

CAROLINE 00:12

Hello and welcome to Mind Your P's: The Purposeful Leaders Guide. We believe in all the P's: people, purpose, planet, pizza and even prosecco and this week we're speaking to Celia Hodson founder of Hey Girls, a social enterprise committed to ending period poverty with their buy-one-give-one model. Launched in 2018 they've donated over 11.5 million period products to people in need and Celia I believe launched Hey Girls from her kitchen table with her daughters and is now a multi-award winning social entrepreneur whose work has helped to bring the issue of period poverty to public is an absolute pleasure to have you here Celia

CELIA 00:51

Thank you it's great to be here especially with the pizza and the prosecco I didn't know about that!

CAROLINE 01:00

If only if only we could get face to face after this lockdown we'll definitely include that listen please tell us a bit but Hey Girls and your story, what inspired you to start the company?

CELIA 01:08

Yeah do you know this is very interesting and I think any entrepreneurs that are listening in the importance in your story is a really big thing isn't it, why did you why did you why did you what gets you out of bed in the morning? So our backstory is I brought my kids up on benefits, I was a single parent and barely managed, I think it's probably putting it mildly, I really struggled living on benefits and being told well you know how much you had to live on and where went to school, and what you had to eat and what you have to dress. And all of that it's complete lack of agency that that you go through when you're absolutely skint. My kids are now in their thirties and they've got their own families I'm a very proud grandma of three and then you would think you know between them me being a young mom with those with those little ones, to now that things would have changed and we wouldn't still be talking about poverty and we wouldn't have people who couldn't afford food, or heat, light or period products or any of those things but we do. And we know through Covid that is so much worse than it was. So when we started Hey Girls the stat that woke me up was that one in ten women in the U. K. importantly in the U. K., couldn't afford period products. Now we're just come you know we've been through the most horrific twelve months that figure it has grown to one in three so the poverty stats are absolutely awful. So the reason we started was because of that one in ten nobody can accept that figure, what can you do about it? And as a family we got round the table and said so what can we do? My girls are very dynamic and outspoken and and have huge social purpose, so should we do a cake bake should we do a sponsored walk can we raise some money? And things got a little bit carried away in the conversation and we realised the only way to make a significant and sustainable social impact was to start to buy products and sell them. And I come from a social enterprise background so that's obviously the bis-business model that I would gravitate towards but the

- the buy one give one, why not every time you do something that we do every month, why not that be the impact? Why not buy one for you and buy the exact same product for somebody in need. So that was the premise really, if we can find a business model that would allow us to do that and then that sounds like a good thing. We didn't know at that time and that it would take off in the way it did.

CAROLINE 03:57

And so how - what happened, you know Celia you from what I understand of you you're a humble humble down-to-earth woman but you know, awards coming out your ears right, Inspirational Woman of the Year, Social Entrepreneur of the Year, Saltire Outstanding Women of Scotland, Great British Entrepreneur National winner you really are collecting.

CELIA 04:23

Yeah I don't enjoy the the profile I'm just I mean I'm a granny and I was retired and I was quite happy bumbling along doing that and so I don't particularly enjoy the limelight, and to be given such massive accolades you know the Great British Entrepreneur, the businesses you are up against for that award was you know they would just multi-multi million pound organisations that we've all heard of so for us to pick up awards for products, for our service, our actual innovation around the way that we do things was just, is and it continues to be quite amazing and I do sort of have to calm myself down and think 'really, who on earth are you Celia to stand up there and pick up an accolade?' and I can let you know it's kind of a thing but Hey Girls is a massive family so I never think about 'I'm Hey Girls' everybody in the organisation is Hey Girls, it's them that make it all happen I just facilitate a bit of good stuff, but actually the level of pro bono support we received just to set us off on such a good path, we called in all of the favours, you know my LinkedIn was red hot with us asking all the stupid questions, really daft expressions about you know how to import to the EU and what to do about barcodes and all of these daft questions but I'm a big believer of using your LinkedIn network and asking lots of people a tiny little question, so there's probably about fifty people, fifty clever gifted, generous individuals that lent support to get us - so they win the awards really.

