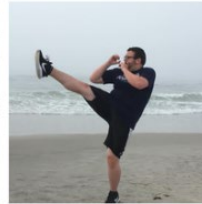


DOWN TO EARTH THE INTERVIEW SERIES ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY IN SMALL BUSINESS

BY **RUFIYA BLANK**



RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
Environmental Stewards
New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

Chapter One: Introduction to the Interview Collection

As part of my **Rutgers Environmental Stewards** project, I decided to include a series of interviews in addition to my e-book *Down to Earth: A Simple Sustainability Guide for Small Business Owners*. The individuals featured here: young professionals, small business owners, and community leaders share something important in common: they are strong-minded, grounded in truth and values, and deeply committed to building a better future. Through their businesses and initiatives, they prove that it is possible to succeed while staying committed to the planet.

Finding the Rutgers Environmental Stewards program was truly a blessing. It brought me together with a diverse group of professionals from different backgrounds, all united by a passion for environmental studies. That spirit of collaboration and shared purpose is reflected in the voices presented here as part of my case study and research.

Each of these individuals has touched my life in a meaningful way. From Rob's innovative approach to soil and sustainability at Agger Grand, to Matthew's integration of eco-conscious practices at Brnich Karate Studio, to Charlotte's passion for horses and every living being, and to my daughter Rena, whose creativity and independence as a clay jewelry artist embody what I call the mother's dream, their stories illustrate how sustainability can be woven into every corner of our communities. This collection is not only about their businesses but also about their values: supporting local markets, embracing sustainable practices, and building resilient communities. Together, their

voices tell a larger story, one of responsibility, and the belief that positive change begins at the local level.

Chapter Two: Robert

<https://aggergrand.com/>



Rob – Founder of Agger Grand, Media & Technology Platform for Soil and Sustainability

Rob is part of a new generation of entrepreneurs who merge environmental stewardship with digital innovation. As the founder of Agger Grand, he created a platform that amplifies stories of farmers, land stewards, and community projects, while also building tools that make sustainability measurable and scalable. His work combines media, technology, and grassroots engagement in a way that empowers others to connect with the land and with each other.

Beyond its media reach, Agger Grand is actively developing digital tools, from soil calculators to compost databases, that help land stewards make data-driven decisions. This balance of storytelling and technology underscores Rob's commitment to making regenerative practices more accessible.

It is a privilege to feature Rob's journey in this book. His perspective highlights how innovation and collaboration can support both people and the planet. On a personal note, I admire his resourcefulness, passion, and ability to inspire action through both creativity and technology.

Rob's story reinforces one of the key messages of this research: that sustainability and resilience start at the local level, where small businesses and entrepreneurs create real change with lasting impact.

Interview Questions for Robert Mueller, owner of the Agger Grand.

Section 1: Personal Journey & Origins, Agger Grand

Q. Can you tell us a little about your background and what inspired you to start Agger Grand?

I come from a business background, starting school as an administration major with a vague dream of having my own company. It was through talking to professors to try to expand my horizons and knowledge I became close with my economics professor.

His name is Royce, and we would talk about various things, and he mentioned he would have to do hand calculations for soil tests to get information on what he should do to his garden to improve its health.

As someone who is also heavily interested in technology, I immediately thought there should be a website to do that for him. To our surprise, there was none. At least not in the way we wanted it. From that we had an eureka moment that there is a need for this, even as a niche product, from there we started the idea of Agger Grand.

Q. Was there a defining moment when you realized that soil health and sustainability would become the center of your work?

I have a deep fascination with AI while always appreciating biology and nature since I was a kid. I think it was a natural path for me to get here even when I did not fully understand that this is what I would want to do.

Q. How did your experience in the Rutgers Environmental Stewards Program shape or deepen your approach to environmental storytelling?

RESP gave me more confidence that there is a need for an understanding of sustainability and how soil health plays a vital role in our ecosystem to the public. There is so much information out there and people want to be entertained but also learn. I find it a fun challenge to try to make that happen.

Section 2: Agger Grand's Mission & Impact

Q. In your own words, what is the mission of Agger Grand?

Agger Grand exists to create healthier soils and thriving ecosystems by combining science, technology, and community. We empower gardeners, farmers, and land

stewards with tools, data, and education to understand and improve their land, while building a marketplace that supports local food systems and sustainable practices.

Q. How do you decide which stories or land stewards to feature?

I choose who to feature based on fit to sustainable practices that align with Agger Grand's mission. Anyone that has a unique story or way of doing things tends to be the people interested in being involved with Agger Grand's.

