

Women-owned Rochester startups addressing mental health, wellness needs in burgeoning market

■ Special to the RBJ

The wellness industry is growing as rapidly as it's changing. According to McKinsey & Company, with consumers spending \$450 billion annually on products and services that improve their health and well-being, the opportunities for innovating new offerings are exploding.

Three Rochester-based startups are already tapping into this potential with unique services that reflect changing consumer preferences, including the desire for more control, personalization, and integration across the multiple dimensions of health and wellness.

Bringing Mindfulness and Chocolate to Employees

To help companies satisfy growing employee needs for mental wellness services, Melissa Mueller-Douglas recently launched MYRetreat, Inc. The experiential learning business, which combines mindfulness practices with chocolate, is helping organizations build trust within teams, tackle employee burnout, and demonstrate how people can set intentions for how they want to think, feel, and behave at work and in daily life.

"As a Licensed Social Worker, I know that people need to confront their busy minds and decrease their emotional reactivity to focus on their work. Mindfulness is an evidence-based practice that can benefit those who adopt it to reduce their stress and increase their productivity," says Douglas.

After conducting customer discovery sessions with more than 100 human resource and wellness professionals, Douglas confirmed companies are looking for cost-effective programs that benefit both employees and their bottom line.



RIT faculty members Keli DiRiso and Nicole Trabold launched their software business, kan•nect, with help from NextCorps' Embark program. (Provided photo)

"I started with a MYRetreat tech-enabled service and tested various iterations. The feedback I received identified my voice as the 'secret sauce' — it seems to relieve listeners' tension. I also found that by including chocolate in my approach to mindfulness, which more than 80% of the population loves, people who have never before or rarely engaged in meditation began practicing it. Chocolate provides the tangible reward that helps people turn practice into a habit," she explains.

Today, Douglas is busy holding wellness workshops for a growing list of clients, including American Express, YWCA, Ronald McDonald House Charities, the Stupski Foundation, MIT, and the University of Rochester, just to name a few, and creating her companion app.

"There's a word: Topophilia, which means 'the love of place.' I was born and raised in Rochester. In addition to being family-friendly and easy to get around, this city provides a nurturing environment for women and minority entrepreneurs. It also has incredible re-

sources that can help you grow a business, connect, and thrive — like NextCorps, 100 Women Who Care, Greater Rochester Black Business Alliance (GRBBA), and the Rochester Open Coffee Club,” she says.

“I’m also not afraid of the word ‘no’ — it’s actually my favorite word. When a prospect says ‘no,’ I’m grateful. It gives me the freedom to focus my time on other entities. And when I say ‘no’ to an opportunity that’s not right for my company, it allows me to set my intention to say ‘yes’ to a better one that has more growth potential.”

Helping College Students Deal with Stress

In late 2021, Keli DiRiso and Nicole Trabold participated in NextCorps’ Embark program, which helped them start their software business, kan•nect, without having to know how to code or leave their jobs. The founders, who are faculty members at the Rochester Institute of Technology, have developed a mobile app called base campus that helps higher-ed students assess their current level of distress. Depending on their answers, it then serves up customized content in a game environment — including proven strategies and personalized encouragement — to help students improve, track and maintain healthy emotional states.

“In being part of the college environment, we saw the unprecedented stress students are experiencing and how they seem unable to find ways to cope,” explains DiRiso. “This has become an overwhelming problem, which is felt on multiple levels. Students are struggling. Faculty are grappling with how to help them. School resources are being stretched to the limit. And colleges are burdened to meet the demands. This situation, along with the ramifications of being isolated during the pandemic, has created the perfect storm.”

The National College Health Assessment backs up their findings, reporting substantial increases in student stress (59-81%) and suicidal thoughts (13%-28%) since 2019.

“We saw an opportunity to help students really learn what mental health is and develop better coping mechanisms for dealing with stress before it becomes problematic and debilitating,” adds Trabold.



Melissa Mueller-Douglas launched MYRetreat, Inc. to help organizations build trust within teams, tackle employee burnout, and demonstrate how people can set intentions for how they want to think, feel, and behave at work and in daily life. (Provided photo)

“The base campus app offers both a prevention and intermediary tool to help them fill gaps with mental health resources.”

As assistant professors, DiRiso and Trabold have an immediate customer audience for base campus through RIT, which is key to helping them get to revenue quickly. With 19 colleges and universities within the Finger Lakes Region, Rochester presents an ideal location for them to collaborate on, refine and expand their new business. Their biggest challenge now is bandwidth.

“Working full time doesn’t allow for a lot of free time to work on the app,” says DiRiso. “Our next step will be getting a few students on board to help with the next phase of development.”

Enabling the Safe Use of Essential Oils

A growing number of people are also turning to aromatherapy to manage health conditions. This practice of using essential oils (EOs) from plants to heal, however, can be dangerous, with some oils even being poisonous if absorbed directly through the skin.

To help empower millions of EO users, natural health blogger and website designer Emily Carpenter founded AromaTrust last year. Like DiRiso and Trabold, she also participated in NextCorps’ Embark program to validate that aromatherapists and consumers alike would benefit from resources that support the confident and correct use of essential oils.

The Aroma Summit



AromaTrust

The Aroma Summit by AromaTrust had 2,500 registered attendees for the three-day event. (Provided photo)

“The number-one problem today in aromatherapy is an overabundance of misinformation,” explains Carpenter. “AromaTrust acts as a bridge between aromatherapists and EO users by providing a place where people can connect with trusted resources.”

The membership-based website offers value to both audiences by listing qualified aromatherapists and helping EO users select from this directory to hire skilled practitioners. Members can also take advantage of live, interactive sessions and additional free resources, such as the Aroma BUZZ newsletter which features a recap of articles, podcasts, and videos by aromatherapists. The Aroma Summit – a three-day annual event that brings #aromafriends together to connect, discover trends and learn – just concluded, attracting 2,500 registered attendees.

Carpenter is now working on providing public access to additional free resources, such as books, essential oil companies, aromatherapy schools, and The Essential Oil Dilution Calculator. “Rochester is the perfect place to base my global aromatherapy business,” she points out. “The Embark program, my mentors, and my loved ones have been of great help and support to keep me on track and moving forward.”

Encouraging More People to Launch Businesses

While all four women are laser focused on expanding their companies, they all express the desire to help others in starting their own entrepreneurial journey here.

“The best thing to do is to actually talk with your customers – not just through surveys and Facebook groups. Start doing this before you launch your product and service, and never stop,” advises Carpenter. “Having face-to-face conversations – where you can see their body language and reactions and build true rapport – will help you validate your idea, change your thinking, and improve the end result by showing you the next right action to take. Having these heartfelt talks and shifting my strategies accordingly is the single best thing I’ve done so far. It’s made all the difference.”

Douglas brings up a common trap that often stops many entrepreneurs from moving forward. “Don’t waste your most valuable resource contemplating and processing how to solve ‘Imposter Syndrome,’” she says. “It’s a waste of time questioning if you are deserving of your accomplishments and accolades. Surround yourself with people who have surpassed your wildest dreams of business success. They’ll inspire you and help you to remember that you are the entrepreneur meant to cultivate your business from a plan to reality.”

“Even if there is demand for your offering, remember that starting a new business doesn’t happen overnight. Be patient,” adds DeRiso. “Sometimes you’ll take one step forward and a few back. The journey is a marathon, not a sprint, so the trick is to keep the momentum.”

Trabold agrees. “Be prepared to work a lot, and be open to asking others for help. Take advantage of opportunities like NextCorps, where those experienced in the details of an idea and in starting a business can support you, every step of the way.”