Ciara Ladroma: Hello. Hello. Welcome in. We are just going to give people maybe a minute or two to join the webinar. Thank you so much for being here. If you are able to or interested in doing so, please go ahead and pull up the chat, say hello, and maybe where you're joining from today.

Perfect. Hi, Lacy. Welcome in from Colorado. Hi, Frank. Hi, Emma. Perfect. Thank you. It looks like we're having more people join us, which is great. I think we'll go ahead and get started maybe in 30 seconds or so, but what I had asked earlier, if you are interested to go ahead and open your chat functions and just say hello and let us know where you are joining us from, and I guess I could tell you where I'm joining from. I am based in Iowa right now. Perfect. Hi, Lorenzo. Nice to see you here.

All right, group, let's go ahead and get started. First, I'm going to start with some housekeeping slides just to make sure that we understand all the different functions and how to interact throughout this webinar. So the audio for today's meeting can be accessed using computer audio or by calling in by phone. If you select computer audio, please make sure your speakers are turned on or your headphones are plugged in. To call in for audio, dial 301-715-8592. The meeting code is 87803870906. The ASL interpreter will have a spotlight throughout the presentation.

For the best viewing experience, please navigate to speaker view using the options at the top right of your screen. If you prefer, you can go ahead and also change your view to gallery view in order to see speakers and interpreters in the same time. Realtime captioning is provided. The captions can be found by clicking on the CC button in the Zoom controls at the bottom of the screen. If you do not see the captions after clicking the CC button, please alert the host via the chat box.

Please send your questions, concerns, and any requests for technical assistance to the NDI host via the chat box. Questions will be addressed by the presenters if time allows. If you would prefer to ask your question in ASL, please raise your hand and wait to be called on by the host. Just to add to that, you can also let us know if you would like to share a question by using the chat function, and we can go ahead and spotlight you and make sure that your camera is on.

If your question is not answered during the webinar, you are listening by phone or maybe you're unable to use the chat box, please email ajones@ndi-inc.org. Please note this webinar is being recorded and the materials will be available at www.disabilitysmallbusiness.org on the past events page within one to two weeks.

All right. Hello, everyone. Welcome to today's session titled Business Feasibility and Creating A Plan. My name is Ciara Ladroma, and I'm with Griffin-Hammis Associates. I am joined by my incredible colleague, Molly Sullivan. Molly will help us monitor the chat box. So if you haven't already, please pull up the chat function by clicking on the icon that reads chat at the bottom of your Zoom screen menu. Please use the chat box to join the conversation, ask questions, share ideas or leave comments. There will be a short Q&A at the end of our conversation with the entrepreneurs on today's webinar.

Griffin-Hammis Associates has over 30 years of experience providing training and technical assistance to support individuals across the spectrum of disabilities to become self-employed and small business owners.

Lastly, we want to thank the US Small Business Administration and the National Disability Institute in leading the community navigator pilot program that creates the space for this webinar. While the webinar is funded by the US Small Business Administration, all of the opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the SBA.

At the end of today's session, we'll share upcoming events and the National Disability Institute team will share some exciting information with you about the small business hub and resources available to you.

I am thrilled to introduce you to today's guest speakers. First up, please meet Paola Blanco. Paola is a website developer and the founder of Pixels n Paper, a digital marketing company that focuses on creating accessible websites and content. Paola has cerebral palsy and wants to improve accessibility both online, that's where pixels comes in, and in-person, and that's where paper comes in for other people with disabilities. She's currently looking to tap into a new client base as she expands her services to include accessibility audits and consulting.

Next, please meet Melody Stein of MxT 2510. MxT 2510 is a Los Angeles-based sustainable clothing company that was founded by a mother and daughter duo, Melody Stein and Taysia Stein. As a deaf and CODA-owned and Asian-owned business, they are proud to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the fashion industry. Drawing inspiration from their global travels, Melody and Taysia have crafted a line of sustainable elevated basics that exude confidence and consciousness. Their garments are designed to be versatile, timeless, and ensuring that they will become long-lasting staples in your wardrobe.

