

Embrace water and keep your hair dry with Obé

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Danielle Obe, founder of Obé about finding a solution to water and chemical damage on Black hair and hairstyles, influencing real change for a community and making water more inclusive.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Like most parents, I wanted my children to have swimming lessons so that when we went on holiday I could be reassured they were safe. We were members of a health club that offered them, so we started them young.

As part of those lessons, it was a requirement that children wore the club's swimming caps. My daughter Kayla, often complained about them because 'they didn't work'. We dutifully followed the specifications for the greater good of our daughter learning how to swim, despite knowing from experience that they were ill-fitting and would let water in.

One particular week, my elder daughter Kayla had finished her lesson, and we had returned to the changing rooms. It was the typical routine we did each week, and once again her swimming hat had let water in. I began the arduous task of washing and conditioning her hair to prevent as much damage as possible from the chlorine. However, my strong-willed four-year-old daughter had other ideas and decided she wasn't going to make it easy.

'Mummy no, mummy no, please mummy, STOP! No, no, noooo...' Kayla screamed uncontrollably. About 15 minutes later I got a frantic knock on

the door. Kayla was still crying.

'Who is it?' I ask in an exasperated tone. 'Open the door please, this is the duty manager.'

We've had reports of a child in distress. Please open the door NOW!'

Whilst still trying to calm Kayla down, I unlock the door to the family changing room. 'Where is the child?'. I stand frozen, bemused, clutching a bottle of hair conditioning shampoo in one hand, a towel over my arm, and a distraught child in the other. Two ladies are staring at me, and they identify themselves as a duty manager and a child protection lead.

'We've had reports of a child screaming in distress due to a possible abusive situation. What's happening here, why is the child so upset, is she ok? Little one, are you ok?'. The questions kept being fired at me, as I stood there speechless, trying to comprehend what was happening and wondering what exactly was going through their minds.

Finally, I took a deep breath and as calmly as I could, turned to Kayla who had thankfully stopped crying and said 'Baby, mummy needs you to please tell these lovely ladies why you were screaming'. 'I don't want to get my hair shampooed, I don't want to get my hair shampooed. Mummy please noooo,' and the agonised cry starts again.

They looked at each other, and then one stepped forward to comfort Kayla, and I noticed the other scanning the room. I proceeded to explain to these two Caucasian ladies, holding back the tears, that Kayla had just finished her swimming lesson and I was trying to wash and condition her hair which was drenched with chlorine water from the pool. I had to explain that her swim cap had failed yet again, and despite this bringing the same stressful routine we went through week after week it was vital to keep her 4c hair healthy. Like most children, Kayla was super sensitive to having any water or soap around her eyes. The difference is that

textured hair prolongs the ordeal, so although necessary, it was one of the worst things I could do to her or myself. Bathtime and swimming lessons were nothing short of traumatising.

Thankfully, as long-standing members of the club, we had built up a good rapport with staff. They knew us, as we attended six out of seven days. So, after some further interrogation and a caution, the ladies were satisfied having seen us interact as a family and chose to give us the benefit of the doubt. As they left the changing room, they shared some reassuring words with Kayla, unlikely to reflect on the incident again.

For me, it left a deep scar on my heart which I don't think will ever heal. I slumped into the changing room chair, heart racing, tears rolling down my cheeks and desperately clutching my daughter, unwilling to let her go. As I held her, I whispered - 'Lord! There's got to be a way, I never have to go through this again.' The thought that my daughter could have been taken away from me by social services was unbearable! I believed I was simply trying to be a good parent and do what was best for her and I dread to think what would've happened if I wasn't known to them.

That incident heralded the start of my journey to solving the age-old dilemma, and significant barrier to aquatics for billions around the world today. The issue of water and chemical damage to Black hair and hairstyles. That was the day I made Kayla a promise - to find a solution or, if needs must, invent one.

Necessity is the mother of all inventions they say, and that was the only way to find a solution for my daughter. From this journey, the plight of the African, Caribbean, and Asian communities inspired what many around the world have come to call a game-changer. Revolutionising swimming caps with a versatile, and stylish waterproof wrap. Specifically designed to keep our hair dry and protected in, on and around water. To take protection a step further, it also can be used when hydrating, conditioning

and treating hair.

It has been a tough journey, but watching Kayla enjoy such freedom with water makes it all worthwhile. For us swimming lessons, water parks, and even dancing in the rain, have become fun-filled family adventures thanks to Obé. Until that promise, I hadn't realised just how much of life we had been missing out on and I want as many to experience that as possible.

Tell us about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Obé is a startup, in business because we believe in a better quality of life, using innovation and design to empower individuals to find their place in the water. To achieve this we are revolutionising the traditional swim cap by developing a hypoallergenic waterproof headscarf, designed to meet the needs for people who have textured and long hair.

We are working in partnership with Justgood, who are experts in product development and manufacturing.

As is pretty standard with startups, we have minimal budget so we are having to be considered with our marketing activity. We are investing in PR and social media to reach our customers in the immediate term and then longer term we will expand our activity.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Where to begin. Originally, I launched Obé (previously NEMES) in early 2020 and after investing my life savings and spending years carefully curating a solution in the form of an innovative waterproof headscarf, I

was let down by the manufacturer I was working with. Products that were not to the quality standard I had signed off were sent to customers, and I was left heartbroken.

