

Changing What's Possible - S.2, Ep.2 - Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Marie McNeely, Nicole Cuervo

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:01

Hello, and welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability Innovation Podcast brought to you by Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation or CPARF. I'm your host, Dr. Marie McNeely. And this season, we are excited to bring you extraordinary stories about how disability technology and innovation come together. In this episode, you'll hear from our guests and Nicole Cuervo. Listeners, Nicole is founder and CEO of Springrose, one of the startup companies in our 2023 Remarkable US accelerator program. And she'll be talking more about Spring rose in this episode. So Nicole, I'm looking forward to learning more about the company. Thank you so much for joining us on the show today. How are you?

N Nicole Cuervo 00:43

Thank you so much for having me, Marie, this is wonderful.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:46

We are excited to learn more about you and more about the company. So first, can you start by telling us more about yourself.

N Nicole Cuervo 00:53

I was born originally in Argentina moved to the US in the early 2000s. My background is in design-research, design-thinking and strategy. And I worked about three to four years doing a lot of human-centered design work for government and nonprofit clients where I would engage with their constituents, usually underserved groups, and then try and understand what their pain points were and co-create solutions that the government could then implement in terms of programs or policies to improve their life. And so from there, I decided to get an MBA and start

Springrose, I'd had the idea a few years before I felt that getting a master's of business was going to be the best way to launch the business forward to give me the tools to do it correctly, and the time and kind of financial support from the school to do it well.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 01:42

Wonderful. Well, I'm excited to talk more about your background and more about the company. So can you give us some insight into what maybe motivated you to found your company Springrose, and how did you actually get started?

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Nicole Cuervo 01:53

It was I believe 2010, my grandfather passed away. And so my grandmother Rose, who lived in Argentina moved to the US a few blocks away from my mother and I. During that time, I got to spend more one on one time with her than I had growing up having been in a different country from her. And noticed that despite being very independent, very capable, very sharp, even at the age of 85,86,90, she felt a lot of pain and discomfort. She had a lot of different conditions but caused chronic pain. She also had osteoarthritis, and getting dressed in the morning was very challenging for her particularly putting on her underwear, her bra and her socks. And as a single grandchild on that side of the family, I really wanted to buy her a gift and buy her something that would improve her life. And when I went to big box stores and retailers and I looked online, I couldn't find anything that was adaptive and actually would work for her limited mobility. And that also would respect her dignity. A lot of the options at the time and still to this day look very medical, they only come in white, they're shapeless, they have a very limited sizing range. And they're very narrow in terms of what kinds of limited mobility they serve. I felt that that was personally I like lingerie, so I was very frustrated by that. And then I hosted a focus group of about 10 of her friends who were between the ages of 75 and 95 at the time, and they were very straightforward. And this is a product that they would have liked. And they shared with me what colors they liked, and where they shopped what they were looking for. And so that was back in 2015. This nugget just stood in my brain. And even as I was progressing through my career, I kept coming back to it. So when I applied and got into an MBA program, I decided that if I was going to invest the two years that I was going to do so to start the business and to really nurture it to a place where would be sustainable to work on full time after graduation. And luckily, I have been and so that's where we are today where I'm working on it full time and have been for the last year. And it's been a really fun wild ride since.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 03:54

That is absolutely wonderful. Has there been anything in particular that really surprised you about this experience, so far?

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Nicole Cuervo 04:01

What has surprised me a lot is how universal and neat this is. A lot of times people who don't have a form of limited mobility, who are fully able bodied, they understand that it's important, but they don't quite know the scale. They tend to say it's a niche, and it is a niche - it's not the

entire market. But it's a pretty sizable chunk of the market. And we serve over 50 different conditions, both temporary and permanent. So everything from a broken bone frozen shoulder fractured wrist, to more permanent things like cerebral palsy, sometimes stroke paralysis, MS and it's over 50 conditions like it's quite a large group of people that are in need, and haven't had this problem solved for them. So that to me, like I've been doing this for almost three years and about two or three weeks ago, I learned about a new condition that I had no idea existed and so I think it's a space that is really underserved and hopefully will not continue to be that way but I think I was surprised by the scale of it.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 05:00

So can you tell us what is Springrose's mission?