Q. What kind of feedback have you received from viewers, farmers, or organizations featured in your videos?

The feedback and engagement have been positive from viewers. I get a higher like to viewer ratio which is a great indicator of people resonating with the story. Some farmers are reluctant to share their stories or information on their farm. However, I have been told horror stories of these farmers facing unjust criticism for how they do their operation, be it from animal activists or just opinionated people. Overall, I've had help from incredibly kind people and organizations. Many people share a similar vision and interest in wanting to make the world healthier.

Section 3: Tools & Technology

Q. Agger Grand is more than just a media platform, you're building digital tools for soil and land care. Can you describe some of those tools and what problems they help solve?

We've built tools that make soil science easier to use. Our Soil Texture Calculator takes the jar test and turns it into a quick digital result, so people don't have to struggle with the soil triangle. The Compost Database helps users know what materials can be composted, their carbon-to-nitrogen ratios, and how those affect pile health, so composting is less guesswork. We also have a nutrient balanced model that makes soil test results understandable and actionable, instead of a confusing sheet of numbers. Finally, we are building a Soil Database where people can store and track their own soil data over time. Normally these kinds of tools only exist in scattered university systems or behind expensive paywalls, but Agger Grand is making them available in one place.

Q. What challenges have you faced in building tech tools for ecological use, and how have you overcome them?

There is a knowledge barrier and time barrier. People dedicate academic careers to gathering a lot of the data available. People also dedicate careers to learning how to make computer software. Not to mention trying to maintain a social media presence which promotes consistent uploading schedules. So, it is all very time consuming and there are so many paths to take. I've been overcoming a lot of this by leveraging existing resources, speaking with tenured professionals, and maintaining a schedule. I have help in a partnership with Dommo Designs for video editing and social media management. I also have been trying to take courses such as the RESP to gain more knowledge in the domain.

Section 4: Vision & Future

Q. How do you see Agger Grand evolving over the next few years?

Ideally, we finalize the ability to upload and process soil tests first. Our most popular video is on how to do a soil texture test and use our website for best results. The demand is there.

I will further expand the company to provide more sophisticated tools utilizing geospatial technologies and AI. There is also a vision for a small grower marketplace. Realistically, I will pivot to what sticks while maintaining the mission of promoting sustainable environmental practices.

Q. What role do you think small land stewards and independent farmers play in the broader climate and sustainability conversation?

I think land stewards of all sizes play a vital role in maintaining sustainability and protecting our climates. The environment is such a complex yet delicate system. Any change has consequences, and we can measure those with science. When we analyze those measurements, we see trends of how things are going. Recently, I've been interpreting bad trends in the climate and local ecosystems.

I think a lot of it comes down to education and understanding what we can do to protect our local ecosystems. For instance, I dislike grass lawns. I find people prefer them due to not having as many bugs. However, most bugs are not bad even if they look scary. When we promote natural plants and environments for good bugs to thrive, we also promote the natural decline of bad bugs. It's a balance that I believe can be controlled through knowledge and practice.

Q. If you could change one thing about how people understand soil, what would it be?

Understand it through continuous testing. For instance, I have high aluminum in my soil, and without knowing the pH, this could be poisonous. I must maintain a pH above 5.5 to feel safe to eat my plants. This is the importance of understanding my soil and the soil around me.

Section 5: Advice & Reflections

12. What advice would you give to someone who wants to use storytelling or technology to support environmental goals?

Do not get discouraged. I think it's a difficult challenge but worth it. A lot of careers are not as attractive as banking or the most recent technological trend, but the impact it can have is immense on local communities and the nation. Farmers also face this challenge I believe, and I always feel inspired hearing their story and why they have not gave up farming, even when historically it is the lowest amount of the population that is in the industry.

Q. What gives you hope right now

I remain hopeful because technology is incredibly powerful and there are some incredibly smart people working on these hard problems. I think we are living in a impetus of change and I stay optimistic about the path we can take as individuals and a society.

<https://aggergrand.com/>

Chapter Three: Matthew, Sa Bom Nim

<https://brnichkarate.com/>



Matthew Wyatt – Owner of Brnich Karate Studio

Matthew Wyatt has built Brnich Karate Studio into more than just a martial arts school; it is a community hub where discipline, confidence, and sustainability intersect. By combining traditional martial arts training with forward-thinking initiatives, Matthew has created a studio that teaches not only physical skills but also values of responsibility and resilience.

