



NATASHA WRIGHT

BY JANA MANOLAKOS

Asili Botanics founder and president Natasha Wright grew up in one of Toronto's most violent, impoverished neighbourhoods. While teaching at a school that specializes in working with minorities, one of Wright's students inspired her to launch a unique skincare line derived from, and inspired by, high-quality natural ingredients – ranging from botanical face oil to hydrating moisturizers, body butters, scrubs and hair balms. Her African black soap is handmade in Ghana from plant-based ingredients that aid with acne and hyperpigmentation. Last year, she also launched Wright Frame of Mind, a non-profit that she says “gives children access to experiential learning programs, where they can actually learn how to become entrepreneurs with anything that they do best or that they love.”

What was the journey that brought you to launching Asili Botanics?

As a child, I had really bad eczema and when I hit 12, I was hit with severe acne. Corticosteroid cream helped with the flare-ups, but it was just the worst time of my life. First of all, the eczema ages you because it roughens your skin, and at the time, we couldn't afford to get good treatment. By the time I got to college, I was fed up. I applied the research skills I gained during my master's degree to experiment with different ingredients and discovered that some natural products were effective over time. That's when the spirit of entrepreneurialism hit me.

As I began developing my products, there was a little girl in my class and we were talking about shade and skin tones. She asked, “Miss Wright, do you think I'm beautiful?” I said, “Of course you are.” She had severe eczema, similar to mine as a child, and was scared that the coconut oil her mother was applying wouldn't heal it, and that no one would like her. That's when I realized creating my product line was something that I could do to help people.

What inspired the name of your brand?

I've always been drawn to plants and to history. My grandpa was an herbalist in Jamaica and people would come to him for help with different health problems. He used natural resources to cure them. Every time I utter the word *asili* [the Swahili word for nature], I think of Africa. I think of what my people have been through and how magnificent they are in surviving the worst parts of history. I also wanted to pay tribute to Indigenous people known for their use of plants and herbs. I wanted my brand to highlight and show respect to the ancestors and to underscore the ancient wisdoms that healed and helped our people.

What were some challenges you faced?

I was planning to launch earlier this year at different events, but with COVID-19, everything went virtual, so I launched on Instagram in May, just in time for Mother's Day, and that's when things took off. Most of the start-up funds came from my savings. I've seen good results, but taking it to the next level is all about connecting and networking. Marketing is another element that I have to look into. Truthfully, I need a mentor, someone that can guide and help me grow this brand.

Is highly pigmented skin safe from sunburn?

It's a myth that skin with darker pigmentation is less prone to burning. Even Black skin needs a good sunscreen. When I was searching for a dermatologist, it was challenging to find someone who knows what works best for dark skin. I still think it's important that whoever is treating you or giving you advice brings experience with people with a similar skin tone. You have to be very careful. What works for one may not work for another.

What are some of the opportunities for marketing to Black women?

I think product lines are missing a whole market segment by keeping their price points high and often beyond the reach of many people, prohibiting their access to these high-quality natural products. I try to break that barrier with my products by using really good ingredients while doing my best to keep the price point affordable for people of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Why is self-care important?

Being pampered helps you as a person. Looking back at the neighbourhood I grew up in, I look at their inability for self-care and how it affects their drive and their confidence, and I realize that self-care is one of the most important things that we need in our life. Even myself, there have been times where I've been working so hard trying to just escape my reality, trying to do better. When you work so hard, neglect can easily happen, and so I think that this whole industry is very important for Black women. They need that tender love and care. While there are some who are affluent, far too many are working hard, but just not able to afford spa treatments. Besides getting access to service specific to their skin type, just being in a spa for a Black woman, like for all women, is wonderful. **■**



EVELINE CHARLES

BY JANA MANOLAKOS

Starting with a two-chair salon in her hometown of Falher, Alberta, to building a multimillion-dollar beauty empire that spans across Western Canada, there's much to learn from Eveline Charles. Today, after 46 years in business, her eponymous company includes salons, day spas, medi-spas, two training academies and EC Labs, a product development company.

What is the key to your organization's success?