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Nicole Cuervo 05:03

Our mission is to design intimate products that champion resiliency and respect dignity. We're starting out with an adaptive bra, because that is where the greatest need is. That's where most of the pain points lie. And we've designed one that is quite innovative, I'd say. So what makes our bras special is that you can put it on multiple different ways you can put it on with one hand, you can put it on with limited dexterity in both hands, you can put it on overhead, and you can step into it, you can put it on like a vest, there's many different ways. And that gives you the flexibility as the user to get dressed on your own and independently. And let's say your range of motion changes day by day, it still gives you that flexibility to use it as you need.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 05:44

Absolutely. And I think one of the other cool things about your company is your commitment to sustainability and ethical labor. Can you tell us a little bit more about this commitment?

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Nicole Cuervo 05:53

We are a public benefit corporation that is a legal designation within the US that means we are keeping profits and social mission at the same level of importance. So we would not be able to prioritize profits if it went against our social mission our social impact. And that was very important to me to make sure that there was a legally binding reason for a lot of what we do at the company and making sure that we never know what the future holds. So let's say one day, we have an investor and they try and take over one of those things you hear in movies, making sure that they're also held to these standards. For us, our social benefits are to design for women with limited mobility. And our other social benefit is to only employ ethical labor and to pay people well. So we even pay our interns, even when it hurts my soul a little bit because they need to be taught a lot. But we do believe that if somebody is working, they deserve to be paid for that work. And that extends to our supply chain. We use a manufacturer who's our partner in Colombia, they have lovely practices I've visited them. They're trusted by other brands that we know. And they mainly employ single mothers who are head of household and give them a living wage so that they can actually support themselves and their families. They

also reduce their water waste. Any fabric scraps are repurposed and reused. Fabrics are not dyed with really harmful chemicals, our packaging is plastic free, we are using recyclable material. And we're not even including hand tags in it. Because we want to avoid having those little pieces of plastic that tie the hand tied to the garments. So trying to be thoughtful about every step of the supply chain and what we're doing. And while the product isn't perfect, it's not like no fabric is ever going to be fully sustainable. Whether if you use cotton, and maybe it's the amount of water or pesticide use if you use recycled nylon that it's also a water use it use nylon, it's petroleum. So there's really no solution that's going to be 100% sustainable, but we're trying to do what's right to the best of our ability.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 07:48

Absolutely. And I think that is amazing and wonderful that you were actually able to visit the facility in Colombia, what was it like going on a trip there?

N Nicole Cuervo 07:55

Finding the right manufacturer is one of the hardest things to do as an entrepreneur, especially when you're starting out, especially when you are making such a technically difficult and specific product, particularly when you look for ethical labor standards and good sustainable practices. And this was - I started during COVID. So we started formally in 2020. So it was a very difficult time and we couldn't travel then. My background is not in manufacturing. So I was almost on my own to try and find a supplier that could work with us. And last year in 2022, we were actually working with a different manufacturer also had great standards, but it was a little bit of a difficult relationship. And I ended up going to Colombia for a wedding, I decided that I was gonna go with day early, pop to a different city, which our manufacturer is located in different from the wedding and find see if I could find a fabric supplier because that's what we were missing at this time. A week prior to my trip, I went to a co working session with other Latino founders in Miami, Florida. And during that session as we're going around a circle talking about what everybody does, most people were talking about the FinTech of this or the FinTech of that and then it gets to me, and I'm like I make bras to which everybody obviously stops and is like that is not like the rest. Very different. So everybody asked me questions. I mentioned how I was trying to find a fabric supplier in Colombia. And turns out one of the people in that circle is a Colombian founder who has a friend who's worked in textiles in Colombia for 18 years, put me in touch that man then put me in touch with the company that is now our fabric supplier, so I got to visit them while I was there. And I was only in that city for about six hours. So I fit in going to the fabric supplier, going to our manufacturer, and then going to another manufacturer, which was the sister company of the textile supplier. Loved the people there thought they were wonderful and lovely. So I started making some samples with them, too see if it would make sense to switch over and two weeks after that trip, I get an email from my original supplier manufacturer saying hey, we've decided to get rid of intimates production. So bye now! And so some times things work out in your favor. And that was one of them were sheer chance, it all worked out where we could just continue production almost uninterrupted with the new manufacturer, and they really are really wonderful partners.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 10:11

