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Clean Machine

Can Christina Ramirez '07 purify our polluted oceans with a toothbrush?

By Andy Levinsky. Photos by Marge Pamintuan-Perko

While studying abroad during college in 2007, Christina Ramirez and her friends decided to sail around Ha long Bay in Vietnam. Looking up, she was surrounded by breathtaking mountains with steep cliffs and heard a symphony of birds. "Serene and surreal" is the way she describes this setting, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Looking down, however, the picture was dramatically different. "All you could do was fixate on floating plastic bags and plastic waste that covered the entire bay. Boats would dump waste every single day. It was a spectacle like no other. This image was burned in my memory."



During her senior year at UC Santa Barbara, Ramirez took a writing class for global studies majors that required students to develop a grant proposal for a non-profit organization. Her project, entitled “Brush up the World,” focused on oral hygiene in Ugandan children. The professor, Ljiljana Coklin, recalls that it was “a simple idea that required a lot of research in order to provide a viable solution. Students often talk excitedly about following up on their projects and turning them into real-life enterprises, but reality soon kicks in and they realize the level of commitment, sacrifice and business savvy that a start-up requires.” This was different. “The assignment challenged Christina in the best possible way and mobilized her knowledge and skills as a soon-to-be-graduating senior.”

After graduation, Coklin suggested that Ramirez and her three teammates on the assignment present their project at the Southern California Conference for Undergraduate Research. “The group impressed the audience members who lingered after the presentation and kept encouraging the group to do it ‘for real’ Coklin recalls. That encouragement seemed to have resonated with Christina.”

In 2012, Ramirez was working as a cashier at Whole Foods Market in Venice Beach, California. One day, as part of an employee education program, she watched a video about a swirling plastic island gyre in the Pacific Ocean that was twice the size of Texas. The image reminded her of Ha Long Bay. "Something inside me changed," Ramirez recalls. "I no longer was leisurely developing and researching a product. I went into overdrive and worked nights, weekends, and on breaks. I was racing to make a positive impact and provide at least one solution to the world. I thought, every day that passed was a day millions of pounds of plastic waste would be created, purchased, used and thrown away. That kept me focused to reach the starting line."

"I truly believed in the phrase, 'Fortune favors the bold' and trusted myself and my ability to remove all the safety nets."

Lost in the Translation

Growing up in Encino with two busy working parents, Ramirez and her older brother were raised largely by their Spanish-speaking live-in nanny from Argentina. English was their primary language at home, however, and Ramirez believes she was placed in Spanish speaking classes at her public elementary school simply because of her last name. When she began falling behind academically, her parents hired tutors and enrolled her in a new school but the experience had a lasting impact on Ramirez. "I remember feeling like I was being held back," she recalls. "I think this is what fueled me in middle and high school to become the overachiever I am today."

Miguel Ramirez, a social worker in Los Angeles, remembers the nickname given to his two-year-old daughter by her "adopted grandmother" (their nanny): "Temoraria Tremendini" which translates to "fearless little big one."

Growing up, she played softball and soccer and ran track.

“Although not the fastest nor the tallest, she was determined and tenacious,” recalls Miguel Ramirez. He believes his daughter’s childhood “helped shape her willingness to undertake new challenges.”

When Christina began looking at colleges, she followed the recommendation of a family friend and neighbor. “I loved UCSB,” recalls Kristine Oakes BA '04, a dramatic art major. “I had a feeling she would fit right in.”

Ramirez had met up with Oakes who was studying abroad in Italy and decided to follow in her footsteps.

“I’ll never forget my first impressions of the University,” she says. “UCSB looked like a summer camp right on the beach. Everyone was young, fun, different and active.” She took bio-psychology courses with the goal of becoming a doctor but quickly recognized that math and chemistry were not her strengths. Ramirez had envisioned herself ultimately working for an organization like UNICEF, Oxfam or Greenpeace. “All I knew is that I wanted to use my major [to] help people in some way,” she recalls. Ramirez opted for a new major called Global Studies. “I was interested because it supported students who wanted to study abroad and not fall behind [academically]. It was the best decision I ever made.”

At UCSB, Ramirez travelled to Thailand and Spain. While in Barcelona, she learned the Spanish national motto Plus Ultra, or “further beyond” in Latin, an expression that would turn out to be fortuitous.

