

Kelly takes pride in the conscientious principles at the core of his brand.

"I think you can inspire people when they know what you're about and you're honest with them," Kelly said.

Impaired to Empowered

One of the ways Kelly inspires people is by sharing the struggles he overcame on his way to becoming a successful entrepreneur. As a young child, he was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, an Autism Spectrum Disorder that can cause social and behavioral challenges.

From an early age, Kelly had a thirst for learning. He loved reading and was fascinated by history. But he was mostly nonverbal and had difficulty communicating with others.

"I was kind of like a one-way sponge," he explained. "I could take everything in, but I couldn't get anything out."

His parents began seeking out resources to address his challenges. At age 7, he started participating in social and recreational programs offered through the **Oakland University Center for Autism Outreach Services** (OUCARES). Over the next several years, these experiences helped him improve his ability to communicate and interact with others.

As his confidence grew, he enrolled in other OU programs, including "Explore the World of Business," a weeklong summer camp that introduces high school students to a broad range of



Spencer Kelly, an OUCARES alum and current dual enrollment student at OU, started The Expedition Soap Company in September 2016.



Kelly speaks with customers about his products, which include soaps, lotions, body butters and bath bombs.

business-related topics, such as accounting, finance, management and marketing.

"I learned a lot of skills that are crucial for running my business," Kelly said. "Especially bookkeeping and inventory management."

Kelly, who is homeschooled and takes classes through Oxford Virtual Academy, says he feels at home at Oakland. So much so that he decided to take part in the university's dual enrollment program, which allows high school students to take up to eight college credits per semester.

This semester, he's taking classes in writing and physics at Oakland.

"It's going really well," the 11th-grader said. "I love the campus and the atmosphere."

Advocacy Incorporated

Just before embarking on his first semester at Oakland, Kelly served as an exhibitor and panelist at the U.S. Autism & Asperger Association World Conference & Expo, an event featuring leading experts and advocates in the field.

"I spoke in front of 500 people, something I never really thought I could do," he said. "People told me about how they have autism or their children have autism. They were just so amazed at my story, and it felt good to be a source of inspiration to them."

One of Kelly's best memories from the conference was meeting fellow panelist Temple Grandin, an internationally recognized expert and one of the first people in the autism community to publicly share her experiences with the disorder.

"One of her reasons for speaking at the conference was to emphasize how it's important for young adults on the autism spectrum to become entrepreneurs," Kelly said. "When she met me, she was really interested to talk to me and learn more about my story and my business."



Kelly was a panelist and exhibitor at this year's U.S. Autism & Asperger Association World Conference & Expo in Portland, Oregon.

According to OUCARES Director Kristin Rohrbeck, entrepreneurship can be an optimal path to employment for individuals with autism.

"It's a great avenue because they can set their own working conditions and follow their own pace," Rohrbeck explained. "A lot of people on the autism spectrum have found success through self-employment, especially when they have a strong support system to help them develop their business."

A Team Enterprise

Kelly's support system – in business and in life – is his family. Soon after launching his company, he expanded his product line to include lotions, body butters and, most recently, bath bombs. His younger brother, Grant, pitches in by designing the labels and hand-packaging the lotions and body butters.

"We have a large work area set up in our basement where we do it all," Kelly said. "Sometimes, I even have outside help. A couple neighborhood teens

have volunteered a few times to help with applying the labels and wrapping the products, and in exchange they earn service hours for school.”

In between juggling the demands of school and extracurricular activities, he sells his products at craft and vendor shows around metro Detroit. His family helps at the events, which are held mostly on evenings and weekends. He estimates that by year’s end he will have participated in more than 50 shows.

One of the things he enjoys most about the shows is interacting with customers, something that was once a daunting task.

“When I started my business, I was socially awkward,” he said. “I wasn’t able to speak to people very easily. That’s a challenge that I’ve definitely overcome.”

Since starting his company in September 2016, Kelly has served more than 2,000 customers. Many have become regulars he knows by name.

“I get lots of requests for different scents, so I make sure to bring them in,” he said.

Among the top sellers are Coconut Breeze, Lavender and Kelly’s personal favorite, Soothing Vanilla.

“It makes the entire bathroom smell like warm, toasted vanilla,” he said.

The company also offers seasonal varieties, such as Cider Mill, Winter Berry and Holiday Dreams. Kelly comes up with the whimsical monikers himself.

Along with craft and vendor shows, Kelly’s products are also available through his website, ExpeditionSoaps.com, and at two area retail outlets, Soothe Your Soul, in Oxford and Green Hippo Gifts, in his hometown of Lake Orion.

Paying It Forward

With his company thriving, Kelly has added philanthropy to his business model. Last April, in honor of National Autism Awareness Month, he donated a portion of his sales to the U.S. Autism and Asperger Association, an organization close to his heart.

“Not only do they help younger kids, but they also help kids my age who are transitioning to college,” he said. “There’s always a lot of emphasis on helping younger kids, but it’s also very important to support older kids and adults on the spectrum.”

In addition, he recently started offering his products for fundraising. He’s partnered with several cheerleading and gymnastics groups, as well as a nurse who raised money for the March of Dimes.

“It’s a product that people can feel good about selling,” he said. “And the people buying it can feel good about using a product that’s healthy for them.”

Above all, Kelly says his most important mission – and greatest reward – is inspiring others through his story of triumph over



Kelly is pictured with Temple Grandin, a renowned expert and advocate in the autism community.



Kelly is shown with his parents, Steve and Tracie, and his brother, Grant.

adversity.

"I've given up on so many things in my life," Kelly said. "My business taught me not to give up. It taught me to take responsibility and see things through."

He encourages others facing obstacles to reach for their dreams.

"Whatever you want your future to become, just go for it," he said. "You don't have to believe everything others tell you. Just believe in yourself, and go for it."



The Expedition Soap Company offers almost 80 varieties of soap, all biodegradable and free of harsh chemicals.