The weight of responsibility pressed down on me after promising not only to my daughter, but also those within my community that they would have the sought after tool they needed to be able to embrace water.

COVID-19 hit, and the world stopped. My hands were tied and it left me unable to rectify the situation. I was left devastated, and it took a long time to come to terms with it. A year later, I was at a crossroads. One hand I had the promise of Obé and the significance of that innovation, on the other I had the Black Swimming Association that I had co-founded to influence real change for my community when it came to water safety, drowning prevention and participation in aquatics. As most who have worked in a new business startup will know, it takes a lot of time and energy and I was running myself into the ground trying to do both for both, so my husband gave me the ultimatum that I had to choose one. He couldn't bear to see the woman he loved destroyed, trying to give her all to both and so I was forced to choose.

No more than 48 hours after this, as I was reflecting on what to do, I received a DM from the MD of a company called Justgood (at the time Tiger Global). He had read about my launch attempt and was compelled to reach out because he understood the importance of my mission and product. He offered the use of the company's expertise in helping me in getting my product to market. I am a woman of faith, and so I took this as a sign that Obé was only just beginning, and with this allyship and support I perhaps didn't need to give up on either, I could achieve both.

The business relationship began on a fairly transactional basis, I was doing as I did the first time round in terms of the product development, but Justgood would manage the factory in a way that was outside of my

skillset. This time they would ensure the manufacturer was properly audited for legitimacy, and that stage gates were put in place to keep them honest. It was a relief to have that invaluable support.

The relationship has since evolved into me being much less of a 'client' and working more in a partnership, both with different skills being brought to the table where we work together on all aspects of the business.

Tell us about the working culture at Obé?

Our team at Obé are from all walks of life, so we have purposefully worked hard to carefully foster a culture that provides a safe space. One where we all get to celebrate our differences, and nurture the ability to be respectfully curious, educating each other on our unique perspectives. We believe having a non judgemental environment, where the team feels secure, and it encourages more engagement and overall a better output.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Being first. When you are the one to push through the glass ceiling, it feels as though you are entirely alone, and everything is against you. Obé is no different.

My mission from the beginning for launching Obé and co-founding the Black Swimming Association was always to create opportunity by making water more inclusive.

When it came to Obé, it would've been easier (and faster) for me to make it out of latex. A widely available material, which has the same characteristics I was looking for, and could be available in a variety of colours. But, it was flawed. Despite only small minority of the population

suffering from latex allergies, people of African, Caribbean, and Asian heritage are disproportionately affected. Taking the easy route would've meant compromising the very community I was trying to help.

I needed a material that was as inclusive as my mission, so as with my idea, I had to make it from scratch. We have been through a lot of firsts. It has taken three years of development work, and many, many iterations, to get the product 'right'. Working very closely with our manufacturing partner because the product didn't exist in the form it does now. And not only was it the development that took time, the actual production is a first too. The very nature of Obé, its size, and finish are all unique, which exposes us to challenges. We of course have had and will have teething problems that we will overcome, and we will, as we have done so far on this journey.

How does Obé answer an unmet need?

As a community, we spend so much of our time and energy avoiding water out of fear for the damage it will cause to our hair that we are really missing out on so much. We avoid spa dates, we seldom take the kids to the splash park, we don't have the sense of freedom you get from running out into the rain to let the drops wash away our worries and our cares. And much more than that, it stops us learning a vital life skill that one day may save our lives. Obé is designed to be a tool that meets our needs, developed to remove this significant barrier and help us find our place in the water - safely, confidently, and in style.

What's in store for the future?

No limits, no boundaries! A revolution in recreational aquatic headwear as we know it. A fusion of fashion, fashion and innovative design. We want to increase our ranges to inspire, embolden and empower as many people as we can to improve their opportunity and quality of life, which we hope

will ultimately contribute towards saving lives.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Find your WHY and lock in, then trust the process and it's unfolding, no matter what! Coded in an acorn is a HUGE beautiful oak tree. No one needs to teach a planted acorn how to become an oak tree. It is in its DNA. The only variables are life, time and seasons, which is where trusting the process and its unfolding come in.

Coded within you is infinite power which cannot fail, so YOU CANNOT fail. Find your WHY and lock in. Setbacks, disappointments, 'apparent failures or disasters' may come. You may not understand the whole process, timing and seasons, but you must trust in the power of the infinite coded within you. Engage, keep moving, help will come and like the planted acorn to the oak tree your success will be inevitable - come rain or shine.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

I am blessed to wake up to breathtaking views of the Kent Downs. I start my day at 5:12 most mornings in thanksgiving and prayer, I then get ready (listening to gratitude affirmations) to go to the gym for a 6am - 7am PT session Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. Mondays and Wednesdays I go out for 8 - 10km walks. I get back home at 7:20am, make myself a cup of green tea, water the flowers and prepare for the school run at 8am. When I get back from the school run, I get ready for my working day with my first meetings typically starting at 10am. On days when I have to travel for in person meetings, I head to the train station immediately after the school run.

I lead three dynamic teams in three organisations, one of them international so my work schedule is rather atypical but gives me the flexibility for the school run and after school clubs. Although this also means I am constantly working, sometimes late into the night or morning.

Danielle Obe is the Founder of Obé.



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