CAROLINE 06:03

Do you know I love that Celia because I've got a little post-it note on my desk here that says just ask and it's it's something that I think we're all guilty of, that fear of asking so that's something that really inspires me is is that whole principle of you know - people want to help they want to give the want to support so just ask but listen for what size of of company you have now how many is in the in the family?

CELIA 06:28

So there are sixteen team members, there are a lot of volunteers of the sixteen spread between Musselborough and Diss which is just on the south Norfolk border we've opened we've only opened our dispatch centre in Diss in February, first of February to try and cope with capacity and to do less road miles moving product up and down from Scotland to England and all those kind of things. So sixteen a wonderful board who give me endless amounts of time around the governance and even the spreadsheets and all of those things I don't particularly dig, and yes so we need so it's a jolly team.

CAROLINE 07:12

Yeah and how do you you know that's that's quite either it's a great number of people you've got volunteers as well how do you build a positive company culture what what how do you do that?

CELIA 07:24

I think during Kobe that's been a challenge for everybody so even we work in a beautiful space and I beg stole and borrowed office equipment and shelves and things to make sure we had a really lovely place to come to work, just because you're for special purpose doesn't mean that if you have to work out of a grotty dungeon. We're creating menstrual products so therefore we have to have hygiene standards, but actually a space that's light bright and full of colour for people to come to work and enjoy being here and the team created the vibe the first day that we came here we did in in our new center is we set up a social contract that we all collectively agreed 'how do we work' in our little things like who's going to clean the fridge, you know who's gonna take the bins out but how do we collectively build this brand and how do we respect each other and how do we and answer questions challenging questions? How do we actually set ourselves up to receive challenging questions and the team just you know they just swallowing it up it's absolutely amazing.

CAROLINE 08:29

What's been the biggest challenge through it all, I mean you know you you it sounds like you've had to learn about creating products, selling products, import, export, building the team what what's been your your your biggest challenge and how did you overcome that?

CELIA 08:45

You know the biggest challenge is my capability, I've had to learn all of the stuff and that although we've gone very quickly, you know I have to I have to be confident I know enough about it to go out and ask the right questions so I think that that has been a big challenge. Constantly looking for more environmental ways to do things and I think all business are challenged around that but I've already mentioned why are we shipping things down the motorway, why are they coming in and then being packed and then going out. So looking at

at that environmental efficiencies taking out a plastic out of everything that we do the you can't just sell plastic-free products and then live your life filled with plastic you've got to walk the talk haven't you, so making sure that we are internally and environmentally organisation not just externally and that's a journey and you're never at the end of that and our customers will pull us up if they don't like it's doing a particular thing and we'll have the debate internally and we'll go yup, so that I think that ultimately the biggest challenge was around the growth. You know we started out as you said on my kitchen table selling a products and we launched our product arrived on the seventh of January, we went live on the ninth of January, and we were all tee'd up and had that not arrived goodness knows what we would've done so going from there to then being listed in Asda and being listed in Waitrose, in the Coop and Scotmid and winning some pretty big contracts with the Scottish government and then the Welsh government English government and so it's you know, you don't get time to try it - I'd like to say we're gonna try it we're gonna reflect and refine and then try it - we don't get time to do that. We just go on on on on on and we don't get time to come down between each thing. So we'll kind of run a campaign and nearly before it's ended we're on to the next thing that's just because of the growth opportunity that we've been grabbing really.

CAROLINE 10:54

And just, speaking about growth, tell us about the Hey Girls home pack service and and what that's about and what the response was there?

CELIA 11:04

Yes the home pack was an amazing innovation that came from one of our local authorities and our team member Becca who runs our public sector contracts, so Hey Girls typically we're sending pallette loads of products purchased through the Scottish government funding and purchased by local authorities or colleges or universities and sending out pallet loads to a location so you would send out to City Hall or leisure centres or foodbanks or wherever people could get to products that could come in and collect whenever they need it, so then you're going into lockdown and nobody can come in and collect anything. So we thought how on earth do we get these out to people who need them so we then switched loading up pallets to loading up almost shoeboxes with three to six months worth of period products and sending them out to people's homes. So hugely time consuming but it's a fabulous feeling to know that someone is getting that to their home just when they need it there is a and it was quite a steep the change of direction we have to go in to make that happen [crosstalk]

CAROLINE 12:24

Adapting! Was it over eight hundred and fifty thousand packs is that is that right?

