

Ethan:

Hey, everyone and welcome to Startup Savants, a podcast dedicated to helping aspiring entrepreneurs and startup enthusiasts by bringing you news, insights, and stories about the startups and founders that are making waves right now. I'm your host, Ethan.

Annaka:

And I'm your other host Annaka.

Ethan:

Our guest today is Kaylin Marcotte, founder of JIGGY. Kaylin is a former employee of theSkimm. In fact, she was employee number one. Kaylin turned her favorite hobby into the fast growing, mission-driven jigsaw puzzle, startup JIGGY. Hey, Kaylin. Happy to have you here.

Kaylin:

Hey, thanks guys. Happy to be here.

Ethan:

All right. Tell us a little bit about the history behind JIGGY, its mission, and how you got started.

Kaylin:

Yeah. My journey with jigsaw puzzles began 2014. As you mentioned, I was the first employee at theSkimm, so that was my first entry into the startup world, startup life, living that grind in the early days. And it was an incredible experience, but definitely, stressful and all consuming. I was on screens all day long. And so I was looking for a way to unwind and unplug, and it was 2014, '15. We were starting to have these conversations around burnout and tech fatigue. And I wanted to get away from screens and do something with my hands.

And I rediscovered my love of puzzles, which I'd done as a kid, but not for 15 or so years. And I did one. It clicked immediately. And I started doing about a 1,000 piece puzzle every week. And so I was constantly looking for more — buying more, going to toy stores online, and all the ones I could find were just, I felt, really outdated and cheesy. Grandma's puzzles, stock photography, the same cardboard box, and the idea planted then of just, what would it look like if I made my dream puzzle, and what parts of the puzzle experience would I want to innovate on and take my approach to. And so ended up being at theSkimm for four years.

This was definitely a slow burn of an idea. Kept coming back to me, kept taking more and more shape. And ultimately what came together and what I ended up launching within 2019 is JIGGY and we partner with emerging female artists and turn their artwork into the puzzle design. So that was pain point number one of just the design itself that you're spending eight, 10, 12 hours with living inside of putting together piece by piece. And part two is, what do you do with the puzzle once you're done? And for me, I was pretty sentimental of these hours I had just spent, I didn't want to tear it apart right away. And so we include puzzle glue with each JIGGY so that you can preserve it once you're done buying the pieces and preserve it, display it as wall art. So our mission is to get people away from screens, reconnecting with downtime, mindfulness, and then supporting our artist partners, who we do profit sharing with and get a percentage of every sale.

Annaka:

That's I... Oh man. I think a lot of people maybe have been looking for this outlet, especially tech fatigue, absolutely. And maybe there's a big chunk that have that relationship with puzzles from their childhood or from being younger and all that stuff. So, I got really excited when I was like, "All right, we're going to talk to Kaylin with JIGGY." And I was like, "Yes, I'm super excited." But this was your first experience in manufacturing and logistics surrounding that. How did you develop this new skill set and what were the roadblocks?

Kaylin:

Yeah. Steep learning curve there, obviously, there were some very transferable things from the Skimm experience, but JIGGY being my first physical product and all the whole world of supply chain, manufacturing, fulfillment, customer service in that way was brand new. And not only was it brand new to me, it was also from four months in a constantly moving target because we launched November 2019. So three, four months later, the COVID just shook, as many of us know and have felt the impacts of this supply chain world, and sourcing products, freight, everything just got more complicated and more expensive. So it was bootstrapping. So trying to do everything in the scrappiest way possible, for the first or second time ever brought a ton of challenges. I think once we had our core many manufacturing partner, which was its own process, and I think there's actually a ton of opportunity in finding factories. How do you match people with ideas, with people who can make it. I naively thought like there must be some index or a directory and you just-

... puzzles, who makes these? Let's Google it. And it ended up being much more challenging too, especially since so much of our product is custom to find someone willing, able, and willing to take that bet on us. Pre-revenue, pre-launch, it's the air investment too, to even fire up the machines for you. So that was really much more of a partnership than I think I previously expected. And then again, doing every piece of our packaging, fully custom, the pieces coming to reusable glass jar with a Coke lid, we include the puzzle glue.

That's not marketed as puzzle glue. We didn't want to use plastic, so it comes in an aluminum tube, which was apparently for hair cream, which is a thing. So just piecemealing each aspect of the packaging together was almost a year long process. During that time, parallel path with curating the art, figuring out that relationship with the artists, these royalties, how do we support them and help really monetize their work. And then the tech side and the website and building that out. So those were the three processes I did for about a year before launching.

And then started out of my living room fulfilling and had my little station of packing orders and stuff. But very quickly, especially with the dimensions of our product, I think it was a blessing. I had a friend who did a jewelry business and I think because it was so compact, it actually enabled her to do it much longer, our silver lining of each box. Each master carton only has six puzzles and they were already stacked and they were only 100 of them. So, it didn't last long doing it in my living room. And so we got a third party logistics partner who handles all fulfillment.

Ethan:

Nice.

Kaylin:

And been off to the races ever since then.

Annaka:

Yeah. I would love to talk about packaging real quick because the packaging that y'all have is very different from traditional, what you'd know as like puzzle packaging. So I mean, I appreciate switching lanes on that one, but what drove you to make that change?

Kaylin:

Yeah. I extend from a couple different approaches. One was that I really wanted it to feel like a more elevated, premium product. From the beginning, I wanted to reposition puzzles out of toy and games, aisle, and more into like home gift, lifestyle. And so I wanted the packaging to reflect that because each of the puzzle designs was original artwork by these female artists. I also wanted the packaging to reflect, be worthy of show, showcasing their art. And so kind of took inspiration from very minimalist museum or gallery white, the box sits upright. So it's a square base and then sits upright almost like pedestal-ish. And then it's thick, white, has some gold foil that's meant to evoke like a frame.