From organizing recycling pick-ups and upcycling karate boards into student gardens, to planning future eco-friendly events, Matthew and his wife Courtney integrate sustainability into their business practices in ways that engage both students and their families. Their approach reflects a belief that even small steps can have a big impact when practiced consistently.

Featuring Brnich Karate studio in this book is an opportunity to showcase how local small businesses can lead by example. On a personal note, I respect Matthew and Courtney's dedication, leadership, and commitment to shaping both strong athletes and responsible citizens.

Their work reminds us that even the smallest businesses can weave sustainability into their mission, making it a natural part of community life and education.

Interview Questions for Matthew Wyatt, owner of the Brnich Karate Studio.

Section 1: Personal Story & Studio Origins

Q. Can you share a bit about your journey into martial arts and what led you to open Brnich Karate?

My martial arts journey began when I was just four years old. My uncle wanted me to take karate so I could “kick butt” like the action movie heroes, so my parents signed me up at a local school. But it quickly became clear that the atmosphere there wasn’t the right fit. That’s when we discovered Brnich Karate, and it’s been my home for the past 27 years.

Brnich Karate first opened its doors in 1996 in Deptford, NJ. For nearly three decades, it has been a family-owned and operated school, instilling discipline, respect, confidence, perseverance, and community into every student who trains here. Tom and Debby Brnich led the studio with the support of their children and a dedicated team of assistant instructors for over 25 years. I was the 133rd student to join, and over time, I grew from a white belt into the senior student, an instructor, and, in many ways, an honorary member of the Brnich family.

In 2021, Tom’s sudden passing brought a period of uncertainty for the school. Debby and I worked together to keep things running, and after careful thought, she and her children decided that entrusting me with the studio was the right next step. In July 2021, I officially became the owner and operator of Brnich Karate. Since then, I’ve been proud to carry on the values that Tom and Debby built the school upon, maintain the close family environment they created, and continue their legacy while bringing my own family into the Brnich Karate tradition.

Q. What values guide your studio’s mission, and how do you bring those values into your teaching?

At Brnich Karate, our mission is guided by values that come directly from the traditions of Soo Bahk Do and from our belief in the positive impact martial arts can have on families and the community. The core values we focus on are discipline, respect, confidence, perseverance, and community.

We bring these values into our teaching in very intentional ways. Respect is shown through the way students bow, address instructors, and treat one another on the mat, because the way we treat others in class carries into how we treat people in everyday life. Discipline is developed by setting clear expectations and encouraging students to

stay consistent in their training, even when it's challenging. Confidence grows as students achieve goals, from small milestones like earning a stripe to big accomplishments like testing for a new belt. Perseverance is taught by reminding students that success isn't about being perfect, it's about showing up, giving your best, and not giving up. And finally, community is woven into everything we do, from supporting each other in class to organizing events that bring families together.

In short, we don't just teach kicks and punches, we use martial arts as a tool to help students become stronger, more focused, and more confident people both inside and outside the dojang.

Section 2: Starting the Sustainability Journey

Q. When did sustainability first become a consideration for you as a business owner?

Environmental sustainability first became a consideration for me when I realized how much waste a martial arts school can create without even noticing it. Between paper sign-up forms, disposable water bottles, constant printing of flyers, and even the energy costs of running a busy studio every night, it added up quickly.

The turning point was when I started to see more families and kids in our community talking about recycling, reusable water bottles, and being conscious of their impact. It made me think, if we are teaching discipline, respect, and responsibility on the mat, shouldn't we also reflect those values off the mat? That's when I began making changes, like moving to digital sign-ups and communication, encouraging students to bring reusable bottles, and being more mindful about energy use in the studio.

For me, environmental sustainability isn't just about being "green", it's about setting the right example for our students. If we help them build habits for a healthier life, we should also be showing them how to take care of the world they live in.

Q. What inspired you to begin making changes in the studio related to environmental impact?

What really inspired me to start making changes was a moment with one of my students. One evening after class, she brought up the idea of recycling uniforms and how it could help reduce waste. It really made me stop and think, something I had never considered before. Once students move on to a new uniform, the old one typically just gets discarded, never reused. From then on, I started paying closer attention to

opportunities like this. It made me realize that if my students are already thinking this way, I should be setting a better example inside the studio. That small comment from a student really pushed me to take responsibility and begin making changes that reduce our impact on the environment.