To Melody and Paola, thank you so much for being here today. I am honored to share time and energy and space with the three of you to really learn about how the both of you started your business, how you went about learning that your businesses were and are needed, and how you created a plan to essentially start your businesses and grow them to this day. Then lastly, I hope that this conversation serves to inspire and guide those that are tuning in today and for our future viewers.

Paola Blanco: Thank you.

Ciara Ladroma: Welcome. I'm going to go ahead and stop this share screen. All right. Welcome to Melody and Paola. My first question for both of you really is to just tell us about your business and, Melody, specifically, how did you come up with the name of your business?

Melody Stein: Yes, absolutely. So really, it's a long story. I've come up with a lot of different business names. I was researching online and everything on social media, and everyone seemed by the same name, but I actually contacted Trademark Lawyer and they actually didn't see anything right there, and they actually found one that was similar. So I had to backtrack myself and think about a new business name. So I was thinking about it. It was really hard because I realized that I wanted to pursue a trademark, and I saw that there were millions of names out there that had already been taken.

So I was just trying to figure out, but maybe I thought Russ, my husband, had actually suggested using the handshape of ASL, something I wanted to show that it is a deaf-owned business. So I thought, "Okay." So I thought 2510. What does that mean? Two meaning the two of us, my daughter and myself, Taysia, five showing the sign for woman, and 10 is based, so two women founded it. So I thought maybe I'm adding MxT at the beginning. So it's myself, Melody, partnering with Taysia, so MxT. So it's her name, my name, two women founders. So that's how I figured it out, and I got excited, and I actually just got the exciting news that it was ready and it was approved and it was trademarked.

Ciara Ladroma: That's wonderful. I love how personalized and unique your business name is and how it really shows you and Taysia. I love the MxT. Can you tell us just a little bit about your business?

Melody Stein: Sure, sure. As you mentioned, we are focused on designing and manufacturing our sustainable elevated basics. We decided on the basics because we use the basics every single day. So we're focusing on that and something that we're able to wear repeatedly. It's go out, it's a nice day. Actually, it is pretty nice. So we actually were inspired by our travels because my husband, Russ, and I, we travel a lot, and we didn't want to bring a large suitcase. We were afraid that our luggage might get lost or it might get delayed. So we didn't want it to really mess up our trip experience.

So we decided to just bring a small carry on, something easily we could just take off the plane and go and get to our destination quicker, but we found that it was actually tougher to pack at the time because at the time, we were planning for travel for a year. So we didn't know the places that we were going to go. Plus, we didn't know the temperature, whether it's hot, cold. It's going to be a real challenge to pack that.

So all of that experience inspired me to get to the basics because that way we can switch it and decide if we wanted to go out for a nice day. We can actually add a scarf to whatever we were wearing or something nice like that. So we thought maybe we can focus on just the basics. We're actually manufacturing here in LA. We actually started the business during COVID. So the entire world was shut down. We started with LA and now we're actually focusing on manufacturing overseas, China, Hong Kong, and the like.

Ciara Ladroma: That's incredible. I can't wait to stay updated with your business to see you and your items out and about. I think packing for vacations, I tend to sometimes overpack, but I like to also challenge myself with one carry on. I love the concept of your business of wardrobes and apparel that is perfect for all locations, and that's forever lasting. So I love that so much.

Paola, I love the idea and how you made up the business name of Pixels n Paper. Can you please tell us about your business?

Paola Blanco: Sure. So my business originally happened by accident. I had received a degree in advertising from the Art Institute at Fort Lauderdale. Originally, my vision was I'm going to join an agency, but I was having a really hard time with finding employment that fit, and part of that were some assumptions about my ability. There were moments where I would get called into jobs based on my portfolio, and then they would backtrack once I came in for the interview because they saw that there were some physical challenges. I actually got called in for the same job after they told me no because I still liked the portfolio.

