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You need to meet these local women who embody the soaps they make

UR Bath and Body in Boynton Beach hires women out of crisis situations. Together, they make bath soaps that are carried at 1,000 stores across the United States.

LOCAL By Nina Cusmano - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer



The women of UR Bath & Body Co., a soap manufacturer in Boynton Beach, Fla. Founder Tracy Gunn, photographed on Monday, April 30, 2018. (Thomas Cordy / Palm Beach Post)

Never underestimate the power of words. Tracy Gunn recognized that power when she was visiting a homeless shelter in New York. At the time, she was still toying with the idea that would eventually become her Boynton Beach company. It now has bath and body products on shelves in more than 1,000 stores across the country.

The shelter's director was showering residents with praise and words of empowerment on their way out the door to search for jobs or go to work.

In that moment, Tracy found the name for her company: UR Bath and Body Co.

The name further intertwines her mission with her product. Her soaps, bath salts and bath bombs are handmade by the 25 employees, mostly women, who she hopes to help achieve independence, stability and safety by hiring them as they transition out of crisis situations.

Tracy herself was once in their shoes... on the verge of homelessness. After losing her job and suffering from a bout of shingles, her family's future looked dismal. While watching TV one day, a moment of clarity struck her: She was going to be homeless if she didn't do something.

Being on the cusp of a make-or-break moment in her life, and the lives of her two sons, propelled her off the couch and into action. She was determined to reinvigorate the small soap-making operation she had started prior to her health problems. This time, she would employ women transitioning out of crisis.

And she's doing just that.

Many of the UR Bath employees are transitioning out of homelessness or domestic violence situations. Some have simply been discriminated against for physical disabilities or for their sexual orientation, she said.

The message of self-respect, self-love and self-confidence is clear through the UR Bath company name and logo. But sometimes actions speak louder. Hiring them. Training them. Trusting them. Empowering them. Saying "yes" when all they have ever heard is "no." Tracy's actions as an employer set the foundation for a trusting, symbiotic relationship.



"Being an employer, when they trust you and they know you have their back, you get a better, more loyal employee. They believe in your mission, they believe in your company, they believe in everything you're doing almost as much as I believe in it. It's because I believed in them."

Even the smallest peek into the lives of the workforce behind the vibrant bath bombs or glittering slices of soap can illustrate the way the women at UR Bath embody the company's mission: "UR is a loving affirmation of all that you can become and all that can be realized with a loving hand extended," the company's mission statement reads on its website.

Here are snapshots of the lives of some of the women Tracy has extended a loving hand to.

| Jasmine, UR Brave



The women of UR Bath & Body Co., a soap manufacturer in Boynton Beach, Fla. Distribution Manager Jasmine West, Boynton Beach, photographed on Monday, April 30, 2018. (Thomas Cordy / Palm Beach Post)

When the time finally came to put pen to paper and sign her first-ever apartment lease, 19-year-old Jasmine West burst into tears: What if I can't do this? What if I can't pay it? What if something happens?

Committing almost your entire paycheck to paying the rent is scary. It's even scarier when you're a 19-year-old who spent part of high school living in a homeless shelter. This kind of move takes a fierce bravery. The same bravery Tracy, Jasmine's boss, sees in her every day at work.

Tracy lent support to bolster the teen as she hesitated to sign the papers, taking the final step in a long journey toward independence.

"I have your back and I'm not going to let you fall," Tracy said as she stood by Jasmine's side at the leasing office that weekend, a young woman who often cares about the company more than herself some days, Tracy admits.

When Tracy learned Jasmine had left Place of Hope, a transitional housing program for young women in Boca Raton, because she was getting too old for the program, she immediately set out to help. The pair spent almost six hours one weekend hunting for an apartment that was both affordable and in a safe neighborhood.

"I was in there completely blind, I didn't know what to do or what to say," Jasmine said. "So the fact that [Tracy] was there helping me was nice."

Like her employer, Jasmine can see the bravery in her resilience too.

Having her own place has given Jasmine her first taste of independence, despite holding a job since she was 14, when she started working as a bagger at Publix to help her mom make ends meet.

Her apartment freed her from the rules that came with the shelter she was living in: an early curfew (that sometimes affected how late she could stay at UR Bath for work), chores and other restrictions. Signing the paperwork took Jasmine from communal showers to a spacious, private bathtub. It's finally all hers.

"Even though the apartment is pretty expensive, it's mine, you know? I'm still able to manage it and pay for it on my own and I just love every part about it."

| Margee, UR Blessed



The women of UR Bath & Body Co., a soap manufacturer in Boynton Beach, Fla. Margee Baker, Delray Beach, photographed on Monday, April 30, 2018. (Thomas Cordy / Palm Beach Post)

The flames started on the other side of the house. She was sitting by a window, and through that window she saw men working on the house across the street. They were running toward her. "Fire! Fire!" they yelled.

Margee Baker made it safely out of the Delray Beach home that she had been living in for two and half years and belonged to her friend, just before it was destroyed along with most of her possessions, in an electrical fire.

"I found myself broke, unemployed and homeless," she said. "Totally surreal. It was like what you see on TV, you know?"

When she walked into UR Bath days later to ask for a job, Margee didn't know where she would sleep that night. She didn't have a toothbrush. Despite having nothing to her name, when Tracy said to her, "You must be so traumatized," Margee responded, "Actually, I feel blessed."