Section 3: Changes & Impact

Q. What are some of the sustainable practices you've implemented at Brnich Karate so far?

We've taken several grassroots steps toward sustainability. Since our business plaza doesn't offer recycling services, we've created our own solution, organizing recycling pickups with the help of our student and parent volunteers. We also upcycle used boards from training and repurpose them in student-run gardens. Currently, we're discussing plans for a 2026 community picnic that centers on ecological conversations. One idea is for each student to plant a pot of organic sunflowers as a symbolic and educational activity. We're also exploring the possibility of a uniform reuse initiative to reduce textile waste and support affordability for new families.

Q. What has been the most challenging change to make, and what has been the most rewarding?

The biggest challenge has been being the first in our area to push these kinds of sustainability efforts, its uncharted territory, and there's no clear roadmap. But the most rewarding part has been seeing how even small steps make a real difference. Whether it's students taking pride in recycling or parents engaging in eco-friendly conversations, it's clear the impact goes beyond the dojang.

Q. How did your students and families respond to the new sustainability efforts?

We sent a survey. The responses from the survey titled "**Interview Questions for Parents – Sustainability & Family Decisions**" indicate strong interest and support for sustainability among families. Here's a summary of the key findings from the first few responses:

- **Key Takeaways:**

1. **Does sustainability matter in choosing businesses/programs for kids?**

- All respondents so far answered **Yes**.

2. **Would eco-friendly practices at a karate studio influence enrollment decision?**

- Majority answered **Yes**
- A few answered **Maybe**

3. **Do parents consider sustainability when choosing children's activities?**

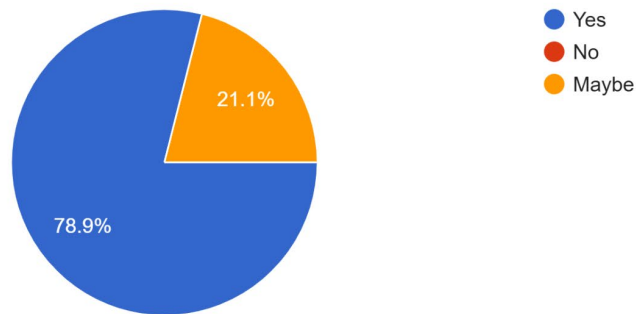
- Mixed results: some said **Yes**, others **Maybe**, none said **No**

4. **Would they be more likely to support/recommend a business that promotes environmental responsibility?**

- 100% said **Yes**

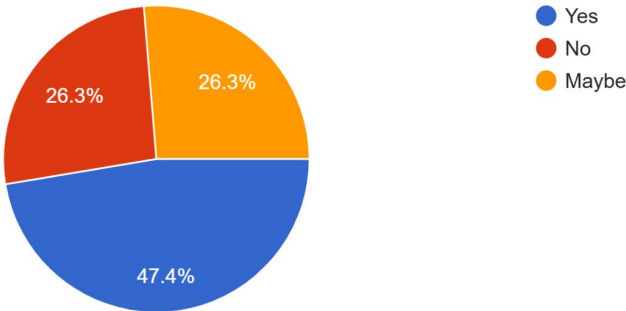
Is sustainability something that matters to you or your family when choosing local businesses or programs for your children?

19 responses



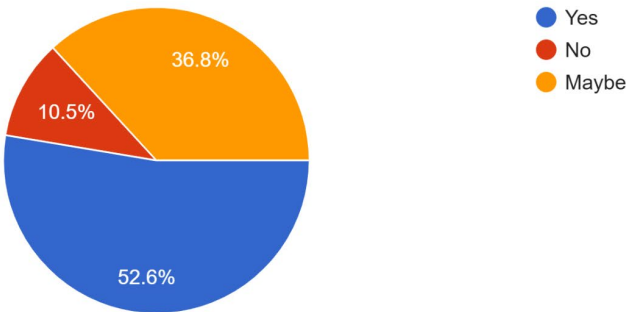
Would a karate studio’s commitment to eco-friendly practices (like reducing waste or using non-toxic cleaners) influence your decision to enroll your child?