We always work on reinventing ourselves. When I started in the spa business, it was in the era when people spent full days enjoying treatments and relaxation, but that's changed. In the cities, clients are looking for multiple services and results-driven beauty in the least amount of time.

I dream big. If I want to do something, I tell everybody and then it forces me to be accountable and meet my goals. Years ago, I set a personal goal to run marathons. My goal was to qualify for the Boston marathon. When I qualified, people told me to keep it quiet in case I didn't make it. When I'm told I might fail, it makes me even fight harder for what I want. I ended up running Boston once, but I ran probably five other marathons – in between giving birth to two boys. With my last son, I ran seven kilometres every day until he was born. If you want to be successful at something, you must have passion for it.

Why did you start to offer spa services?

I remember thinking, "Okay, we've got to reinvent ourselves." I felt that if you could offer more services and become a one-stop beauty destination, people would spend more money. We had only three treatment rooms and four pedicure stations. One year later, we were adding another 5,000 sq.ft. of space, and all kinds of treatment rooms, more mud baths, Vichy showers – anything that was new in the spa business. Before starting something new,

we always asked our clients. That's how we introduced Beauty MD, where we offer a full range of medi-spa treatments.

Where did you gain your business acumen?

I only have grade 12 education, but I've learned to stay abreast of my learning curve. I've been lucky, winning a Global Business Award twice, and I was one of only a few CEOs accepted into the Quantum Shift program of the Ivey Business School.

When did you open the EvelineCharles Academy?

We opened 14 years ago because we couldn't get well-trained students fast enough. We can put new stylists on our floors within six weeks because we train them and esthetics people up to a whole other level. We now have our sights on becoming an international school. We just got approval for a shorter barber program, working with the British Barbers' Association out of the United Kingdom.

Why did you launch EC Labs?

We wanted to help other companies develop their signature product lines, and the time seemed right. EC Labs is now making products across North America, and we've just developed a patented hemp peptide that is really good for anti-aging and inflammation. Developed with scientists over the last three years, we are now selling it as an ingredient across Canada. It has unbelievable benefits as a topical, but can also be ingested.

Our patented hemp peptide does not have CBD or THC. We recently introduced our Beauty and Vodka shots, which contain the peptide as well as vitamin C, vitamin B, vitamin K, collagen and protein. We've made a peptide hand sanitizer that's like a glove, so it hydrates your hand and doesn't dry it. When the coronavirus hit, we got large orders from China and across North America.

What does the future hold for EvelineCharles?

We thought about franchising, but I'd like to stay focused on our many current lines of business. We now carry the Sisley-Paris line and we've added a full menu of Sisley products. We are the first Sisley Spa in Canada, offering Sisley Spa facials. In these exciting times, I've been mentoring the company's next leader. My company president, Lina Heath, has been with me for 25 years. She worked for me while she was still in college taking business marketing. I still want to be very involved, but I don't want to do the day-to-day, and I am fully confident in her abilities as she takes the business forward.

What advice do you have for business owners?

In our industry, you have to work "on" the business to grow it, not just "in" the business. What I mean by that is, if you're working all day as either an esthetician or a hair stylist, you're never going to grow that business like you would coming off the floor and working on upping your business game plan. Business has a funny way of pushing you in the direction you need to go. Every time you achieve one goal, you need to change your strategies to make it to the next level. After I made my first million dollars, I reassessed where I was going with my business. I did the same every time I hit another major business milestone. You need to set attainable goals and keep on raising the bar. **S**



CHERYL THOMPSON

PAR JANA MANOLAKOS

« **L**a personne la plus négligée en Amérique est la femme noire », a déclaré le militant des droits humains Malcolm X en 1962. C'est encore le cas aujourd'hui dans la culture de la beauté au Canada, selon un livre publié en avril dernier par l'auteure et universitaire Cheryl Thompson de Toronto, professeure adjointe à l'Université Ryerson. Son livre, *Beauty in a Box: Detangling the Roots of Canada's Black Beauty Culture*, souligne la sous-représentation des femmes noires dans l'histoire canadienne et les lacunes dans les informations sur leurs comportements de consommation.

Quel message voulez-vous que votre livre communique ?