And then the image of the puzzle is displayed there, we say puzzles worth framing and also art in pieces is some of our brand language. So that's on the packaging. And then inside you have the reusable glass jar. So I wanted something that one, if you do the puzzle and glue it and frame it, you have this piece of your JIGGY experience that you can reuse. We've seen people use them as flower vases, cookie jars. There was one time during the first COVID lockdown when somebody used it as their sourdough starter container. And I was like, "These COVID pandemic trends merging." Or if you choose not to glue your puzzle to put the pieces back in there and have it almost be able to stand alone like on a bookshelf and look decorative.

And then the glue, obviously, each package comes in an aluminum tube, and then really during the product ideation was trying to figure out what to include to apply the glue. And I tried different things and I thought maybe like a tiny paint brush or something, but that left marks, streaks. So maybe a mini paint roller, and that didn't work for other reasons. And so finally I was on Reddit, and some guy, Brandy, who glues all his puzzles, posted a video of him doing it. And he just dumped glue out and used his... it was either his credit card or his driver's license, and just spread it. And I was I like, I guess that's all you need. Just a straight edge tool that just gets it closely spread in between the cracks of the pieces. So we developed this glue spreader, which is in our signature shape and has our logo cut out, and looks decorative as well.

Ethan:

Well, thank you Randy from Reddit. That's awesome.

Kaylin:

Yeah.

Annaka:

I'm imagining the mini paint roller, and that's adorable. I can understand Randy pulled through on it.

Kaylin:

Yeah.

Ethan:

So we know you work with upcoming artists and lots of awesome people to put together the artwork for the puzzles. We'd love to hear a little bit more about the relationships with those artists and how you find and decide to work with an artist and whether or not anybody can submit their art to JIGGY.

Kaylin:

Yeah. It's honestly my favorite and the aspect of the business that really keeps me going when I run out of energy. So I grew up in Los Angeles, and my mother worked in arts education my entire life. And so I was always surrounded by the art community there. And I really saw how even if you had made it, if you will, and have gallery representation are participating in exhibits, now of course like Instagram, building a following, it's still so hard to actually monetize your work. And I think artists oftentimes just copyright. And especially social media and sharing, it's hard to really correctly credit and pay artists for their work. So wanted to make sure from the beginning we had that really baked into the business model. And I just started going to fairs and shows based in New York, so plenty of opportunities to scout new artists.

And I really approached it from both what would look good, just completed and finished, and something you'd want to frame on the wall. And also what would make for a really fun puzzle experience, certainly detail, and color, and saturation, and layers. And so I just started with that lens in mind, going to shows and fairs and found the first six artists we worked with for our launch collection. Myself reached out to them, wasn't really sure what if they would think it's silly or just not an application of their work they were interested in, but actually it was a great reception. I think they were open to seeing what the experience would be like with people then puzzling their work.

And I think something I didn't necessarily expect but has become a really special aspect is that relationship between the customer, puzzler, and the artist, where you have studied every detail of their work, truly. And so there's such an appreciation for the work, and for the detail, and this intimacy because you feel a bit of ownership in having recreated it also. So you feel like part of the creative process with the artists, and tag each other on social and some of... They'll discover an artist through the puzzle and then go on their site and buy their other work. So that's been a really, really special thing to watch happen for us. We now, that was pre-launch. I was just always had my eyes open, scouring.

And now that we have had some visibility, we have a lot of inbound. So we have basically an open submission process, and any artist can submit their work. We now have a few different use cases, which is great. Some are just our curated collections, which we do seasonally, but we have also started work with partners and brands, and doing custom puzzles or collaboration. So we'll pull from our artist community to commission an original for a brand that wants to do a custom puzzle. And actually, our next collection that's launching this spring was the result of our first community art voting contest. And so artists, I think we had over 500 submit their work, and our community of puzzlers went through and voted for their favorites. And so the winners of that are our next collection launching soon.

Ethan:

So you've really got the community involved in this as well. That's really great.

Kaylin:

Yeah. Yeah. Especially for my skim experience. I'm a big believer of leading with community around your brand.

Ethan:

Right. Right. So onto the nuts and bolts of those relationships with the artists, how did you put together the licensing or copyright agreements with those artists? Did you pull from a template that exists out there or is this something that you had to really learn on your own as well?

Kaylin:

Both. I definitely have taken the approach, especially boots shopping. Again, I started with \$25,000 of my savings from the eight years of working before launching. And so really tried to stretch a dollar and do as much as that I could myself. So found, I don't know if it was LegalZoom or Rocket Lawyer or whatever, but to find templates out there and tried to just reach out to anybody I knew in my network who might have insight on not necessarily just the legal language but also just industry norms, like what is standard, royalty rates, terms, and anything that I should be mindful to, what artists really care about. In the beginning, we've now, as I mentioned, especially with brand partners starting to do originals, but in the beginning, with an unproven untested market, we didn't know what kind of sales to expect. Didn't want to ask artists to create new work if I couldn't pay them up front for a commission rate.

And so we just pulled from their existing work. So there was no work needed on their end. We pulled from the existing portfolio and they got paid out on royalties on a quarterly basis. So trying to just be mindful of how it could be a win-win really for both, but yeah, the contract itself, we actually just, I think in the last like six months had a real art licensing lawyer revamp it. But the first couple years was definitely scrappy and a lot of hacking together, templates and Google.

Ethan:

That's awesome. You made it work. That's what counts.

Kaylin:

Yep.

Annaka:

Well, and copyright law is not easy.