19 responses



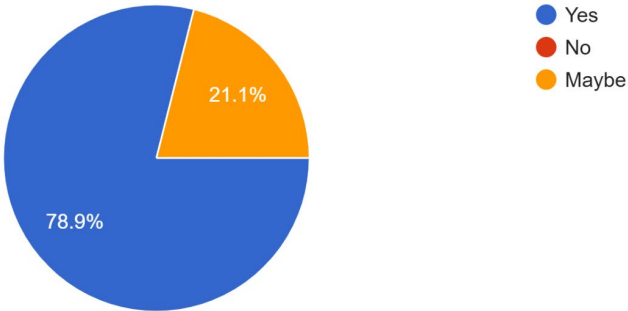
Do you consider sustainability when making decisions about your child’s activities—such as sports, camps, or after-school programs?

19 responses



Would you be more likely to support or recommend a business that actively promotes environmental responsibility?

19 responses



Section 4: Community & Culture

Q. In what ways do you try to model environmental responsibility for your students?

I try to model environmental responsibility in the same way I teach martial arts, through small, consistent habits that students can see every day. For example, I make a point of using a reusable water bottle in class instead of disposable plastic ones. We've also switched to digital forms and communication whenever possible, so students see that we don't waste paper.

The idea is to show them that environmental responsibility isn't about making huge changes at once, it's about being mindful and consistent. Just like in training, little habits add up to big results. When students see me practicing what I preach, it reinforces that respect and responsibility extend beyond the dojang and into how we take care of the world around us.

Q. How do you see martial arts contributing to broader conversations about leadership and community care, including the environment?

I believe martial arts has always been about more than just kicks and punches, it's about building leaders who understand responsibility, respect, and service to others. Those lessons naturally extend into how we care for our community and even the environment.

When we talk about leadership on the mat, we teach students to lead by example, to make choices that benefit the group, and to show respect for the space we train in. Those same principles apply outside the studio, whether that's being kind to others, volunteering in the community, or being mindful of how our actions affect the environment.

In today's world, leadership isn't just about strength, it's about stewardship. If martial arts can inspire students to not only take care of themselves but also to take care of the people and the world around them, then we're doing our job right. It's all connected: discipline, respect, community care, and sustainability.

Section 5: Reflections

Q. Has this process changed how you think about your role as a business owner in the community?

Yes, absolutely. At first, I saw my role mainly as teaching martial arts and running a business. But going through this process made me realize that being a business owner in the community carries a much bigger responsibility. Families trust me not only to teach their kids discipline and confidence, but also to set an example in how I carry myself and how the school operates.

When I started making changes to reduce our environmental impact, I saw how students and parents noticed and even got inspired to do the same. That showed me that my role isn't just about what happens on the mat, it's about contributing to a healthier, more responsible community overall. In a way, it's deepened my sense of purpose as a business owner. I'm not just running a studio; I'm helping shape the kind of community we all want to live in.

Q. What keeps you motivated or not to continue integrating sustainability into your work?

As a martial arts business owner, what keeps me motivated to integrate sustainability into our work is the belief that our actions, both on and off the mat, impact our students and the community. Running a studio responsibly, from minimizing waste to choosing eco-friendly products, reinforces the lessons we teach about discipline, respect, and responsibility. It also sets a positive example for students, showing that martial arts aren't just about physical skill, it's about making thoughtful, conscious choices in every part of life.

At the same time, the biggest challenge is balancing sustainability with the practical demands of running a small business. Sometimes eco-friendly options cost more or require extra effort, but the long-term benefits, to the environment, our community, and the culture we cultivate in the studio, make it worth the commitment.

<https://brnichkarate.com/>

Chapter Four: Charlotte

[@mindfulequinmassage](#)



Charlotte Quinn – Equine massage therapist, small business owner

Charlotte's journey reminds us that sustainability is not limited to farming, floral design, or traditional small businesses, it also extends into the care of animals that work, perform, and live alongside us. Through her equine massage practice, she is not only improving the wellbeing of horses but also showing how passion and responsibility can coexist in business. Her story ties directly into the larger theme of this e-book: that young, value-driven entrepreneurs are shaping a future where they care for the planet, people, and animals all intersect.

Interview Questions for Charlotte, Equine Massage Practitioner.

Section 1: Background & Business

Q. Can you share a bit about your journey into equine massage therapy? What inspired you to turn this into a small business?

I grew up in the heart of horse country in Warrenton Virginia. Horses have always been a part of my life, a part of my family, and my passion. For most of my early life I was convinced I wanted to be a medical provider for them and attend vet school after college. As I learned more about equine husbandry, their behavior, and their true magic, I wanted to create something more involved focused on their long-term success. When I graduated UConn with my Animal Science Degree, I took several jobs before I realized that Massage Therapy would help me find the satisfaction and reward I wanted while helping horses through their journey as companions and athletes.