Les femmes ne sont pas toutes pareilles. Les femmes noires ont un récit très unique et une expérience unique. Il faut y avoir une prise de conscience que les femmes noires ne vivent pas les mêmes expériences que les autres femmes, et cela est également basé sur notre histoire unique ici dans le monde occidental. Sur le lieu de travail traditionnel, il existe des règles tacites sur ce qui est considéré professionnel et ce qui ne l'est pas, et trop souvent, les gens considèrent que ce n'est pas professionnel pour une femme noire de porter ses cheveux au naturel. Mon intention avec ce livre était d'amener les gens à se parler entre eux, à établir des liens, à s'écouter et à essayer de se comprendre les uns les autres avant de faire des suppositions au sujet des autres.

Votre livre est basé sur votre thèse de doctorat.

Quelle était votre thèse ?

Essentiellement, le livre affirme que la culture de la beauté n'existe pas seule. Elle a vraiment besoin des médias; les médias agissent de la force motrice de la culture de la beauté. Ce que j'ai découvert, c'est qu'il semble y avoir peu d'informations sur la culture de la beauté noire au Canada. J'ai remarqué que les femmes noires sont

symboliquement annihilées de la plupart des publicités portant sur la culture de la beauté. J'ai examiné des archives au Canada et aux États-Unis pour trouver ce que j'appellerais la culture matérielle de la beauté : des publicités avec des images et du texte. J'en ai trouvé certains qui remontent aux années 1920, ici même au Canada, qui faisaient la promotion des produits en vente par correspondance pour les cheveux ou pour la peau des femmes noires; ces produits n'étaient tout simplement pas vendus en magasin.

Qu'avez-vous découvert sur la culture de la beauté noire au Canada ?

L'une des réalités au Canada est que la majorité de l'histoire des Noirs n'a pas été accordée beaucoup d'attention. Les journaux noirs canadiens remontent au 19^e siècle; on y trouve tout un historique de publicités faisant la promotion des femmes noires entrepreneures qui vendaient généralement des produits à partir de leurs domiciles. La plupart des gens ne savent pas que la militante canadienne des droits civils, Viola Desmond, qui figure maintenant sur le billet de 10 \$, était l'une de ces entrepreneures. Les médias ont ignoré ce fait. Elle a acquis une notoriété pour avoir contesté la ségrégation raciale à New Glasgow, en Nouvelle-Écosse, alors qu'on lui a interdit de visionner un film dans un cinéma parce qu'elle était assise dans la section réservée aux Blancs. À l'époque, elle parcourait la province en auto pour vendre ses produits de beauté faits maison; elle était ce que nous appellerions une « culturaliste de la beauté ». Elle a non seulement exploité un salon de beauté, mais a également fondé la Desmond School of Beauty Culture, où elle formait d'autres femmes noires aux techniques de soins des cheveux, et elle fabriquait et vendait également ses propres produits.

Constatez-vous des améliorations dans la façon dont les femmes noires sont représentées ?

D'une part, nous n'avons pas affaire à une culture extrêmement raciste omniprésente, et si nous voyons des cas ouvertement racistes, nous avons maintenant des agences qui les gèrent. Le seul vrai mouvement que j'ai vu concerne la parité entre les sexes. Mais quand vous regardez en profondeur la question de la race et du sexe, dites-moi où sont les femmes noires ? Nous allons à l'université pour nous former et nous obtenons des diplômes, pourtant quand on regarde qui prend les décisions, qui obtiennent des postes de cadres, qui sont les présidents des entreprises... Je vois beaucoup de femmes blanches faire ces choses; je ne vois pas beaucoup de femmes noires.

Est-ce que les soins personnels et les traitements de spa sont importants pour vous ?

Peu importe votre revenu, je crois que chaque femme devrait vivre l'expérience des traitements de spa au moins une fois dans sa vie. C'est presque comme méditer. Vous méditez pour vous dissocier de votre corps. De même, lorsque vous allez au spa, vous vous dissociez de votre vie. Vous libérez les toxines de votre peau, mais vous vous libérez également des choses que vous enfouissez à l'intérieur émotionnellement. Je crois aussi qu'il y a un aspect thérapeutique à se faire toucher par quelqu'un d'autre. Les moments de soins personnels sont si importants pour notre bien-être global. ■