Kaylin:

No.

Annaka:

At all.

Ethan:

No. I think people go to school for quite some time to be able to make things like that happen.

Annaka:

Yeah.

Ethan:

All right. I'm going to jump around a little bit.

Kaylin:

Yeah.

Ethan:

So you were on Shark Tank. And I think that people have heard of Shark Tank. So I want to talk about before. Before you went to Shark Tank, what was the preparation for that? What did that process look like for you?

Kaylin:

It was a really good forcing function for me to have to do that homework and ask some of the big questions, and be ready for the big questions. Again, bootstrapping and being a solo founder, I didn't really have anyone to push back on me or be accountable to. So the zooming out, especially when you're all also one woman show, and so in the weeds and in the business, versus working on the business, I really appreciated the opportunity. Of course I was taking it very seriously and wanted to really walk out there feeling as prepared as I could, but it was also just really important zooming out and big picture strategy that it's really hard to carve out time and hold yourself to do without such an impetus like that.

So I started... I of course watched a ton of the show. And there are five questions you know you're going to get. And then from there, really tried to work backwards from what do I want the outcome to be? Or what do I want somebody watching to walk away knowing about the company and my story? And so I think you really... When you're out there and sharks are all talking over each other and bouncing, as much as it's just media training 101, but how can you make sure that you're, as much as you can, controlling the conversation to communicate what you need to get across at the end of the day. So watched a ton of it, made sure I knew, brought in the head of analytics at theSkimm who was just a friend.

And I was like, "All right, what are my numbers? What's CAC to help me here?" So called in some favors for sure. Had a bunch of friends. This was 2020. And so all Zoom, but get on Zoom and pretend to be the sharks and grill me in a bunch of practice sessions. And then ultimately, I think because at that point I had zero employees and had truly done everything myself, I was like, "There's nothing they can ask me that I don't know the answer to."

Ethan:

Right.

Kaylin:

Because I've literally done everything.

Ethan:

You are intimately involved. Yes.

Kaylin:

Right, right. So then just tried to have fun with it.

Ethan:

That's cool. All right. We all see Shark tank, and we see these people making deals, and we see that there's a lot of publicity that comes from being on the show. So do you see it as more of an opportunity for funding as an opportunity for a celebrity partnership? I'm going air quotes here. Is the benefit the appearance on the show? I mean, in your opinion, what's the major benefit of appearing on something as widely popular as Shark Tank?

Kaylin:

I think it's both. And I think it really depends on the state of the business. And I think it's actually changed a lot, certainly since the show began. I mean, if you watch the old seasons, it was, I think the average deal was 30% for 300,000. So a million dollar evaluation, and it was real mom-and-pop. And that was maybe a great deal, and the funding and that exposure to an advisor, one of the sharks, really was the desired outcome. I think now you see a big mix, and they're already VC-backed like real-growth stage businesses also going on for either more strategic money, I think less than the numbers. They're looking for the strategic money of a shark and of course the exposure.

I think just reaching the Shark Tank audience, you reach consumers and people that hopefully will come, and shop, and stay in your ecosystem and become advocates. But also a lot of other investors watch the show, so people spin it into a whole round and follow on investment. A lot of large retail, so big wholesale accounts or collaboration. So I found personally a lot, just the straight traffic and sales day of is great and such a high, but a lot of tangential exposure to different partners, retailers, wholesale, and potential investors or acquirers.

Ethan:

So you're saying that not all money is equal?

Kaylin:

Yeah. Yes. I would say that.

Ethan:

So can you dive in a little more on what strategic money means to you?

Kaylin:

Well, I think you see a lot on the show. And the sharks do it too. They try to picture where you would fit in within their portfolio. So you'll see like Mr. Wonderful being like, "Oh, this is a subscription business. I have a ton of subscriptions... will this product pair with my wine box club of the month, or the wedding industry." So Mark does a ton of education stuff. So I think Lori of course immediately she's like, "If I can get you on QVC, value add." So I think thinking of, and really doing the research if you're preparing for the show of what do the existing portfolios look like? What are the natural advantages each of the sharks might have? I mean, people do this, certainly with outside of Shark Tank, with larger companies or opportunities that position them uniquely in the market in some way. So I think there's, especially if you can get the same terms from multiple sources, then really thinking about all of that, the value add that each might be able to provide.

Annaka:

Yeah. It just sounds to me like Shark Tank is the ultimate pitch practice. You have to have it down together 100% before you're going to be on TV.

Kaylin:

Definitely. I think the-

Annaka:

Impressive.

Kaylin:

Yeah. One take and everything you say can and will be used against you kind of thing is it definitely gets the adrenaline going.

Annaka:

Yeah, no kidding. What were your nerves like in that situation? I feel like I'd rather not.

Kaylin:

Yeah. I mean, the funny part is you walk in, and it looks exactly like the you're standing outside and you hear the count down, and then the door's open and you walk down the hallway, but then you get into the tank, and you hit your mark, and you stand there in silence for 30 to 60 seconds while they adjust the cameras and everything. And then from the side, someone just yells, "Go," and then you start. So it's like, talk about a cold start. You're literally standing there trying to just smile at them. Yeah.

Annaka:

Yeah. Oh my God. I'm very impressed. I would probably pass out. But switching to another aspect of your background, you started in law and then moved into working for theSkimm, where it sounds like you were kind of employee one. Can you tell us a bit about that background and that experience, and how and if it influenced your choice to jump into entrepreneurship?