Q. How does your work fit into the broader holistic care of horses alongside veterinary care, chiropractic, nutrition, and training management?

I've always referred to Equine Massage Therapy as supplemental, but essential. Do my services replace radiographic imagery, diagnostic therapies, or Vets knowledge? No. Can I help the horse and owner amplify what the vet provides, interpret their horse's body and emotions, and help them achieve their goals? I sure try! I like to think of myself as an outside unbiased perspective to help horse owners interpret their companions. Horses are deeply emotional creatures, and sometimes the ailments they face can be due to much deeper emotional insecurity and distress.

Section 2: Sustainability in Practice

Q. In your practice, how do you integrate sustainability, whether in your materials, travel, or daily operations? Do you use eco-friendly or reusable tools (oils, wraps, cleaning supplies) when working with horses?

Because I travel so often for my massages, I always require there to be one or more scheduled sessions at the location I am visiting to cut down on my emissions. When I do use my TENS unit on horses, I use water soluble environmentally safe ultrasound conductive gel.

Q. When you travel to your locations, what are the most common and least common sustainability practices that you see? Do you find that horse owners are becoming more interested in sustainability, for example, using local feed, natural products, or low-waste management practices?

Most commonly I see reuse of materials on farms. To list a few examples; reuse of feed scraps to feed other farm animals like chickens, on site composting of manure for fertilizer or sale of manure to another location for the same purpose, spreading of manure for pasture growth and rotational grazing. Occasionally in these locations horses have been trained to assist in facility management like arena dragging.

Other sustainability practices can include the use of more natural or biodegradable feeds. There is currently a new wave of diet growing in popularity called “Forage First feeding” or “Forage based diet”. This diet focuses on using less factory-made feeds and mixes and is centered around the use of Alfalfa, Beet Pulp, and Grass hays.

Q. Horses require a lot of resources (water, feed, land). Have you found ways to minimize the environmental footprint of your work while still supporting their wellbeing?

Horses do require lot of resources to survive. While I do not include equine management in my massage business, sustainability can be achieved by following a routine feeding cycle, maximizing use of manure at home (spreading in pastures or composting), using easily degradable bedding materials, and much more.

Section 3: Community & Education

Q. Do you find that horse owners are becoming more interested in sustainability, for example, using local feed, natural products, or low-waste management practices?

Yes! Every farm I visit has their own way of being sustainable, whether they use chickens and birds for parasite control in addition to traditional dewormers, and use things such as hemp or straw bedding.

Q. How do you educate or encourage horse owners to think about sustainability in their horse care routines?

I try to, as often as I can!

Section 4: Challenges & Opportunities

Q. What has been the most challenging aspect of practicing sustainably in the equine field?

Manure Management! Everybody tries to do it differently.

Q. What opportunities do you see for small equine-focused businesses to lead, by example, in promoting greener practices?

Rethinking use of water, manure, bedding, and more!

Section 5: Future Outlook

Q. Looking ahead, what's your vision for combining equine health and sustainability? Are there any new practices, partnerships, or innovations you'd like to explore?

Thoughts on horses/ what they mean to me/ their connection and my own to nature.

Horses have been a part of my life for a long time. At 26 years old, I am going on 20 years as a horse person. When I was growing up, it was more like an adrenaline obsession. I wanted to ride because I wanted to go fast, to jump, to explore, to take a risk. The lifestyle and the connection with the animals were much less a part of my hobby of riding. As I grew up, I noticed that horses often didn't want to participate in human activities. However, it was their job, and they were made to do it anyway. For a brief period in grade school after moving to New Jersey I volunteered at a therapeutic riding center called Riding High in Allentown New Jersey. It was

truly there, seeing people affected by horses that for the most part wanted to participate, that I understood what the human horse connection is meant to be. It is meant to be mutual. It is meant to be consensual. It is meant to be respectful on both sides. It is meant to be healing, grounding, always therapeutic for us AND for them.

When I attended college at the University of Connecticut I witnessed more of the same work horse culture. This is not surprising in academia; they are there to teach the students how to become equine professionals. The willingness, gentleness, and communication of the school horses was outstanding. They were nurturing, careful, slow and kind with all students. Challenging the ones who needed it and producing harmony with the ones who deserved it. However, their bodies were tired, their equipment often didn't fit, and their work seemed endless. After a change of barn management my freshman year things improved dramatically. Welfare was more important. Horses received time off, and more appropriate equipment. After graduation when I returned to repay my favorite horses for all they taught me, I found them happily continuing to work for the school despite all the time that had passed thanks to proper medical management.