On her first day at UR Bath, another employee brought her a pair of sneakers to wear because she only had a pair of flip flops after the fire.

The job, one of Margee's blessings, has given her a sense of purpose -- and hope -- in this unsettled time in her life.

"I felt blessed to be alive and to have the opportunity to start over again," she said. "Hearing her tell me 'yes.' Just that one little word can pivot a whole world. She was my first yes. It felt like she was offering me a thousand dollars an hour."

| Vicki, UR Sweet



The women of UR Bath & Body Co., a soap manufacturer in Boynton Beach, Fla. Vicki Wagner, Boynton Beach, photographed on Monday, April 30, 2018. (Thomas Cordy / Palm Beach Post)

Vicki Wagner exudes empathy. She loves to smile. She's often moved to tears. She even switched career paths so she could connect with people, and help them, more easily.

But because of facial paralysis that she suffered at the hands of shingles and subsequently Bell's palsy, she can't produce tears and it's difficult -- painful even -- for her to smile.

Her passion to help people remains.

"I just want the well-being of everyone to blossom," she said.

Tracy thinks Vicki's background in business and mental health counseling will become an indispensable asset in her business' future growth. In return, she gave Vicki a job just as the 64-year-old's job search was reaching a peak of hopelessness.

The job: answering phones and comforting coworkers going through tough times.

"She is so sweet in everything that she does. She is so personable with our customers," Tracy said. "And to know what she's been through, I don't know if I could be that sweet."

Working at a company that promotes the empowerment of women in crisis, something so closely aligned to her own personal values, has reinvigorated Vicki's faith in the corporate world after it so heartlessly ousted her for the physical appearance of her facial paralysis.

"It's wonderful because it kinda says that my heart is seen." Tracy hired Alex Fullington as UR Bath's Chief Operations Officer because of her experience and strong work ethic. Her job, like her, is multifaceted: She explains unfamiliar business terms to her colleagues, brings them spare sneakers when needed and encourages them on their fearless journeys.

Alex, UR Fearless

Alex's past, which connects her to UR Bath's mission, was something she and Tracy realized later.

A childhood laden with foster care, homelessness and a mother being in and out of jail, Alex is no stranger to women and children in crisis. She was one.

"I've been standing on my own two feet for a very long time. I'm very fortunate to have made my way," Alex said. "I didn't come here destitute or with any problems, but I definitely can relate to that. I was homeless, I've been through all of that. So, that I love the most with this opportunity is to see the people that grab it with both hands and pull themselves up."

She dropped out of school in eighth grade and left home soon after. She got her first job at 16. Now 34, she has put her fearless determination to use, earning herself the COO title.



The women of UR Bath & Body Co., a soap manufacturer in Boynton Beach, Fla. Chief Operating Officer Alex Fullington, Port St. Lucie, photographed on Monday, April 30, 2018. (Thomas Cordy / Palm Beach Post)

She started working at UR Bath about five months ago, taking a faithful leap from another company to join Tracy's ranks.

"I wanted to go to a new job where I was going to be utilized and valued," Alex said. "When this opportunity presented itself, I grabbed it."

Yadira, UR Free



The women of UR Bath & Body Co., a soap manufacturer in Boynton Beach, Fla. Web developer Yadira Rojas, West Palm Beach, photographed on Monday, April 30, 2018. (Thomas Cordy / Palm Beach Post)

Yadira Rojas was 24 when she left Cuba in search of opportunities to grow professionally as a web developer and computer engineer. She moved to Italy before coming to South Florida, where she had to complete her certification in web development for the second time, this time in English.

But with each step into her future, oppression followed.

Yadira experienced sexual harassment from male supervisors at work; a boss once tried to kiss her. She was in an abusive relationship. It seemed the world was against her, but not even the world was enough to hold her down.

She grew tired of the stereotypes: that she was "too pretty" to find success in a male-dominated industry. And she grew even more hungry for freedom, both personally and professionally. She refused to settle.

Her accent impeded her job search in Florida at first, she said. Until Tracy saw the drive and talent behind the accent.

“Yadira got to this country and embraced her freedom,” Tracy said. “She learned English, she got a job, and she did every single thing on her own and was so independent.”

Some women may not be able to get out of negative work environments or abusive, toxic relationships because they have no other options, Yadira, now 30, said. But she had an option, and she wasn't letting it pass her by.

Yadira built the UR Bath website and spends her days updating and adding new features as the company continues its booming growth. She's free to experiment, to create and to code without the reservations and hurdles that plagued her past.

“She got free and she made the best of it,” Tracy said.

The letters “UR” appear all over the UR Bath office and manufacturing facility. As you cross the threshold of the building in Boynton Beach, you'll find a welcome mat that reads “Be who UR.”

Those two letters serve as more than a company name written in a scripted font on packaging labels. Those two letters are a reminder to Tracy's employees of her faith in them.

As Jasmine enjoys a colorful bath bomb in the spacious tub of her very own apartment, she is brave.

As Margee peels sticker labels with the UR Bath logo and places them on bottles of sugar scrub with a pair of sneakers on her feet, she is blessed.

As Vicki consoles a coworker going through tough times, she is sweet.

As Alex manages all aspects of a thriving business, she is fearless.

And as Yadira gets a chance to prove herself as a professional, not as a woman or an object but as a person, she is free.