Kaylin:

Definitely did. So yeah, I started. I was pre-law. I was paralegal, was studying for the LSAT, and then was doing management consulting while I was getting my applications together. And theSkimm really was just one of those time and place things that totally derailed in a great way and just hard right turn. So, I was doing management consulting. I was looking at the businesses I was working on there. I was like, "I really feel like what I'm missing is a personal connection to whatever the service or product." How fun would it be to work somewhere where I am a consumer of that? And so I had been subscribed to theSkimm very early on. They launched the newsletter in summer of 2012. And one of the co-founders and I had a mutual friend, and I think that's how she posted it, or somehow she shared it.

And I got signed up within the first six months. And so I had already been a reader of it and I was a poli sci major undergrad. So it just really connected with just the mission and we were hearing at the time that millennials are cord-cutting and not reading the newspaper. And I was like, "It is. How is my generation going to connect with the current events and the world around them?" And so I was just so drawn to their mission. And then had a coffee date with Carly and Danielle, and just talked about what the next couple years and what their goals were. So joined

as their first employee. And I absolutely think that seeing the inside of a startup so early really helped demystify what it is and what it takes.

And I think from the outside, it's very easy to think everyone totally has it together. They have so many expertise, or skill sets, or things I don't have yet. How could I do that too? And so seeing being in those rooms and in those conversations, and really seeing we're all winging it, and sure, you bring what and you lead with, especially at theSkimm, the values of community and transparency. And we just throw it at the wall and see what sticks. And so I think it really helped give me the confidence that I could figure it out when I was ready. And just the people, I mean, they hired so, so well, so the people I was surrounded by, especially the first... I think the first year we ended with eight employees and then 20 the next. So seeing it from zero, seed stage to 75, 80 when I left, which was a year after the series B. Those years were just a super meaty, creative part of the company's history.

Annaka:

I feel like a lot of people outside of the startup world just think you snap your fingers and everyone knows exactly what you're doing. And we just talked to someone yesterday who's like, "No, you approach every step like a little newborn. You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know what you're doing. And then you just add skills as you come across them."

Kaylin:

Absolutely. And I think I have a friend who coined this term. She was an investor, and I think she actually did a TED talk on this topic, but she coined what she thinks the most important quality in a founder's early team is not... She goes, "IQ, EQ, but AQ, which is your adaptability quotient."

Annaka:

Wow.

Kaylin:

And I think that's so... I mean, I had been in my JIGGY for years. Finally, launched it. Four months later, global pandemic. Whether it's that dramatic or not, you don't know what's going to be thrown at you and what the circumstances are. So I definitely think just adaptability is a really big indicator, but there's a total survivor bias. You're right of like, of course that was going to work. That was always going to work. I'm like, "No." I can definitely tell you there are times you doubt everything.

Annaka:

Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

Ethan:

Once or twice every day.

Annaka:

Yeah, constantly.

Kaylin:

Yeah. Those highs and lows, they're five minutes apart, multiple times a day.

Ethan:

Oh, for sure.

Annaka:

And you've talked about work life balance and what that means to you in your own experience. Can you tell us more about that? How do you find that balance, and why is it so important to you?

Kaylin:

I've come around to a different approach for me, which I think for a long time with work life balance, I would try to have both at the same time and have every day feel balanced, or every week feel balanced. And I don't know, I'm a bit more of an extremes person. And so what actually works better for me is to not try to be a good founder at the same time that I'm good friend, daughter, girlfriend, sister. I think it comes down to clear expectations. And so there're, especially like our PQ4, I'm going to carve-out sometime, let's see when it works. But honestly, most of the next eight weeks, I'm in a bit of a hole, probably not going to respond to texts in a couple hours.

Annaka:

Yeah.

Kaylin:

And it releases the guilt of trying to be good at both at the same time. But equally, when I carve-out space, I have no guilt about not checking my phone and not being responsive to emails right away. And so I think for me, I find it really hard to be half-minded or half available. I have tried to flip it on its head and just nod, and do one thing well at a time. And then if the month feels overall balanced, that feels like a win to me.

Annaka:

Yeah. Yeah. I think something I've heard from peers and coworkers is that guilt thing like, "Oh, someone sent me a message at 8:00, and I didn't respond to it, and I feel horrible about that." And it's designating times to be at work or to be at home. I'm with you. I love a good work life balance. Yes.

Ethan:

For sure.

Kaylin:

Yeah.

Annaka:

It is real. And what measures do you take to then ensure that your team is balanced as well?

Kaylin:

Yeah. We are just starting to get into that. So I've had an amazing career of part-timers, freelancers, agency-type support over the past two years. JIGGY is now two and a half almost. And the last few months has been my first full-timer. And so now we're a team of about four with

some of that part-time support still. And so the last few months it's been a great exercise. And the first two years of JIGGY, my experience leadership wise was very product, the business, the sales, marketing, all of that. And I haven't yet really had the other side of being a founder and CEO, which is the team, internal leadership, and culture. So we're actively still defining that and seeing what works and what's the right balance of everyone being aware and having eyes on everything, and what are the potential auto necks or holdups, but not micromanaging, especially it's only three people still. And all remote and always have been remote.

So yeah, that's an open and very top of mind thing for me. But, I'm open to all text and we text call, Slack, email. And so if something is really inhibiting anybody else's work, I try to prioritize that first. And I think just prioritization, getting super clear on each person's what they're owning, how it all works together and then prioritizing and making sure we get to what we can, I think I have come around. And a lot of people... I'm hearing and having more and more conversations around it can be both. It can be interesting, important work and not kill yourself stressful. I think for a while, this hustle culture of if you're not suffering, you don't deserve it. You haven't earned it if you're not miserable.

Ethan:

Oh yeah.

Kaylin:

And I feel like that's changing a lot, which I'm very happy to see. And I'm trying to bring that to my team too.

Ethan:

Yeah. Gary V has even cooled down quite a bit.