Being allowed (and surprisingly paid) to massage the horses that helped me build my knowledge and my career is an insane privilege. Watching them let down their guard, connect with me, relax, and find comfort in our sessions is something that will never EVER get old. Their natural ability to heal, speak through body language and action, and fundamentally understand human emotion at its core is unspeakably glorious. That is a connection through nature that I will cherish forever.

[@mindfulequinemassage](#)

Chapter Five: Rena

<https://www.daisylanestudio.com/>



Rena Blank – Clay Jewelry Artist & Small Business Owner, Daisy Lane Studio

Rena Blank represents the new generation of creative entrepreneurs who combine artistry with resilience. As the founder of Daisy Lane Studio, she has built a brand rooted in originality, sustainability, and craftsmanship. Her clay jewelry pieces reflect both a deep attention to detail and a passion for creating meaningful, wearable art.

Beyond her professional achievements, Rena embodies independence and determination. She has grown her small business through hard work, vision, and adaptability, inspiring others with her example. Her journey illustrates how creativity can be transformed into a thriving enterprise while staying true to one's values.

Central to Daisy Lane Studio's ethos is a commitment to buying local and supporting small businesses. By choosing local markets, working with other independent makers, and encouraging sustainable consumer practices, Rena is helping to build stronger communities while reducing environmental impact.

It is a privilege to feature Rena in this collection of interviews. She brings not only her artistic perspective but also the voice of a young business owner navigating today's challenging marketplace. Her insights highlight the importance of authenticity, sustainability, and local community support in shaping the future of small businesses.

On a personal note, I am deeply proud to see her accomplishments and the example she sets, both as an artist and as a woman forging her own path.

Interview Questions for Rena, Owner of the Daisy Lane Studio.

Section 1: Origins & Creative Spark

Q: How did your journey with clay jewelry begin? Was there a moment, memory, or person that inspired you to start creating?

My journey with clay jewelry began during a time when I was searching for a creative outlet during the pandemic. I've always been drawn to nature and working with my hands, and when I discovered polymer clay, it felt like the perfect medium: tactile, versatile, and personal. The real spark came during the early days of the pandemic, when slowing down allowed space to reconnect with creativity. Making jewelry became a meditative practice, and Daisy Lane Studio was born from that.

Q: What does work with clay mean to you personally and artistically?

Working with polymer clay feels both grounding and endlessly inspiring. It's such a versatile medium and I love that it gives me full creative control, especially since I primarily use just primary colors and mix all my own shades by hand. That means every batch of earrings, even in the same style, comes out just a little differently and I love that uniqueness. It's a reminder that handmade doesn't have to be perfect. In fact, subtle variation and imperfection is part of what makes each piece special. To me, clay is a medium where creativity and individuality can really shine.

Section 2: Craft & Aesthetic Vision

Q: How would you describe your jewelry style? What shapes, colors, or textures are you drawn to?

I'd describe my style as earthy, organic, and nature-inspired with a touch of whimsy. I love soft neutrals, natural greens, and warm floral tones. Texture plays a big role in my work too, whether it's botanical imprints, hand-sculpted florals, or embedded natural elements like real pressed flowers.

Q: Are there particular themes or stories you aim to express through your collections?

I naturally gravitate toward seasonal inspiration, especially fall and Halloween. There's

something about the rich oranges, deep greens, and moody tones that really speaks to my style and creativity. Those collections are always my favorite to design, they feel playful, nostalgic, and a little magical. Through those pieces, I try to capture that cozy, whimsical feeling that comes with the changing seasons and the joy of small traditions.

Section 3: Sustainability in Jewelry-Making

Q: When did you start thinking about sustainability in your work, and what changes have you made later?

Sustainability became a core focus early on. Once I started producing pieces regularly, I quickly realized how important it was to be intentional with materials and packaging. I didn't want to create beauty at the expense of the planet.

Q: How do you incorporate eco-conscious practices into your production process (e.g., clay sourcing, packaging, waste reduction)?

I use minimal-waste practices in the studio, like reusing scrap clay and batching production to reduce energy usage. Most of our packaging is reusable, recyclable, or compostable, from the earring cards to the shipping boxes. I also source from small suppliers when possible and try to use pressed flowers that are either foraged or grown locally and sustainably.

Q: What challenges do small-scale jewelry makers face when trying to be sustainable and how do you balance quality and values?