That is an amazing story, Nicole, I'm so glad you shared it and just highlight some of the

serendipity some of the chance that happens in these entrepreneurial journeys. And I'd love to learn a little bit more about your products. You touched on this a little bit earlier in our conversation. But what problems specifically do your products solve?

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Nicole Cuervo 10:29

Our current product, which is our flagship bra, it's our plunge front-closure bra is designed to restore dignity and independence in the dressing process for women who have any form of limited mobility, whether that's a permanent disability or a temporary thing. So it lets you put on your bra yourself, basically. It gives you that privacy and that dignity back and lets you get dressed in a way that isn't painful to you. We've also done a lot of testing. And the one comment we keep on getting back very consistently, is how comfortable the bra is. People say they almost can't feel that they're wearing it. One person actually asked if she could have the bra in lieu of payment for one of our sizing sessions. It's just something that yeah, I even took it to Argentina to my grandmother and I walked my grandmother Grace my other grandmother and gave it to her. And because I was trying to fit the bra on somebody who was of that size, and she happened to be that size. And she's worn it every day since unless it's in the wash. And I told her just because it's mine, you don't have to wear it, you can go wear somebody else's, if that makes you more comfortable. And she said that mine was the most comfortable. So that has been very encouraging. Because when we surveyed women, the number one quality they wanted in their product, even more so than accessibility was comfort. So for us that has been our Northstar, apart from all of the technical features in the product.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 11:47

Absolutely. And you touched on this a little bit as well. You mentioned 50 different conditions. Nicole, I won't make you list off all 50 here. But in general, who do you think are the largest segments the people who could benefit the most from using your products?

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Nicole Cuervo 12:00

Our product is really designed and tested with people who have one limb that's fully functional. So stroke survivors are a good fit, amputees, people with limb differences in the upper body, people who had shoulder surgery or present shoulder rotator cuff injuries, any of those people can benefit. It also does help people who suffer from chronic pain. So if you have rheumatoid arthritis, if you have fibromyalgia, if you have multiple sclerosis, that is also very beneficial to you because you're able to put it on truly many different ways. And so it can flex to your needs day to day, especially if those needs change, while still making it comfortable. So for conditions like fibromyalgia where you might be skin sensitive, we've made sure to try and hide as many seams as possible, or fabric is really expensive and issue as well as expensive. But it's really expensive, because it provides support without wires. So it's a wireless problem. So we've put a lot of thought into every detail of the bra to make sure that we are solving problems for a wide range of conditions. We know our bra is not a silver bullet, it's not going to work for 100% of people. But that is why we're going to keep on innovating both on this bra and other products that we have in the pipeline to make sure that we are serving everybody in some capacity.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 13:13

Certainly. And it sounds like you've already had quite a few conversations. You mentioned these focus groups, these sessions where you're kind of going out and talking to people who could potentially use your product. So how did you then, Nicole, incorporate feedback or maybe perspectives from people with disabilities in designing your products?

