

Podcast ft. Sarah Burnett

Kathryn Dankesreiter: [00:00:00] Thank you all for joining for another Innovation Hub podcast today. I'm excited for today's edition of The Hustle because we are featuring Sarah Burnett and Texas Earth. Sarah, welcome to the podcast. We're so happy to chat with you today.

Sarah Burnett: Thank you very much for having me. I'm glad you're here.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Yeah, we are actually out at Texas Earth, which is so exciting. I've never been out here. So whoever wants to come take a look, I highly encourage it. It is not a far drive at all.

It's so great having an alumni of our Accelerator Program on the podcast today. Taysha introduced us to Sarah a couple of years ago now and so it's been really, really cool seeing Texas Earth grow. And of course, this year being their 20th anniversary is so amazing. But Sarah, for those who don't know you or your story, how did Texas Earth really begin?

Sarah Burnett: Absolutely. My dad started Texas Earth in 2004 and we were located in Brownfield. Moved to our current location here on the Idalou highway in 2016. Unfortunately, my dad passed away the day that we got our keys to this building.

-I've [00:01:00] been at the helm since 2014. And we're very thankful to have been in business and servicing our customers for the last 20 great years.

As far as the Innovation Hub goes, I was introduced to Taysha through a mutual friend, and she asked if I wanted to join Cohort 6. I had really no idea what I was stepping into, but Ganga said, "Okay, nice to meet you and you start I-Corps tomorrow." So I had to go home that night and create this, you know, whole presentation. It was a lot of fun. And I tell you what, that really has catapulted me into where we're headed today.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: I remember it too. She (Ganga) was like, Sarah just joined I-Corps has never been through any of our programs before and she absolutely like nailed her presentation. One of the better presentations at I-Corps.

What was like the original mission behind everything?

Sarah Burnett: Absolutely. So Texas Earth is a legacy business. My dad started Texas Earth with a passion to heal the soils of the earth. It was his mission [00:02:00] field. God came to him in a dream. This is, you know, maybe out there for some people and that is okay and said, "I'm going to give you the tools to heal the soils of the earth."

Because he had been working on this idea of a liquid biological amendment in which we call Bio Nectar now. That's our flagship product.

There was a mission for him. Because if we're able to heal the soil, we're able to heal the plants, the plants are more nutritious, more nutrient dense for the animals that eat the plants, we eat the animals, we're more healthy.

So then, that person gets to serve the Lord or go out and do good things in the world. But they have to be healthy. And in order for them to be healthy, they have to eat healthy food. And for the food to be healthy, we have to have healthy soil.

So everything we do is about healthy soil and about products that are synergistic in that goal. We manufacture products here in the BioNectar line, BioNectar liquid, dry, and then we have some alfalfa pellets, and then BioFluf was through the Hub.

All of those products contribute to better, microbial diversity in [00:03:00] the soil, better porosity, better soil quality, overall health. And that's what we are about. And that's what he was about.

I never really saw myself in this business. I came back to work with him in 2012 and then he got sick. I kind of found myself as a reluctant driver, right? Driving the bus. It just wasn't ever my dream, but God moved all those blocks around and said, "This is where you need to be."

It's been hard. I mean, being a business owner is hard by itself. Being a female business owner in the agricultural industry has its own unique set of challenges. But, it's so incredibly rewarding and it's allowed me to meet wonderful people, many wonderful women in agriculture. That's really where my passion project is, is connecting and innovating with other women that are like minded in the ag industry. And it's just been a great experience.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: That just encompasses so much there. First of all, your dad sounds like an amazing human [00:04:00] being. To have that kind of, like, God given mission is so rare.

Sarah Burnett: It is rare, and he was not shy about talking about it. He was this long, tall cowboy. You know what I mean? Actually, there's a picture right there. Sorry, y'all can't see it. He was the Marlboro Man, like drove the stagecoach all over Europe selling Marlboro cigarettes.

He loved people and he just had such a passion for doing what was right. And when he jumped into this, it was just full force. A lot of my passion comes from remembering and watching him be passionate. It's very motivating. I mean, not everybody thinks soil is cool, but I'm all about it.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Just talking to you about your dad's story and then your passion and the legacy that surrounds Texas Earth is so heartwarming.

Sarah Burnett: I kind of have a unique story in that, that we have been in business. BioNector Dry was the last project that my dad worked on before he passed away and honestly, I really thought okay when he's gone I'm just going to maintain the products that we have and just keep the doors open and continue to [00:05:00] service our customers because they need what we have.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Right.

Sarah Burnett: Like I said, I never really thought past what was going to happen.

We have all these things going on already, but this new product that I was developing called Bio Fluf, that was really what catapulted me into the Innovation Hub program.

So we took that one product from start to finish and worked through all of the steps. And that was absolutely fantastic. What the Innovation Hub taught me when it came to product development was invaluable.