In her first job out of school at News America Marketing, Ramirez pulled sales figures for manual toothbrushes. "I was curious to see if my idea had mass potential," she recalls. When she saw that 169 million brushes were sold in the U.S. alone that year, "My jaw dropped."

Ramirez left her marketing position for Whole Foods. In exchange for retail experience, she would sacrifice a secure salaried position with benefits for an erratically scheduled \$11 an hour cashier job. It was all a part of a long-term strategy.

"Christina came to Whole Foods to obtain a better understanding of how [we] operate as a business and how that business plays into the industry as a whole," explains Corey DiGiacomo, Ramirez's former supervisor. "In working for the company, I think she gained a broader knowledge of her customer base and consumer behavior, valuable knowledge into operational standards for being a vendor to a large company, and an incredible amount of contacts and resources through which she could grow and expand her business."

Ramirez quickly rose through the ranks to become a buyer and educator in Whole Body, the store's health and beauty department.

"I wanted to learn how a retailer operated on the ground level," she explains. Whole Foods offered a sort of grass roots MBA that she could apply to her business plan for the company she developed at UCSB and would name "Plus Ultra."

Brushing up on Business

The problem was clear: a billion plastic toothbrushes thrown away each year, 50 million pounds of toothbrushes added to landfills annually, billions of pounds of plastic waste in our oceans. The solution would start with a single toothbrush. While working at Whole Foods, Ramirez developed a prototype with a bamboo handle, making the product sustainable, free of chemicals, 99% biodegradable, and largely compostable and approached dentists at USC and UCLA for feedback on design and efficacy. In 2011, she flew to China to find a manufacturer and returned with a product and a pitch to her first vendor. The company began the following year with 33 Whole Foods locations from California to Hawaii.

Ramirez launched Plus Ultra without bank loans, raising funds through personal connections with individual investors. Initially, she considered a non-profit model but determined that, while consistent with her values and goals, continuing to donate toothbrushes would simply not be sustainable in the long-term. A hybrid model with a pure business supporting a nonprofit was another possibility. Ultimately, however, she realized she “could give more just by having it be a business” and chose a traditional for-profit path.

Financing was just one decision Ramirez had to make with virtually no training or professional experience. Beyond her work at Whole Foods, she knew little about manufacturing, marketing, or any other aspect of running a business—less about oral health. There was so much to learn.

“It didn’t feel like it was all on me,” she recalls, but “the reality was that it was all on me. I had no idea what I was getting myself into—which, looking back on it, was for the better. It wasn’t daunting to me at the time because I saw this

as an opportunity to interview professionals like lawyers, CPAs, dentists, other CEO's, etc. to craft my own experience...I wasn't worried at the time because I truly believed in the phrase, 'Fortune favors the bold' and trusted myself and my ability to remove all the safety nets."

As it turned out, the very skills she initially found the most daunting were the ones she wound up enjoying most. In the beginning, "quality control was a challenge. Now it is one of my easiest and favorite things to do." Getting used to calls from her quality control team in China at midnight or 3AM used to cause serious sleep deprivation. "Now," she adds, "I can fall asleep immediately. Learning business on all different levels used to be something that I struggled with just because I didn't have any practice. [Now] I think that is the most fun thing for me."

Yet for all her outward self-confidence, Ramirez experienced feelings of reticence and apprehension. "As the company grew, so did my worries and anxieties," she confesses. "Mind you, I had studied Buddhism in Bangkok, so while I felt like a spiritual Buddha in my soul, my mind was under constant distress."

Ramirez says that "While many business people go to therapy, I am fortunate to have learned a lot from my dad," who taught her coping skills and cognitive behavioral psychology which she uses on a daily basis.

She also credits Professor Coklin not only for the class project that inspired her company and became a sort of early business plan but also for the support she received from the

"The reality was that it was all on me. I had no idea what I was getting myself into—which, looking back on it, was for the better."

beginning and continues to receive today. "I knew that if my professor believed in my idea, it had to have major potential," she says.

Coklin appreciates how her connection with Ramirez has evolved over the past twelve years. "Initially, I wrote letters of recommendation for Christina and then things changed," she observes. "I became on the receiving end of email updates about Christina's company, the business contacts she built, new strategies she adopted, and the adjustments she made to the initial idea. I'm thrilled that she has stayed in touch all this time and that she has let me follow her journey of becoming a successful entrepreneur."