Kaylin:

Yeah.

Annaka:

Yay millennials, we can do this. But do you have any tips or advice for anyone who's having trouble striking that balance? Because I know quite a few people who will go for 80 hours then they're like, "I'm dying, but I don't know how to do this differently."

Kaylin:

Yeah. I've done very... It feels a little silly doing it, but it ends up being insightful for me of very intentional audits of my time. And I'll do almost like a lawyer tracks to 15 minutes what their billables are. I'll almost, for a week, if I'm feeling off balance or I'm spinning wheels, and I'm working hard, but the same things are rolling over on the to-do list or something.

Ethan:

Right. Right.

Kaylin:

I'll have a very intentional audit of my time in very small increments and see what those blockers are. And for me a lot because again, it was bootstrapping and really scared to spend and ultimately getting to loosening that grasp a bit, and just understanding what is the best use of

my time and what is it really just worth it to bring someone on, or get a service for it, or outsource and ultimately free up my time. If I can be focusing my time on the areas that are my strengths and growing the pie, then that extra \$1,000 a month to outsource that. So really being intentional about not just bandwidth overall, but the specific tasks I'm still keeping on my plate versus delegating and doing either Pomodoro method or real tight time blocks to understand what's getting in the way.

Ethan:

Sounds like you've got a lot of strategies. That's really awesome.

Kaylin:

I try.

Annaka:

Well, and the Pomodoro technique, remind me, that's spending a certain amount of time, and then when that certain amount of time is up, you have to go do something else, right?

Kaylin:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Annaka:

Or stand up and get some water.

Kaylin:

Exactly. Trying to do deep work. One, it's funny, because I always crowded myself on being a multi-tasker. And I've also changed my tune where I don't think... I'm going to attempt to be the best unitasker at this one thing for... And usually I think it's 20 minutes. I have a physical, a kitchen timer. And so you do 20 minutes and then you have to do at least five off, change, walk, whatever, even email. My team, they're like, "Oh it's Kaylin's email hour." Because I'm like, everything comes through at the same time. But the idea that the emails that come in are never my priorities or my to-do list, it's everyone else's, so limiting when I allow that.

Ethan:

Right. All right. So in our research, we read that JIGGY grew 550% during COVID. And during COVID is who knows what that means? But 550% over any short stretch of time, that's fantastic.

Kaylin:

Right.

Ethan:

So it seems like you really timed it just right or just rode the wave just perfectly. And now that people are allowed to leave their homes again, what's your strategy to keep the momentum going and how can other founders navigate success that happens through circumstances out of their control?

Kaylin:

Right. Yeah. I mean, it's the timing ended up, again, I was thinking about it for years and then November, 2019 actually launched. So, it was just one of those things. And then it was really

double-edged because it brought incredible demand and attention for a product like ours but also brought all of these constraints and supply chain issues, and all that. So, I really tried to view this window of opportunity and interest to one, just bring people into our fold and view it as like, "Here is a lead gen circumstance, so how do we get you signed up for email? Or SMS? And how do we keep providing not just, 'Here's our product, buy it.' But engaging content." That's where a lot of community stuff and telling our artist stories comes in.

So a lot of focus on that organic social email content and dialogue we have with the community. One thing about puzzles we found, which I certainly found and led with that origin story is that they're addictive. And it was habitual and became my nightly unwind practice. And so once we saw that behavior also starting with our customers, we leaned in and tried to formalize that into a product offering, which is our puzzle club. So it's a monthly membership and we curate the art, and it's a different artist, and you get a studio tour and behind the scenes with the artist. And then you receive their puzzle every month.

And then I think really that's on the customer side. And then some of the new uses of puzzles which we have this whole deck for our partners, we call it puzzles as a platform, and really how do we use puzzles as a vehicle for a brand launch, a product launch or employee gifting? Especially when everyone's remote and stuck at home, how do you surprise and delight your employees, or customers, or VIPs with a branded puzzle? And so opening up that understanding that B to C, we're going to continue to incultivate that community, and have this subscription and really create that ritual and habit around puzzles that will continue the demand. But everyone's allowed outside. There is some natural seasonality like summer when you're doing outdoor activities.

So how do we also buffer that and build the B2B business to even out some of that seasonality or loss in demand? So working a lot on the custom side, our big wholesale and retail partners, and using puzzles from a different angle. Just one example, we just worked with the music artist, Kacey Musgraves, she launched her album. And so we put her... I love her too. I was totally fangirling, but we put her, her new cover album art on a puzzle. And that was sold alongside the album release, a different way to engage fans. We've talked with a couple other partners and with a similar type structure of the partnership. And there's something about putting a puzzle together that is very ripe for surprise and delay kind of Easter egg.

We're talking with one partner about including a QR code, kind of Willy Wonka ticket, win the tour tickets. So I think there are a lot of fun ways that we want to show. And I was talking to an advertising guy, and he was like, "Wait, hold on. I spend 5 million on 30 seconds of attention and you're telling me someone's going to spend eight hours with this thing and I can put my logo on it?" Really building out that revenue stream to support the business overall while we definitely still continue to invest on the direct consumer side.

Annaka:

Yeah. I don't know if y'all could hear this, but when you said Kacey Musgraves, I wasn't pretty sure I heard our producer McKayla squealing in the background.

Ethan:

Oh my God. All of our pre podcast meetings were filled with, "Oh my gosh, she did the Musgraves thing." And I'm like... I don't understand.

Annaka:

Yeah. Ethan's over here like, "What?"

Ethan:

Everybody gets it but me and that's okay.