So I had to rethink what I wanted to do. It started because I was helping out a friend, a web developer, and they needed some graphics and things. It was just too much on their plate. So I whipped it up and I sent it over to the client and they loved it. The anonymity and the flexibility of being online was what really inspired the idea of, "Hey, maybe this could be more than a one-off."

So I worked for a while with my business, but had to shut down after COVID and then restart. So it's a new chapter for Pixels n Paper, but I'm really excited. This time around, I've learned a lot of lessons and I've also built a network of support. So I'm excited to see where it's going.

Ciara Ladroma: That's perfect. Thank you so much for sharing. I really like that, Paola, it just happened to you and you said, "You know what? I can do this," and you didn't give up. Then, Melody, I really liked that you saw something within your own travel experiences of, "Wait, I think this business would be really great because it applies to my family when it comes to traveling." I think that answered a little bit of the next question of how did the ideas of your businesses come about, but I would love to know if you have any more detail of what came next after that, "Oh, well, I see the need here," and then what was the next step? So what was that first plan? What did you identify needed to be done?

Melody Stein: So it started with where I lived, which was in San Francisco, and they had just announced a lockdown. This was in March of 2020. So around about summertime, it was still ongoing, we still had the lockdown. So I was talking with my daughter, Taysia, trying to come up with an idea for our business, and we decided we wanted to focus on clothing, but I wanted to make sure we had a chance to do some concept testing, but you really weren't allowed to go over to other people's houses. So what we decided to do was use FaceTime.

So we started off by calling Taysia's friends to see what they thought. We'd show them some prototypes we'd come up with to see what they thought. It was a little bit hard to try and do all this while also using sign language on FaceTime, but we were doing that. I also called my friends also on FaceTime to show them the prototypes we had to get their ideas, and we also tried to get an idea of what people's pain points were.

One of the common things we heard is that, typically, women's clothes are designed by men. Do they really understand women's bodies? We wanted to have in all our little thoughtful details as well. For example, if you think about a pair of shorts, when you go to the store, you'll see the hem of shorts be very straight and flat across, but when you actually put them on, you'll notice that the hem isn't flat, it rides a little higher in the back, and then you feel a little uncomfortable always wanting to tug them down. So what we did is when we make our shorts, the hem line is not perfectly straight all around. It's actually a little bit longer in the back. So that way it covers you better, especially if you're walking upstairs. So those were the kinds of ideas that we were coming up with.

Ciara Ladroma: I love that you found a way even in times where we were in, where all of us were in quarantine. I think that is so creative and how technology can really support us in starting something, even in times where there are so many barriers.

Paola Blanco: As far as the relaunch for my business, one of the things that I really focused on was developing knowledge. Through the first iteration, I'd realized very quickly that my client base was small business and nonprofits for the most part, but they really did need an additional layer of support. A lot of times when you're talking to those clients, they need a wealth of resources. So graphic design and copywriting and all of these things put into a package.

So one was developing services that would serve them to the best of their ability and that would be scalable. Then the other was getting some training in regards to web accessibility, which I was doing while we were in lockdown, going through WCAG guidelines and seeing what training was available. Again, most of those consulting services are really specialized and not something that was really accessible to smaller businesses or two or three-person nonprofits that really did care about accessibility and cared about their clients but just didn't have the bandwidth for it.

So that was really what developed into my niche in addition to working with an organization, another nonprofit based in Georgia called Synergies Work. They helped me with some of the struggles that I had as a solo entrepreneur who also did deal with bad days and downtime because of my disability and some of the challenges that I faced. So I think that combination was really important to setting me up on the right path.

Ciara Ladroma: I love that your first steps in restarting your business was focused on learning and connecting. Even as subject matter experts, it's so important to continue that education, to continue to be the best, and to really fill the needs of your customers. So when talking about customers, and I would just love to know how the both of you identified who your customers would be and what you did to test the feasibility of your business ideas. Melody, do you want to share first?