CELIA 12:30

It's a lot isn't it!

CAROLINE 12:29

Wow.

CELIA 12:33

All hand packed here in Musselborough! Yeah it's a lot of packing and then and everyone has to come in and pack, whoever can and it's a staggered shift that goes on that keeps everybody safe, that starting at six in the morning and just pack pack pack.

CAROLINE 12:51

That's another P. pack. We'll add that one in Celia. And listen what's been your expedience of leading the team through through this last year?

CELIA 13:02

Well that's a big question isn't it, I think we were okay at first because we thought it was short term thing we though ok we'll go through this everyone take everything home set up at home we'll get into it, that kind of thing. Then I suppose everyone was sort of working from outside and it did feel lighter, we were doing lots of zoom calls and team calls and all of those things but actually as it moved into the wintertime, I became concerned about team members you know you're at home all day on your own, and your mental well being all you've been doing is staring at your screen, how do we stay connected? So we just tried to bring in a lot more fun the way we communicated and we have working together which is in it just as you and I am doing it open your laptops and we sit opposite each other virtually and you can pretend that you're at work so you do all that chitter chatter, what did you do at the weekend and I'm writing this can anyone help? Just trying to make you feel like you're all together but very mindful of the pressure that we have had most of our team are mums, so you can imagine that. Mums are wanting to come into work and they've got kids at home and how did they manage that kind of thing and so you'd be really mindful of all of that pressure, so it's been tough, really tough.

CAROLINE 14:20

Yeah it's not been it's not been easy and I think there has been that winter dip hasn't there when people are really really worried about family friends colleagues and trying to be boost. you know best that moral is really tough and actually some of the stuff that we get involved in with, you know, we talk about the antidote to that feeling and work is whole heartedness and

doing something for someone else, that that gives you that lift to keep you through the the weekly and I suppose that's what some of your volunteers do as well. So you you've obviously got a clear purpose, I would see that your your website tone and your messaging is playful, was that deliberate deliberate thing.

CELIA 15:04

Yeah it is playful, a little bit cheeky and we say we don't you know we don't shy away from the subject because periods, menstruation and it's all very much whispered about isn't it really 50% of the population have had will have periods. So we tried to just out some of those old myths and taboos and tried to broaden the conversation wherever it needed to go and that times that's been quite uncomfortable to have those conversations, bring men into the conversation, dad into the conversation, bring boys - why don't we educate boys about menstruation when they're at school so just trying to go there really and have a really open and honest discussion about menstruation.

CAROLINE 15:53

It's definitely changed over the years hasn't it Celia because my dad would never have gone to the shops for me as a teenager to purchase any kind of products, but my husband goes for my daughter every month.

[crosstalk]

It's definitely changing isn't it?

CELIA 16:12

I must show you this, so we do this little pack, it's like a flash pack of you know at education stuff and it's all the funny things that people asked us about menstruation. So one girl told us that her boyfriend had said you know 'why can't you wait to get home to have your period', do you switch it on do you - no - so we we put all of these great things in to a pack and just answer the questions like if you go swimming with the sharks get you? Probably not in East Lothian! Girls thought you couldn't have a shower when you're on your period and if that is what you've been told and that is truth isn't it, why would you question it so just put all of those things and some really technical stuff about the anatomy me and menstrual cycles and education and diet and exercise and just put them into a pack for people to have a conversation with their families or at work or at school or whatever so lots of taboos still left hanging around.

CAROLINE 17:22

So yeah a little bit of work to do but and Celia why do you what's your biggest sense, what's given you the biggest sense of purpose so far and has it started since, and has changed since you started Hey Girls?