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Nicole Cuervo 13:29

As I mentioned earlier, my background is in design thinking. And so to me, keeping the user at the core was vital to the business. I am able bodied, I think that's important to disclose. And so I have no stake in what the bra looks like or does or how it functions and what little pieces or gadgets that it has. To me. It's all about making sure that we are talking to the user and getting their perspective and their pain points and their needs and desires into the product. And so what I did first other than that focus group back in 2015 is I started interviewing women one on one for 45 minute or hour long sessions, I interviewed over 60 women across a range of conditions and ages and asked them very point blank, like, can you tell me about your day? How is your mobility limited? If you could design your dream bra what would you do? And took all that data and made it into design requirements. At which point I said, okay, here are the things people want universally, people wanted wireless, universally, people wanted something comfortable, something that was supportive. So I took all those design requirements and then need stitches and went to different physical and occupational therapists across the country across a range of different offices or practices. So we had hand therapists, we had neuro therapists who then a pined on the design to give us input into saying, Well, my patients would be able to do it this way, or they wouldn't be able to do it that way. Or maybe you could change it this other way. So we kept on iterating on the design. Eventually, we hired a designer who made us prototypes, which we then shipped to, again, occupational therapists who tried to on their patients and gave us feedback. We also tried it on women ourselves, so I would just give it to somebody I knew who had either RA or frozen shoulder or some other condition. And they would give us feedback in the moment. And I just tried to incorporate as much as possible, we did surveys as well with over 500 women, and took more data from those. So basically, this is a constantly iterative process. And even to this day, we're still slightly perfecting things on the back end that maybe aren't visible or apparent in the product. But even like two months ago, we changed the thread to make it a softer thread. But again, sadly more expensive for us. But it's worthwhile to have a quality product that will make people happy, even if it increases our costs. And even now, we just started our trial with a few dozen women who have received the bra and are wearing it and giving us feedback on the product.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 15:45

Absolutely. And we talked about your bras a little bit. But can you maybe go into a little bit more detail here about what are actually the key features of your adaptive bras that make them different from some of these other products that are available for people with disabilities or people who have some of these 50 conditions you mentioned?

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Nicole Cuervo 16:00

It's a very visual product, so I will try my best to describe it. The main key feature of the bra is

that it has a front closure bra that has two velcro straps, the straps are long and stiff. And they go through a middle metal piece called a slider, it's our closure. And so when you put the straps through that, you then pull and adjust it on to your torso on either side. And those straps, because there's one on either side, you only really need to open one to put on the bra. And that's what allows you to put it on with one hand or one on them. And because there's two of them, it allows the bra to be reversible. So the same bra can use for somebody who maybe has a limb difference on the right side or limb difference on their left side. Those straps as well, on the back side have a pocket made of fabric. And that pocket is there so that we include O rings that are optional with every purchase. So if you prefer to put on the bra overhead, or by stepping into it, or you have limited dexterity of some kind, you can attach the O rings. And then you open the straps, the O rings, prohibit the straps from exiting the middle closure. And then you can pull the bra overhead or stepping into it because it'll make it really large compared to your body. And then you can hook your finger around or any finger really or even a tool, if you need it around the O ring, pull on the strap and adjust it to your body again, the way you would have if you were just putting it on without the O rings. The velcro is actually from the velcro company. And it's one of the most innovative products that is specifically designed for apparel. So it doesn't feel like 1990 sneakers, Velcro, it feels very nice and soft. It's not rough against the skin. And it makes it really easy to open and close. But it also it's very resistant, so will not open without you purposefully opening the strap.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 17:50

Very interesting. And you mentioned just a few other kind of features that you're incorporating whether it's the high quality fabric, the softer thread, what are some of these other pieces, I think that really distinguish your products?

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Nicole Cuervo 18:00

Oh yeah, we're all about comfort here. So our fabric is actually a fabric use for compression garments. That means that it is thicker and heavier than most, but that gives it that support without the wires. We also still included a back hook and eye closure on the bra. But it is a cushioned back hook and eye closure. Meaning that if you have it on and you rest your back against a chair, or a wall or a bed or whatever the case might be the hooks are not stabbing into your skin uncomfortably. And the reason we have that back closure is because in our research, people wanted a front closure bra. But they always mentioned how it was unfortunate that it's not adjustable. So if you buy a bra, and it just so happens, the band does not resize, there's no way to fix that you just can't wear that bra. So for us, we wanted to include the back closure so that you can put it to the right size on your body. And then just let it be you don't have to adjust it every day. It's mainly a one time thing for us. We're using the fancy Velcro, our hardware is nickel free, because we know that around 10% of at least the US population is allergic to nickel and want to make sure we're not harming you, as we are trying to help you and support you. And I could really talk about this forever. Like we have the inside of our bra the seams are hidden, make sure that it's not rubbing against the skin, the tip of the strap is pointed to make it easy for insertion. It's a magnet proof product so that it doesn't interfere with pacemakers or get in the way of anything. It's really taken a lot of time and thought but also, it's thanks to all the women who've dedicated their time and energy to helping us in this process that we've gotten as far as we've gotten.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 19:35