Annaka:

Yeah. And Ethan and I have had multiple conversations about brands and companies building out that personal touch with their consumers. And hearing more about that and the length you're going to to include consumers in this community of doing a jigsaw puzzle might be you at your kitchen table by yourself and be building that community around like, "Hey, we all like to do this." That's brilliant and I love it.

Kaylin:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you.

Annaka:

And you've been featured in a ton of publications. Is this part of your marketing strategy or do you just like us that much?

Kaylin:

No, it definitely is. And I think the publications you mentioned, I see it as two-pronged. One is just we're eco, we have a product to sell, so gift guides, the quick hits, different roundups, gift guide products, lists, things like that. But really the opportunity to share more about what we're about, and sometimes on those lists they're like, "Oh, you're pretty puzzle, pretty packaging, cool." But can miss a lot of our artists and what we're trying to do, and what we stand for, and how the people behind it. So I really appreciate the opportunity to share that side of the business.

Annaka:

Yeah, absolutely. And do you have any advice for anyone that wants to reach a wider audience through media and maybe might be a little shy?

Kaylin:

I think, I mean for shyness, so how to reach them, I think being super clear on just your why and how, what you're doing, how is it bigger than you? And how to make that resonate with people. I think shyness to get to... Of course, if it's yours and you have to be the one speaking it, ultimately, it is your voice and face, but if almost getting behind the brand and mission is more comfortable, I think that can be equally as powerful to just lead with that and make sure that I think people... It's much easier to negotiate on someone else's behalf, right? Than your own. So the similar approach of you are a steward of this message, if you will. And so lead with that.

Annaka:

Yeah. And for those of you who don't know me, I am incredibly introverted and I will say that practice helps, but I can't imagine being on everything you've been on and being like, "Yeah, this is fine." I would be so scared.

Ethan:

Oh, you didn't get the memo, we're going on the cover of Podcast Weekly.

Annaka:

Woo.

Ethan:

Just kidding.

Annaka:

Yeah. I'll see.

Ethan:

Podcast Weekly, if you're a real thing, we'd like to hear from you. Drop the line. All right. So you've got direct to consumer stores on your website, but JIGGY puzzles can also be found in retail stores. Obviously, there's an advantage to being in multiple places, but what's the thought on I should do one versus the other, I should do both. How did you come up with that?

Kaylin:

I had been thinking about whether, I felt like in the beginning it was binary like our retail yes or no. And I'm from the onset and still most excited and passionate about the direct to consumer and building our own community and audience and all of the things I mentioned thus far and really having the brand be centered around that. But the things that convinced me to do retail were one, seeing some of the behavior of our customers and that gifting, for example, we'd get emails like, "I want to bring this to a housewarming, it's tonight. Where can I find you in the next 30 minutes?" So having accessibility in key markets with shelf space and two, as I mentioned before, the positioning of the product, so decided to do retail but wanted to be specific about which partners.

So the first one we went with was anthropology. Since then we've been in Nordstroms and Bloomingdale's and some elevated gift boutiques. And so the whole positioning of the brand and our product, again, away from toy game and into home gift, lifestyle, decor, art, having the retail partners we chose lend their brand name to help that positioning and make that case. And so I have chosen to use the partners wisely in that way and then direct our customers. We want them to still be our JIGGYpuzzles.com customers, but if they need to pick something up quickly or touch and feel and see the designs in person, sometimes it's hard, especially with the materials we use, the glass and the thickness of our card stock and all of that. It's hard to communicate that through photography or through our product pages. So I think now I very much see them as means to the same goal. It's just a different experience we can provide.

Ethan:

Gotcha. So you mentioned your first retail partnership was with anthropology.

Kaylin:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ethan:

Can you tell us the story about how you went from no partnerships to getting that first partnership with Anthropology?

Kaylin:

Yeah. It was right before COVID, so I was able to go in person, but I had done some just cold outreach when I was thinking about who. So I knew that Urban Outfitters, Anthropology, Free People beholden with the same parent brand. And actually some friends have been like, "This feels like the urban like miscellaneous table. I feel like there are puzzles there." I thought anthropology was a good brand fit for us and our demographic and that I knew during Q4, they really leaned more into gifts and home than apparel. So I had been doing some outreach and then I think she first reached out. She actually had found me on Instagram separately. So it wasn't my invite email that did it, but one of the buyers saw us on Instagram and reached out and I packed my car up. They're based in Philadelphia. So not a far drive from New York City, so packed up some samples and drove to Philly and went to their headquarters. And we really just talked through who the shopper is, who our JIGGY puzzler is. And what really connected I think with them is that they felt like the anthropology woman is like both wants form and function. So she wants something practical. She wants the use of it but expects it to be curated and elevated and look Instagramable in her home. And so we felt it was just super aligned. They already had a bunch of artists' residence programs and do a lot of support of emerging artists. And so they had in-house artists already that they wanted to use the workup.

So we curated seven designs together for our JIGGY Anthropology collaboration. And then launched those in time for the holiday season. So launched those in October of that first year. It was definitely not seamless. I got ahead of my skis a little bit. I went from, I was still a one woman show mind you, and it was like tens of thousands of units, which was more than we had sold on our own already. And very specific, the whole wholesale guidelines of how things need to be labeled and the master cartons, and how they need to be delivered and all that. It was just very technical, which I did not have expertise in, but again, one of those, you figured out one foot in front of the other and yeah. Seeing being one year in... Well, we launched in October 2020, so less than a year in and seeing a national rollout in all domestic Anthropology stores was just a really surreal, special moment.

Annaka:

That's and Anthropology is an experience. I feel like everyone who's been in one knows what they look like. And speaking of Instagram, how did you leverage your social media following or really get your social media going to where it was impacting your business?