CELIA 17:40

No, I can remember when I was a teenager do in my life-plan [unintelligible] but I remember wanting to do something in, and you know people good people in communities, people that do something that holds a community and I remember thinking it to be a pillar of the community to do something that made a difference to other people. So I've always sort of held that 'what can I do that would make a difference? And I spend a lot of time working out you know my purpose and the whole thing about imposter syndrome, and who what the hell do you think I could do anything I have this constant battle with myself but actually you know the proudest thing is creating a brand that competes in the marketplace with all the big boys and they are all run by guys, [unintelligible] the guys that run Tampax, you know all of those big organisations, our product is better than all of theirs and that I'm very very proud of that but actually should be in a we've donated now over thirteen million products to people in need in the U. K. and when we started to people said 'Oh you know you're going to send products out to Africa or India or Malawi,' and I said no it's about the British poor, this is about British poverty, so actually to see all of our fantastic donation partners and there's about two hundred of them up and down the UK that we send this stuff out to every month and they take it out to their community so actually to see them posting just drop this box off on Mrs so and so's doorstep or just taking this down to the foodbank, that that is phenomenal really makes me feel very proud of what as a team of what we do.

CAROLINE 19:24

Yeah it's really is really inspiring and is your work inspired the the the the big fish as you as you talked about, to do more in the buy one give one?

CELIA 19:38

I don't suppose they even know we exist, they swat us away, I used to write to them when when I had time with setting up you know I used to write to the big companies and say you know look we are doing a tiny little social enterprise - you too could make a social impact and then a lot of people wrote me to say, I think it's Bodyform that do donate one pack buy one pack if you read the small print and how shocking and awful that was and I thought well the volumes that they're selling, they are selling gazillions of products every month then if it is just one in ten that's still going to make you know a massive massive difference and these guys could end period poverty overnight but they don't choose to do and nothing wrong with people making money if that's where the heart is but so that in a constantly, shouting about

what we're doing and there's lots of amazing niche brands like Hey Girls - we're the only one in the world that does that buy one give one and so that is absolutely you need to get this lovely box of applicator tampons with candy on the box, all these are our team or our friends and these girls on our on box, isn't that cool. So you get this for you and you said and a box of tampons to someone in need and so that I think is is just glorious isn't it.

CAROLINE 20:59

Love it, it's a great model and just just thinking about that profit piece, so we often speak to you know we were speaking to business leaders every day, you know there there there our clients, we're speaking to charity leaders every day they're also our clients because we're supporting both sides and something we always talk about to the business leaders is what comes first is it, people, purpose or profit what would you how would you describe that Celia?

CELIA 21:28

Wow that's a killer question, I think it's and it's got to be purpose, if you come to work at Hey Girls you come because you're buy in to the purpose it's our people that deliver and without our fabulous team we are nothing, without our wonderful customers and ambassadors and the planet piece is constantly on our mind so I I don't I don't know if you need you can only rank them, I don't know I don't I couldn't put this much energy into something that was for profit, the other P! We have to sort of wash our face financially we don't live off grants, we're sustainable social enterprise and have been since about two months in that was my whole intention, but it's I think it's a balance really for us.

CAROLINE 22:19

You know it is really important isn't because sometimes, you know we we you know we don't want business leaders to think profit's a dirty word because you have to make money to be sustainable and I'm you know I'm so pleased that you talk about that because a lot of times I mean we are we are not for profit, we are limited by guarantee so we're a social enterprise and we always wanted to choose to put our community at sorry for any surplus funds back into the community, but that was our choice to do that we just felt that that model works really well for us, and that's who we are and it's part of our purpose so this isn't about saying you know profit is a bad word of course it has to be there to make things sustainable and give you growth, but what what challenges, you know obviously you've you've had to get funded in the start you talked about getting some support in the start. But now you're fully trading and that's what pays the wages and you know you don't rely on any of those grants, Celia talk to us about some of the challenges around that.