I had never been through the entire development process with a product like that in such a formatted and methodical way. It opened my eyes tremendously about how to bring a product to market.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Whenever I do these podcasts, I always kind of ask what was the biggest thing that you got out of the Accelerator? And a lot of times it's the mentorship that shaped what you wanted to do.

Sarah Burnett: The wildest thing probably that happened through the Innovation Hub was one of my mentors, Nick Bergfeld, said, "Hey, have [00:06:00] you ever heard of the SBIR?"

And I said, "What are those letters mean? I have no idea what you're talking about, right?"

And so he said, "It's a Small Business Innovation Research. I really feel like your technology would be a good fit for that." So I started Googling it, got a team of people, and said, "Hey, do we want to try this?"

We wrote it in three weeks.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Wow.

Sarah Burnett: Yeah, exactly. Wrote it, design, all of it in three weeks. We submitted it with like six minutes to spare before the deadline and waited. And I sort of turned it in and forgot about it and got a phone call one day from the SDA that said, "Congratulations, you've won this grant."

It was for 160,000 and it was for research. You know, and that was an entire another learning curve of grant navigation and implementation and reporting. I mean, it's just been a really wild ride.

But without that proof of concept, I don't know how we would have really moved forward to the next phase of what we wanted to do. We had to have that data, that research, and it's just proven so valuable.

I got you I've [00:07:00] chilled talking about it because it's just like God has just provided us the next step. I'm just so thankful. The Hub is a blessing. The mentors were a blessing. It's just been such a wonderful experience because now I have all these friends that I can go to and say, "Hey, I have a question. Do you know someone that could help me? Can you tell me where to get this?"

I mean, it is a wonderful database of just great people.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Oh, that's so awesome. And for those who don't know, if you're listening in, you hear SBIR, STTR. Those are really high level grants. Like they take months to write.

Sarah Burnett: Not three weeks?

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Not three weeks, months. Even with the expertise that the Innovation Hub and the SBDC can provide for these grants, that's a tall order. I'm impressed.

Sarah Burnett: You're not the only person. There are so many, I told several people and jaws dropped, Taysha included. She was like, "you're kidding me, right?" And I was like, no.

I didn't know the level of competition that we were going up against. We just wrote [00:08:00] a proposal that made sense. It doesn't have to be overly technical or super scientific to be valuable.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Right.

Sarah Burnett: One of the biggest takeaways is that I never saw myself as a entrepreneur really. You helped me know that I have the capability to do it. So, you know, even when you think hey, this doesn't fit me it may, right? So, it's been awesome.

Since the Accelerator program, we have continued to develop BioFluf both in the pelleted version for more row crop application and then in the loose version which is more geared towards the home and landscape industry as a peat moss replacement.

I can see BioFluf replacing peat moss and that is kind of the push for the SBIR2 grant. It is like, hey, how can we explore and commercialize this for that, for that purpose?

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Man, you never sit still.

Sarah Burnett: No.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: That's amazing. And I'm sure, going from trying to [00:09:00] maintain your father's legacy to growing up your own legacy now is so powerful.

Sarah Burnett: You know cultivating that legacy is important. Because he's the reason that we're here. But I have had to find my own way forward.

So I kind of call this, like, the second iteration. You know, Texas Earth 2 is like, okay, now with my skill set, which we're different from his, my ideas, which were different from his, but our common goal, how can I grow this business?

Cuz I'll never be my dad. I'll never know what he knew. I mean that was his story, right? And so I have to go find mine.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: I Just got chills. Your dad must just be smiling and just so proud of you. I just can't imagine a better story than that.

Sarah Burnett: Sometimes he visits me in my dreams and he's laughing at me. But it is an honor for me to get to carry this forward in whatever way that I'm able to.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: I want to touch back on a really cool comment that you made. That's kind of a [00:10:00] little bit off script about women in ag what have you seen?

Sarah Burnett: Well, sitting at my kitchen table, a friend of mine, Tillery, and I were just like, "how do we get with other women in agriculture in a way that isn't social and that is all about innovation?"

-Innovating is where you get to exchange with someone. You become connected. You have like minded goals. Much like fungi in the soil, they're interconnected, right?

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Yeah.

Sarah Burnett: The idea is to tap into someone and they tap into you for the greater good. Tillery and I sat there and chatted and we put together Women's Think Tank. The first time it was here at Texas Earth, 47 people came in this room. Taysha was there, you can ask her. We all were sitting very close. So everybody got up for five or ten minutes and talked about what they did.

And I tell you what, the education in those ten minutes that were shared was eye opening for everybody. Because it was like, I didn't know you did that. I didn't know that existed. I didn't know that was a problem. I didn't know that was an option.

And I just went, [00:11:00] "oh man, where are all these wonderful women hiding that they're not in the forefront of what they're doing?"

Then we had LEAP Day this year, the second think tank, and it was Leaders Exploring Agricultural Progress sponsored by Davis College. Thank you to them. 75 people came this time, and it was a little bit different format. But still, it was all about connecting and learning.