Kaylin:

Yeah. I started the Instagram pre-launch. I was all right, so the products being made right now takes a minute, then we have to ship it, takes a minute. So what can I do in the meantime? So I started collecting emails and threw up a landing page with a wait list and then started the social account. So for a few months before launch, posted puzzle tangential content, I would say, and just art, not the specific designs we were launching with but some just discovery of new art. And so that was helpful even just for launch day. And then once we launched, it's one of those things that I feel very particular about, anything that's customer facing voice and personality of the brand, so I'll email, social, SMS, I still write every word out for the most part.

Ethan:

Wow.

Kaylin:

And it's definitely not scalable, but it's still just one of those things that I feel very strongly about. So yeah, now that we have, I think, I don't know, we're 70,000 followers. It definitely has become a channel that both is great for just discovery and visibility and people share and find us that way, but it's also a two-way, a dialogue. So people DM or comment all the time different ideas, send us different artists that they would want to see. Will you do kids puzzles, will you do, for example, frames of something that came from that because they finish their puzzle and then and reach out and be like, "All right, what size, what thickness, what do I need to do?" So we actually just launched our own JIGGY frames.

So it's a pairing for each design. And so yeah, now see our social as one spoke of our community hub, where we get a lot of insight and learn and then email as well. So I think, I mean, it really depends on your brand and content creation and keeping up with the best practices of cadence and everything that you need to do to really have it be like a tent pole of the brand takes a ton of work. And especially if you're like an aesthetically driven brand, which we are between the photography of the product and the art, we want that to be visually captured. It's definitely a big lift, but I think ultimately worth it. And I can't tell you how many times we just anecdotally hear that's how people found us or bought one puzzle and now have been following for two years and not bought another but feel a connection to the brand through it.

Annaka:

Yeah. And you said something that piqued my interest as a branding kind of person, but your brand voice and personality in my experience, a lot of people skipped that part. But how did you really define that and narrow it down you're a very aesthetic brand. You're very aesthetics driven. How did you define that voice when you started out?

Kaylin:

Yeah. That's been another exercise now with building out a team of... for a long time, I didn't have to because it was mine basically. I didn't really have to meta explain it. It was just very natural. But I mean, we did the same exercise at theSkimm, which was fascinating because that was the entire product, right? The voice of the newsletter was crucial and how to scale that, how to hire an editorial team that, as a reader, it would be seamless and couldn't even tell who wrote it one day to the next. So saw that firsthand and got a lot of good insight there of how to formalize a voice into a guide and something, a playbook that could be passed off to someone.

And I try to walk a fine balance and even with the name. I think that was probably in the beginning, the most, the catalyst to really articulate the brand because it's like, all right, I want it to tie to puzzles. I want it to make sense and be related and puzzle jigsaw something. And I want it to be not necessarily minimalist but short and sweet to the point and not too much like pump and circumstance, but also I want it to be playful. I'm approaching this in an elevated way, but at the end of the day, it's a puzzle, I want it to have some fun and playfulness. And so going through that exercise to have Google Docs of potential names and ultimately get to JIGGY. That was the first step.

Annaka:

And all I can think about is that Will Smith song. So it's been in my head this entire interview.

Kaylin:

I always want one JIGGY pun and...

Annaka:

You got to have puns. I mean, come on.

Ethan:

Right. Yeah. You went in a different direction on that than I did, you certainly wanted short and sweet, and I was like saw, like jigsaw, but I think that's already taken. They say, "I want to play a game."

Kaylin:

Yeah.

Ethan:

Maybe not the same kind of game.

Annaka:

Oh my God.

Kaylin:

That would've stood out in the market for sure.

Ethan:

All right. So something that we've heard-

Annaka:

Yeah, your turn. I can't hold it together.

Ethan:

Something that we've heard from every one of our founders so far is that entrepreneurship is hard. It's hard. I mean, there's no way to get around it. So what was something that surprised you when you jumped in, when you launched your startup? Was there something that was just so much harder than you thought it was going to be? Or even the opposite, was there something that was like you were thinking it was going to be super hard and it was just way easier than you thought it was going to be?

Kaylin:

I think the things that I thought might have been hard that ended up not are just the things that seem, if you've never done it before seem confusing or just all the infrastructure, like incorporating and setting up and becoming compliance and all of the hard business ops side. And so that was a pleasant surprise of just there's so many materials out there and just checklists. Like with a physical product, we have glass, someone's going to cut themselves and

sue us. Just all of those things that can seem quite overwhelming. And between just you got checklists, what do you need to do? What do you need to know? Disclaimers, business insurance, stuff like that. There's just so many materials and experts that will lend themselves.

So that has actually not been as much of a hindrance as I might have thought. The things that have truly been hard, I think, like the in the weeds stuff of just deciding policies around some customer service issues, how do you... balancing being a small business and having to have the unit of economics make sense. But then also just be generous with customer service issues or lost packages and reshipping, and some of the things that are just like the cost of doing business. And defining what your approach and policies are has actually been a bit less straightforward than I would've thought. Again, some of just the manufacturing and freight, especially in the COVID world. I think for the first time ever every international shipping container was booked at one point in time.

Annaka:

Oh, wow.

Kaylin:

So things that you... I guess, this to sum it up some things that you have no control over, especially as a very type A to... I've done hard things before, but they were always within my control, in school. Okay. I have my thesis due. Like I will pull all nighters. I will do whatever it has... To be told your products at the port, and it can't get off the boat for two weeks. And so your customers are now angry and you're going to need to refund everyone for the holidays. And so you're going to lose money and there's nothing you can do.

Annaka:

Oh my God.

Kaylin:

I'm like, "Mmm. I don't like bribe someone at port authority. What do you mean? There's nothing to do." I don't, that's so hard to accept.