CELIA 23:17

I think that, I didn't want to run a charity I wanted to run a viable a viable enterprise a sustainable enterprise that just so happened to be for social purpose it was the cherry on the cake really. So that was really important to me and I didn't, I've worked in third sector for all of my career and even this challenge of applying for grant after grant after grant after monitoring like it's it's absolutely, it's a talent to win grants and things but it's such an effort to then report on all of that. Eventually I wanted to challenge the retail, retail for social purpose. There's no reason why what you do with your profits is really up to you so the fact that we plough them back in to do the donation and I don't want people to buy Hey Girls product as a bit of a what I call it a poverty porn, I don't want to them to buy one box and say 'I've done my bit', I want people to buy it because it's a really great products and so that in that again is really important. I think the biggest piece and because you know I mentioned within months we were on gearing up to supply Asda and Waitrose and that is a significant challenge in terms of cash flow because they're not buying a few cartons they're buying pallet loads and so then having to cash flow that because of pushy supply all of that stuff and then you sit and you wait for them to pay you in three months. So that was hugely challenging. You know I come from a background in the mentioned beginning that absolutely hated the thought of credit cards and debt and all of those things and not wanting to do it you know take a massive overdraft to drive the pipeline I had to in the end and so I went to an investor that I was comfortable with, which was Big Issue Invest, because they understood all the hand ups I had to as an individual about finance and understood what we were trying to do about poverty, so it felt like a really great marriage. And it was a big day when I took a loan to help us get going so I think - 'yeah we're in Asda and Waitrose amazing amazing!' And it is amazing but it gets very serious very quickly when you do that kind of volume. So that was the biggest challenge emotionally for me that was a really big a big thing to happen.

CAROLINE 25:55

It's that balance isn't it, the of excitement that you've got this great opportunity and you've won this great deal with versus how do we cashflow this and I don't know about you Celia but for me you know you hear people say who the first two years and most challenging and that's when you know is really is really tough, you know and sometimes it's right down to the wire you know, it's sleepless nights stuff isn't it?

CELIA 26:20

Yeah I remember when I did my pitch to Waitrose and they said yes we would like to buy your product I went out into the car park and went 'oh shit - we haven't got that much product!' But it's that ooh you know elation of doing that but yeah that was pretty that was pretty scary, to make that happen then in time with what they needed yeah. Tough but very exhilarating I love I love that part of it the unknown and how to make it happen, how do we troubleshoot it this.

CAROLINE 26:51

And listen Hey Girls creates job opportunities in the UK and your products are packed by people furthest from the job market is is that how it works, tell us a bit about that?

CELIA 27:01

Yeah I carry all my baggage, all with me, so when I was a single parent I could not get the job because of having to manage three kids around dropping off picking up all of that kind of thing and so I wanted to create opportunities for mothers who could use their bountiful talents and skills and actually in that get paid well and still be mummies, still be there still be care givers, still pick up and drop off the those really important things that that we want to do as parents, so that was important and and you know we get overwhelmed if you say what the best team in town and work school hours you can imagine the amount of people that apply to work here and and so that was really important to me and has become very important through Covid.

CAROLINE 27:58

And does that follow through into the education programs?

CELIA 28:00

Yeah yeah so our education programs again, another challenge so we were delivering those out into schools and into breakfast clubs, into youth centres, into dance clubs all sorts of different places and then because when you go into lockdown you can't go out and have those fun events and and things so we have had to bring all of that and we're going to create more resources and loaded on the website with downloadable resources and still do lots and lots of zoom sessions so we can still do education and hopefully we'll be able to go back to slowly starting to do it in face to face sessions and but again education we got to educate and I always think, period poverty we talk about poverty of products don't we but actually there's poverty of access and poverty of education so how do we tell people about what is normal? What's a good period, when should you start to see your GP? How when and how do tell the parents how do you tell your partner? So building all of that into an education program and then we launched a website called my periods and really to try and get corporates to have a conversation about menstruation so you know how do you how do you make your your place of work and an amazing place to work? Because we're offering hand soap and towels and all of those things in the loo but actually just by providing a little basket of pads and tampons you can make a massive difference to someone's day, so how do we get corporates to put products in the washroom so yes again that's been another piece go online, do you an audit of your organisation, are you period friendly? One of the little steps you have to do to move yourself up, sort of bronze, silver, gold a period friendly employer? You know, mass-generalization but you know not many corporates have thought about how do we care for our employees when they're at work? And some of them who had our products in their offices said we're gonna send products to their homes and again it's a just send the home pack! What a lovely thing for your boss to do, send you some period products home and the important thing is for every corporate that buys a carton of products,