Exit Plan

"I don't think I have ever met a single person in my life who has sacrificed as much as Christina to obtain her goals," says Corey DiGiocomo, her former supervisor at Whole Foods. "Everything she does in some way is tied to her vision."

Today, thirty-three-year-old Christina Ramirez is CEO of a profitable company that, according to a report for CNN Business, sells between \$1 million and \$2 million of its products annually at more than 300 stores in 23 states. Though Plus Ultra has just three full-time staff, the company employs numerous contractors including over 100 sales reps. Most important to Ramirez, the company estimates it has prevented over 1,500 tons of plastic from adding to the toxic debris of our landfills and oceans. Continuing with product donations that were a foundation of the original business developed at UCSB, Plus Ultra has contributed toothbrushes

to disaster relief efforts in Puerto Rico, an organization for homeless youth in Venice, California, UNICEF and other charities.

With products in development from replacements for electric brush heads to razors, travel kits and even reading glasses, Ramirez's aspiration is for Plus Ultra to become "the go-to eco-friendly personal care brand." Given the company's rapid growth and Ramirez's aspirations, it's fair to wonder whether she intends to remain independent or is considering an exit strategy.

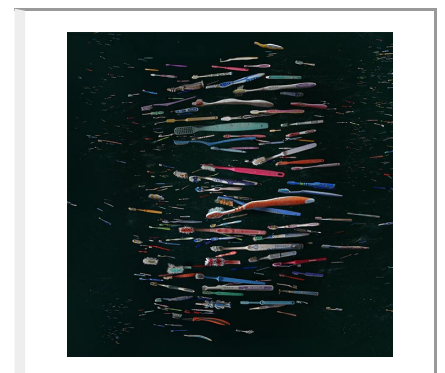
"I'm just keeping my options open," Ramirez says. "My ultimate goal is to make the biggest impact on the environment and do good." If that means acquisition by a consumer goods giant like Colgate Palmolive, which bought Tom's of Maine for \$100 million in 2006, she "would love to do that because they would provide resource tools to allow me to grow and make the biggest impact I can on the environment."

The direction her career has taken so far does not surprise her childhood friend. "It fits perfectly," says Kristine Oakes. "And it's just the beginning."

Pretty Ugly

Internationally acclaimed photographer Mandy Barker creates a compelling collage from found objects in our oceans' dire gyre

As a child in Hull, a port city on the East Coast of Great Britain, Mandy Barker recalls walking the beaches, collecting stones and driftwood. Visiting the shoreline as an adult, she found the shoreline strewn with a computer, a child's car seat, a lawn mower, and other refuse.



“At this point I wanted to find a way to let other people know what was going on in the ocean,” she writes. “Photography became the way to do this.”

Barker had enjoyed taking photos with her dad since she was 13 but she was not yet a professional photographer when she first encountered “the plastic issue,” as she describes the sea of waste swirling in oceans worldwide. Though she was a graphic designer at the time, Barker turned her photographer’s eye on plastic marine debris with a skill and imagination that transformed garbage into photography often resembling paintings. The art world noticed, as did media from *National Geographic* and *Time* to *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times*.

Yet for all of its artistic appeal, Barker insists that “It was very important to me that the objects photographed were as they were found on the shore and in the sea, because if I manipulated them in any way the viewer could question if I have manipulated the facts.” Science, she believes, has “no room for aesthetics or emotion, so in that sense the work of an artist and a scientist are opposed in approach, but in some way are seeking to achieve the same outcome. My work visually represents the issue whilst being true to the facts.”

Barker views her work a means to an end—public awareness. “I consider myself as member of the public who came across this environmental disaster, and felt it was something I couldn’t turn away from.”

In Barker, UCSB Art Director Natalie Wong discovered a kindred soul with Christina Ramirez. The shared mission of the photographer and the entrepreneur is reflected in

"Between Wisdom," the image on the front cover of *Coastlines* which was generously shared by the artist. Find more of her work at mandy-barker.com.

Christina Ramirez is a featured speaker at the 2nd annual Gaucho Professionals Showcase, April 27 at 10 A.M.

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