Our Conversation with Laura Bronner

**Duke I&E:** Tell us about your time at Duke. What did you study and what were you involved in? Did you do anything entrepreneurial while you were here?

I was a Public Policy major at Duke. I was particularly interested in low income housing issues. I have made a lot of career shifts to get from low income housing to beauty products!

**LB:** I didn't do anything particularly entrepreneurial at Duke. Entrepreneurship as a study did not exist when I was a student. Yes - I'm old!

**Duke I&E:** You worked at Ernst and Young after graduating. Tell us about that experience.

**LB:** I joined Ernst & Young's real estate group so that I could work with their government clients on low income housing projects. It was an incredible experience and I learned a lot. I also learned that a career in low income housing would be challenging - and not in a way that I was excited about!

I know there is a stigma around consulting for Duke students. I think consulting is a fantastic experience. It's like boot camp for business. To this day, I love to hire consultants because I know they will come equipped with professional presentation, communication, and reporting skills.

**Duke I&E:** You started Gloss48. Tell us the story of how it got started.

**LB:** I met my current business partner, Jill Kravetz, at our last venture. She founded an upscale chain of nail and waxing salons called MiniLuxe. I moved to Boston several years ago to help her run that venture. Jill and I worked beautifully together. When we were both ready to do something outside of brick and mortar salons, it was a natural choice for us to be business partners.

At MiniLuxe, a big piece of our business strategy was retail. We carried a lot of unique, exciting independent beauty brands that were not available at Sephora and the department stores. We worked hard to differentiate our assortment - in part, because we were down the street from Sephora and the department stores! We learned that beauty consumers were hungry for exposure to brands that were not owned by the major conglomerates like L'Oreal and Lauder. At the same time, Sephora was focusing more and more on conglomerate brands. We created Gloss48 as a way to bridge the gap in the indie beauty market that Sephora had left behind.

**Duke I&E:** Tell us what your business is like these days. What do you spend your time on, and who is your target customer?

**LB:** We launched our full site a little over a year ago! We are still very young, but we are
working with over 250 brands and 3,000+ products. I balance my time between customer acquisition and nurturing and company strategy/fundraising. Life is crazy!

**Duke I&E:** As you reflect back on the years since you've started, what are some of the things you've learned that you wished you'd known when you were starting?

**LB:** The one thing I would have done differently from the start was to look for more partners early on. There are so many opportunities for a beauty ecommerce company to partner with content sites and apps. It makes perfect sense. We have always partnered with other ecommerce companies on discreet marketing campaigns, but I think there are much greater opportunities!

**Duke I&E:** Thinking back to when you were a student, were there things you wished you'd done differently to prepare for being an entrepreneur? And what did you do as a student that you are glad you did?

**LB:** I'm not sure what I would have done differently back then! Certainly, if I were a student now, I would take full advantage of all of the entrepreneurship programs. I think that learning to write a business plan, thinking through startup issues and team management, and hard skills like digital marketing are invaluable.

The most important thing I did at Duke to support my entrepreneurial path was forming relationships with my classmates. I have done a TON of networking over the years to get me to where I am today. I don't really think about it as networking since so many of the people who have helped me are friends and classmates!

**Duke I&E:** For students that are thinking of starting a company, but thinking about getting work experience first, how would you help them analyze that decision?

**LB:** That's a very personal decision. I am a firm believer that there is never a *good* time to start a company. You just need to dive in. If you have an idea and you have a clear path to execution, there are a lot of resources available (incubators, grants, etc.) to help you make it happen.

That said, if there are skills that would help you be more successful with your idea, I'm a big fan of learning while earning a paycheck! I constantly draw from my retail experience at Gap, Inc. and my beauty experience in the salon industry.

**Duke I&E:** A lot of students get stuck on the idea they need to do something incredibly high tech like create the next Google or Facebook. And a lot of them think they need to keep their idea a secret. They might look at a business like yours and say "it's not a technology innovation" and say "if I tell someone my idea, why don't they just steal it and do it themselves?". How do you advise students that are thinking in this way?

**LB:** I think there are a lot of ways to make your business defensible - starting with your own skill set and connections. Gloss48's technology is not particularly interesting, but Jill and I have built relationships with hundreds of brands and beauty bloggers/vloggers that many other entrepreneurs would not have been able to build. I would advise these
students to find an angle - a reason to believe that they will create a better ______________ than what’s out there today.

**Duke I&E:** Tell us what types of things your role entails. What are you responsible for?

**LB:** I am the CMO and COO of Gloss48. On a practical level, that means that I cover everything customer facing while Jill handles everything brand facing. We are both highly involved in fundraising as well. Thankfully, we have an amazing team to support us!

**Duke I&E:** Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, is a fan of people working at startups, gaining operational, and then launching their own startup. Given your experience, do you think you are prepared to one day start something (or be a part of something at an early stage)?

**LB:** I feel like I am fully prepared to start a new business post-Gloss48. We will just have to see what arises!

**Duke I&E:** Tell us what it’s like to live in Boston. What’s the vibe like out there for an alum?

**LB:** I love Boston. We have an amazing alumni group here. I attended an alumni breakfast last month with Steve Pagliuca, Duke Alum / co-owner of the Celtics / Managing Partner at Bain Capital. It was an incredible crowd!