then at the same time that donating to someone in need. So Hibs football stadium just around the corner here and they buy cartons to put into their wash rooms to put into their stadium then that donation goes out to Canongate Youth just around the corner. So you know, how do you know how do we do that something that you would do you every day that help your local community?

CAROLINE 30:48

Yeah it it just, what an amazing amount of work Celia, have you only been going since 2018?

CELIA 30:54

Yes an amazing amount of work and I'm the kind of person that just goes 'I've had this idea! What does everyone think?' And then we just do it and yes it is a it is a lot of work, but it's a lot of fun and I think in the balance isn't in? Between keeping the accelerator just pushing it a bit, letting everybody calm down and then we have another little burn of activities.

CAROLINE 31:23

Yep that sounds like me I'm sure the team cower in the corner when I go 'I've got an idea'. It's one of those - so listen just finishing up, what would you say the kind of best and worst piece of advice is that you've been given around managing people or the sustainability part or and you know the purpose piece? Anything you can share with us?

CELIA 31:55

If there's one - I always say 'start' I mean there's so many people that thinking about doing things and if I had a pound for every time someone said aw I nearly did that! Just do it- have a go so I think even that just have a little go do something small and then back to that reflect, refine, have another little go and we need a lot more people to move into enterprise and there's never been, it might sound a bit mad but there's never been a better time for local social purpose, you know, product with a story stuck to it, so just have a go! So go get your own story and sort it out, what are your motivations and then have a little go!

CAROLINE 32:47

Love it and and finally Celia, do your daughters still work with you in the team?

CELIA 32:51

They do, yes so Kate is my youngest childhood, I say child but she's 30-odd but Kate's my youngest daughter and so she runs the English dispatch hub am she also manages those gorgeous two hundred donation partners across the U. K. and my middle child my middle daughter Becky she's in Australia so she I think she's all about brand and social purpose and environmental and so she's more on the comms kind of side and and then my son who's in London he works and with a social purpose support organisation, he's all about the impacts. So what mum? So you've given away thirteen thousand products, so what? What was the impact? How do you measure what difference that makes to someones life? So he's always pushing for that proves it prove it. So yeah couldn't manage without them.

CAROLINE 33:45

Brilliant. And how would your friends describe you Celia, three words what would they say?

CELIA 33:49

I don't know, I have no idea what would they say - I don't know how they would! I don't have any friends that still speak to me, I don't know I think they'd probably say she's a good gardener! I have no idea, maybe I'll ask them this evening!

CAROLINE 34:08

It's a great question to ask I got asked this last week but I was doing an interview and I thought all I have no idea and I asked my friends and they came up with some lovely stuff so it's definitely something to ask.

CELIA 34:23

We should you should be you should we should get more personal feedback, we get loads of feedback on the product but I never ask anybody what do you think of me! I'll reflect on that one!

CAROLINE 34:32

Celia listen you're what amazing woman you are and and honestly thanks for everything that that you've that you've done that that you're doing what was the plans for the future of Hey Girls?

CELIA 34:46

More of the same, but better. Got to be better more environmental, reaching out to more communities and hopefully just steady growth.

CAROLINE 34:57

Brilliant, well listen it's been an absolute pleasure to speak to you Celia thank you so much and a where can our listeners find out more about you and the company?

CELIA 35:08

So if your social media kind of question just go to you at at @heygirlsuk or if you want to have a look around our website that's just heygirls.co.uk and go in there and there's all sorts of goodies there's videos about gorgeous and ambassador Michael Sheen and stuff from Caitlin Moran and all sorts of great people and lots of free downloadable resources to have chats with your family.

CAROLINE 35:33

Thanks Celia