Ethan:

Right.

Kaylin:

And so I'm like swim, go the boat. I don't know, figure it out.

And so, yeah. So honestly, some of the hardest moments have just been around the lack of control. And then the downstream disappointing customers and missing a moment or a sales window or holidays or something and just having to be okay with that or figure out plan B, C, D E. Yeah. That's been hard.

Annaka:

Yeah. Plan B. Don't mess up plan A.

Kaylin:

Yes.

Annaka:

I would've a hard time, I like all control in one little please, please don't take that from me. And so I would really struggle as well. In some of our previous conversations in previous digging, there was a story about blank puzzles going out. And I would love to know more because it sounds like it turned out really well.

Kaylin:

Yes. It was one of those... What's that saying? Necessities, a mother of invention moments when we sold out of our puzzles, COVID... Ooh, let's decline that call. I don't know if you guys heard. Let's start over. Somebody computer was buzzing. So yes, that was, we launched in November 2019. I'd gotten our first production run. We were selling through them. And then March 2020, is stay at home orders, quarantine. Everyone's looking for activities stuck at home. So the remainder of our inventory, which I thought was going to last months sold out in a couple weeks. So April 2020 we're sold out. I rush back into production, reorder everything, but it's going to be a couple months until it arrives. So we have this period when it's like, "All right, I'm a four-month old company. How do I stay relevant when I have nothing to sell people." And so first we did gift cards and we did digital gift cards. And then we got these really cute mini-puzzle gift cards, they're 24 pieces and you put them together. It reveals your redemption code.

And then this idea came out of both what we were hearing from our artist community. So while this all was happening, we were having conversations with our artists about how they were doing and were they okay? And a lot of their galleries were closed or exhibits were canceled. And so they were in a tough spot and didn't have... There weren't a ton of commissions of original art in their early days of COVID with such uncertainty. So the idea came to me to use them in their free time to create, to get... The only thing our factory could provide were blank, white puzzles. The pieces were cut, there was just nothing printed on them. And so we got those, we distributed them to our artists, and they hand painted and hand drew directly on to these puzzles.

So created a real one of a kind original puzzle. And then we hosted an auction of them. So it was a JIGGY originals puzzle art auction. And we shared the proceeds between the artists herself and New York City COVID fundraising efforts. And so that ended up being a really special moment for the brand, for a relationship with these artists and for our community who participated in the auction. So it definitely was that adaptability quotient idea of how to use what you have. And I think that's why having a why is so important and having a mission, because that was really our support of artists. And having them be so integral to the brand is really where that came from and wouldn't have been possible without them.

Annaka:

Yeah. And you ended up with a very personal touch in there, and what an experience for people that do own those puzzles now. That's very cool. I'm really glad we got to talk about that story.

Kaylin:

Thanks.

Annaka:

And how do you deal with imposter syndrome? And do you have any advice for entrepreneurs working through that?

Kaylin:

Yeah. I definitely have it, deal with it. And I think the more you grow then the bigger conversations you're talking to like Kacey Musgrave's managers. And I feel like on the one hand, the more experience you have or the bigger your brand gets, maybe the less you should have it because you did this thing and you have this big brand. But then you're also, I think hopefully leveling up and talking in bigger conversations in bigger rooms. So I think back to theskimm, the demystifying, the more that I just hear and see and network and talk to friends and other founders, and really just the shared experiences, and really hearing and seeing that everyone at least feels like they're winging it. And to have that be an open conversation and more normalized really, really helps.

And ultimately, I think, I heard someone recently trying to reframe imposter syndrome of it's not a bad thing, it's actually a good. We should embrace it because hopefully that means you are stretching your comfort zone and you are leveling up. And so rather than, I think, seeing it... Someone's like, "Seeing fear or imposter syndrome as an obstacle, seeing is actually a good sign that you're on the right track."

Annaka:

Yeah. Huh. That's heartening for me.

Ethan:

All right. This has been a really great show. I've really enjoyed having you on.

Kaylin:

Thank you.

Ethan:

One more question and then we'll wrap up. How can our listeners support JIGGY? And is there anything else you'd like to share with the listeners before we wrap up?

Kaylin:

Yeah. So supporting JIGGY can look like following us, engaging with us, sending us artists you love. So we're JIGGY Puzzles everywhere on the internet, Instagram, website, Facebook. And of course, take a look, check out our puzzles. If you're looking for something to unwind or have a puzzle lover in your life to gift to, that would mean the world to us. And other things I'd like to share, keep eyes peeled for some things we have ahead. As I mentioned, we're always listening and talking to our community about ideas. So the frames that I mentioned was a new thing. And then in the coming months, we have both that art voting contest, the winners of that are our next collection, which are launching in the spring. Some fun, big collaborations, similar to our Kacey Musgraves and then kids puzzles as well, which I'm really excited about with some incredible illustrative artists for 100-piece kid sizes.

Annaka:

Man, so many fun things to look forward to. Yeah. We will put links to social channels and any other fun stuff in the show notes. And Kaylin, thank you so much for joining us today. That is, unfortunately though, a wrap for this episode of the Startup Savants Podcast. We made it. We want to thank you listener for hanging out with us today. Do you want to chime in? If you think

we're doing a job, let us know in the comments over at startupsavant.com/podcast. If you think we are awful, let us know in the comments over at startupsavant.com/podcast. Ethan reads the bad ones. I read the good ones. If you really loved the show, head over to Apple podcast or your favorite pod catcher, and leave us a five star review. For tools, guides, videos, startup stories, and so much more head over to truic.com. That's truic.com, T-R-U-I-C.com. See you folks.

Ethan:

Peace.