My personal view is that women are the absolute backbone of agriculture and they are not at the forefront of a conversation. It's a huge problem, in my opinion. That is not to take away from the wonderful men that work in agriculture. The women in agriculture are making the wheels turn.

They're doing the paperwork. They're doing the books. They're doing the marketing. They are designing things. They are making sure that people are in compliance. What I want to see is more women having seats at the table. So in a nutshell, that's my take on women in agriculture.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: It's awesome, I think. I mean, it's [00:12:00] nice to see people in the industry caring that women need to be heard in ag.

Sarah Burnett: I think that there is a change occurring and I think it's a positive change. I think that it is becoming easier for women to take on positions of power and influence. Every facet of agriculture has wonderful women working in it and I want them to be recognized.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: That's so noble.

Sarah Burnett: Oh, I don't know about that, but it's important.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: That is 100 percent true.

Sarah Burnett: I was speaking at a club for Texas Tech students in the Ag department and a girl came up to me and said, can I come see you and whatever. Her name is Abby, Abigail Oliver, graduate of Davis College.

She came and she said, "I always wanted to have a flower farm."

And I said, "Well, that's interesting. I really like flowers, too." I said, "Bring me a proposal and we'll talk about it." Because I've just been through the Hub and I thought, "okay I'm gonna pay it forward, right?"

She brought me this proposal and I hired her to come work at Texas Earth and she started to put together Patina Flower Farm. Patina is [00:13:00] the change that occurs in metal and in different elements as it ages and generally it becomes more beautiful as it ages. The Patina is the beautiful change.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: That's gorgeous.

Sarah Burnett: So Abby worked and worked and we installed Patina Flower Farm last year. She worked full time on it, and through that, I got to help her learn how to run a micro business. Like, what's your budget? What are your resources? What is your plan? How do you then take and turn and sell your product and these sorts of things?

It's a part of Texas Earth, but I broke it out in a way for her to learn how to jumpstart her dream. We worked through all last year and had a wonderful experience. It wasn't about necessarily making money. We were using Texas Earth soil amendments in Patina Flower Farm.

It was really a testing ground for what we were doing and it was the best experience. Through that experience, Abby was able to get a job in the industry that she loved and she now [00:14:00] works for a rose wholesaler in East Texas. It's so beautiful and wonderful because when you invest in somebody else's dream, you get to go on that ride with them.

We still have Patina and it's still a place for us to use our products and to contribute to the LBK Grown folks that have an online store for homegrown vegetables and fruits and all kinds of wonderful things. So everybody should check that out.

But it was a passion project that I helped Abby see to fruition. And then here it is now for the next person that comes through Davis College that wants to learn how to run their own business and what it takes to get into the nursery and landscape industry.

So, it kind of goes back to education. It was a hands on education experiment. And it also brought a lot of joy and it's just a beautiful thing. So anyway, that's Patina Flower Farm.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Are you currently looking for someone to jump into that?

Sarah Burnett: I would love for someone whether it was an internship experience or kind of a part time person to come in. This is just a fun place to come and see and educate. The goal with Patina is [00:15:00] to let people experience and recognize where it all starts, which is with good soil.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: That is so amazing.

Sarah Burnett: It was super fun. There's a place for everybody over here because we do a little of everything.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Any ag majors out there interested in going into Patina. You can make a bunch of impact here as a student. So I just want to call that out again.

Sarah Burnett: There are never two days that are the same. I'll tell you that.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: What advice would you give for people that are trying to carve out a place as entrepreneurs?

Sarah Burnett: Okay. Well, first and foremost, you have to do something you enjoy. You cannot force it. If it's feeling forced, you're either off track or you're in the wrong business completely because you can't give what it takes. to be successful if you don't really, really love it.

So, if you have a good idea, or you're passionate about something, find people that are passionate with you. You know, lean on other people. This is not the first time anybody's climbed this hill. So find people that have already done it and are successful at it.

It can be more than one mentor. Like I can [00:16:00] still call the mentors from my hub experience and ask them questions and they're happy to help. So really create yourself a community of people who love and support you. Truly, you cannot do it alone.

And then the rest of it will figure itself out usually. I think anyway, I'm hoping you know and every day get up and say you're not gonna quit.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: That goes for everybody.

Sarah Burnett: Yeah, that's true. Don't give in to the idea that you know, it may be easier, but it's not going to be as fruitful. Just don't give up, in a nutshell.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: I think that that is a great kind of sentiment to leave this on. thank you so much for letting me come out.

Sarah Burnett: We'll come back and see us. Don't be a stranger.

Kathryn Dankesreiter: Oh, I won't. This is always fun to chat with businesses that have been through our programs and, of course, the legacy that you're building through Texas Earth.

I'll just say again, must make your dad extremely proud of what you have built. So thank you so much for letting me take your time this morning.

Sarah Burnett: Oh, it's been wonderful. And you're welcome to come back anytime. And thanks to all your listeners for hanging in.