Cost and access are main challenges, because eco-friendly materials often come at a higher price, and sourcing can be tricky. But I've learned that customers appreciate transparency and intention. It's about doing the best you can with the resources you have and being honest about the process.

Section 4: Community, Impact & Growth

Q: How do your customers respond to your sustainability efforts? Do you find they value it as much as the design?

Absolutely. I think there's a growing awareness and appreciation for brands that are trying to be mindful. Many customers tell me they love knowing their earrings are handmade, low-waste, and thoughtfully packaged and it adds meaning to their purchase. It's not just about the product; it's about the value behind it.

Q: Has your business connected you with local makers, markets, or causes? How has that shaped your journey?

Definitely. Pop-ups and maker markets have been such a beautiful way to connect with other small business owners and creatives. Being part of a local, supportive community has helped shape Daisy Lane into more than just a shop, it's a shared journey. I've also had the opportunity to collaborate with plant shops and sustainable brands whose missions align with mine, which has been both inspiring and energizing.

Section 5: Process & Purpose

Q: What's your favorite part of the jewelry-making process, from idea to final piece?

One of my favorite parts of the process is color mixing, it's so satisfying to start with just primary colors and create completely custom shades for each collection. It gives me full creative freedom and makes every batch feel unique. I also really enjoy brainstorming seasonal ideas and thinking about what shapes, colors, and details capture a certain time of year.

Q: Can you share a favorite project or moment that reminded you why you love what you do?

One of my favorite moments was at a market when a customer told me my earrings reminded her of her grandmother's garden. It reminded me how deeply art, even small, wearable pieces, can touch people.

Section 6: Advice & Vision

Q: What advice would you give to other creative entrepreneurs starting a handmade business?

Start small, start messy, and start with heart. Don't wait until everything is perfect, it never will be. Let your style evolve as you go, stay true to your values, and connect with your community. And don't underestimate the power of storytelling, people want to support you, not just your product.

Q: Where do you hope to take your brand next? Any dream collaborations, materials you want to explore, or messages you want to spread?

One of my big goals is to expand into wholesale and see Daisy Lane Studio pieces in brick-and-mortar shops. There's something really exciting about the idea of someone stumbling upon a pair of earrings in a local boutique and connecting with them at that moment. I'd love to grow the brand in a way that keeps the handmade spirit intact but reaches more people through thoughtful retail partnerships.

Another message I really want to share is the importance of **buying local**. Supporting local artists and small business owners not only strengthens communities but also makes fashion more sustainable. Choosing local markets over mass production helps reduce environmental impact and keep creativity thriving. That's something I deeply believe in and hope to carry forward as the brand grows.

<https://www.daisylanestudio.com/>

Chapter Six: Gratitude and Hope for the Future



<https://envirostewards.rutgers.edu/>

As I close this interview book, my heart is full of gratitude. First and foremost, I want to thank the incredible small business owners who opened their doors and their hearts to share their stories. From farms to floral studios, from martial arts schools to jewelry workshops, each of you showed that sustainability is not just a concept, but a daily practice built on creativity, resilience, and care for both people and the planet.

I am also deeply grateful to the **Rutgers Environmental Stewards Program**, which gave me the opportunity to learn, grow, and connect with a community of people who are passionate about making a difference.

Most importantly, I want to thank you, the reader. By engaging in these stories, you are taking a step toward building a more sustainable future. Change does not come all at once, but it does come when we work together, when local businesses, communities, and individuals join forces to make better choices for our environment.

Looking forward, I feel hope. Hope in the young entrepreneurs who are building businesses rooted in values. Hope in the families and communities who are embracing sustainability in everyday life. And we hope that we can choose a future where resilience, responsibility, and heart guide the way.

This is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a larger conversation. Together, we can continue to write the story of a planet cared for by those who call it home.

Stay tuned for my next project: A Sustainability Guide for Small Business Owners in New Jersey, which will build on these stories and provide practical tools for creating a greener future.



<https://envirostewards.rutgers.edu/>

Chapter Seven: Resources and helpful links

<https://envirostewards.rutgers.edu/>

<https://envirostewards.rutgers.edu/tag/stewards-in-action/>

<https://www.sustainablejersey.com/about/>

<https://apnews.com/article/new-jersey-forest-fires>

https://dep.nj.gov/newsrel/21_0020/

<https://www.ceres.org/>

<https://dep.nj.gov/climatechange/resilience/resilience-strategy/>

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