Absolutely. Well it sounds like you've incorporated a lot of really cool innovations in this product. And I think when it comes to apparel, a lot of times the visual component is important. You mentioned a lot of things that are a turn off for some of these other products on the market or that they look very medical. Maybe they're only available in white and they're kind of clunky and not very attractive. So how do you address that in your products?

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Nicole Cuervo 19:55

We kept that at the forefront of everything we were doing and we were always asking ourselves is something I would wear, even if I didn't need to wear it, we don't want our product to feel like a compromise, because it's the only thing you can wear, we want it to feel exciting and like you're looking forward to wearing it. So it is a plunge bra, which is a little sexier and the colors come in black and terracotta. So black is obviously a classic, and it looks good on everybody basically. And then the terracotta. The really interesting thing about it is that not only does it look good on every skin tone, it's also invisible under white clothing. So if you put on a t shirt, or if you put on button down, you can't see it, most people don't realize that white bras are visible under white. So when we looked it up, reds and oranges are invisible generally under white unless you have a completely sheer top. And we wanted to provide something that looks nice and doesn't feel like an afterthought. So we made sure we were not compromising on that as we were developing the technology for it.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 20:52

Well, you've come a long way with Springrose, and you've got some really cool products coming down the pipeline as well. So thinking about the future, Nicole, what is your vision for the future of Springrose?

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Nicole Cuervo 21:03

I have a really big vision for it. Our purpose as a company is to improve quality of life. So that to us, we're obviously starting with apparel products, but that can expand much further. So what we're doing right now, at least to get to that future is this product, we have a lot of other things in the pipeline for different needs that maybe we're not serving at the moment and different products. And then we're also in the process of developing content around women's health at the intersection of disability. We know that there's a lot of resources out there in terms of menopause, or fertility as it relates to just being a woman or somebody who was assigned female at birth. And that's not necessarily always the case for people who have a disability, maybe an autoimmune condition or more chronic conditions. So we want to bring data informed like clinician informed information that is easily accessible and doesn't feel like you have to go through a hospital's website to get access to. So we have some physical therapists, occupational therapists and other clinicians that we work with to bring that information. And particularly, I'm really excited about our content around sex and intimacy. Because that's something that's not talked about enough and really should be particularly for women who are disabled in one form or another. So we've partnered with a sexual counselor, who's also an occupational therapist, who has many, many years of experience in this field,

working with couples and with individuals to bring this content that normally costs a lot of money because you have to go to the sessions that costs hundreds of dollars an hour. But we want to make it democratized so that it's available for everyone so that not only are we helping you get dressed, which is a big part of the day, but also just helping you improve other parts of your life if you so feel like it.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 22:40

That is amazing. Well, if you've piqued the interest of our listeners out there, and they want to learn more, Nicole, what is the best way for them to do so?

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Nicole Cuervo 22:49

They can find more information at Springrose.co. That spring like the season rose like the flower.co. And that is our website. That's also our handles on Instagram and Facebook and other platforms. So you're welcome to follow us, check out our blog, check out our products, share it around, we'd really appreciate it as we're starting off now.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 23:09

Well, listeners, definitely check out that website to learn more about Springrose and all the amazing work that Nicole and her team members are doing there. And Nicole, it was such a pleasure to have you on the show today. Thank you so much for your time.

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Nicole Cuervo 23:21

Thank you so much for having me. This was lovely.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 23:23

And listeners. It's been great to have you here with us as well. It would be fantastic. If you could take a moment to subscribe to our podcast on your favorite podcast platform. And we look forward to connecting with you again in our next episode of Changing What's Possible.