Melody Stein: Absolutely. So I talked with several of my friends, as well as Taysia talking with her friends. We were asking about everyone's pain points because that helped us formulate a plan, a roadmap because we couldn't do everything. So we were investing a lot of money on manufacturing clothes. So I started out by looking for someplace that could manufacture our clothes, but all the factories were closed.

Now, what I'd been hoping to do was to go to a local factory, get some samples made, and then take them to my friends and ask them to try them on, give me any feedback they might have on them, but since they were all closed, I then looked into LA. At that time, some of the factories were still open and running. They were making masks for city service or public workers, and those that were open making masks, I asked if they could also make clothes. When I found out they could, I had them make some, send them to me in the mail, and then I allow about two people or so to come over to my house and to try on the clothes.

Then I asked them, "If you would be one of my customers, would you be someone who would buy this?" They absolutely agreed. Now, people here in San Francisco really understand the environment, especially for the younger generation. They're exposed to a lot of environmental issues in school. So that was something they were already very aware of, and so they said they were interested in buying clothes like that. The one thing I wasn't so sure about was the price point. I really had no idea where to start, but I knew these were very expensive.

So there was a couple of steps in the process helping with this. First of all, Taysia and I have no experience in designing clothes or sewing clothes. So we would work with someone that would help us develop the cloth, come up with patterns, to come up with a tech pack. So we were able to make one or two samples from those designs. Then once we could start getting into production, then we could really go into bulk production.

Through all of this experience, I learned so much. It was such a journey for me, but all of that also ended up impacting the price. For the factory that I contracted with, sustainability was important to me, as well as that they were making ethical products, that they were paying their employees a very livable wage, that they were provided health insurance. All of that was really important to me, and I had to make sure we were on the same page. So we were testing out some price points, and honestly, that is still a little bit of a work in progress where we're trying to determine the right price points.

Ciara Ladroma: Perfect. Thank you so much. I love that you were creating clothing that not only are you just designing and ordering from manufacturers, but you started with people first and you said, "Try this on. Tell me what you think. Do you love it? Do you hate it? How can it be better? Then now let's make it sustainable." So I love that you prioritized you and your daughter's values throughout the entire process.

Paola Blanco: I know for me, one aspect of creating feasibility was repeatability. I knew that these services were in demand because of my experience with past clients. They would always tack on if I was working on a website, "Hey, can you do maintenance?" or, "Can you do these couple graphics?" or, "Can you do emails?" So while the demand was there, sometimes you're so eager as a business owner to say, "Yes, I can help you," that you don't really develop the structure and the processes, whether it relates to execution, whether it relates to timelines or price structure. So for me, that was a big part of it being feasible.

Then on the flip side of that, as a business owner with a disability, feasibility also has to do with building a structure that works for me, for my needs at that given point in time. What that means is giving myself some grace and saying on a great day, "Absolutely, I can sit down and crack out five different designs," but on a rough day, I need to be able to modify and have the process in place to where I can say, "I'm going to tackle three and have the buffer in place or have the communication with my clients that this is going to take me a little bit extra."

That comes with building relationships and really having that right client that respects the value of what you do that isn't going to try to talk you down or be unprofessional in their demands because we are working professionals, and things do come up. So that was another big component and something that my participation in the Synergies program really helped with a lot because it gave me that viewpoint of I'm not the only one that needs a little bit of grace sometimes or I'm not the only one that works with outside supports.

So for example, as a creative, I don't know numbers, but sometimes we struggle to ask for help and say, "I really should have an accountant look at this," or maybe if I have to do 175 emails today, I should get an assistant and get some help with that, and those are trade-offs that are resource-based that don't necessarily have to speak with your ability as an entrepreneur, as a creative, as a designer.

Ciara Ladroma: Paola, I really love that you mentioned that you make space for your good and bad days when you are thinking about the feasibility of your business and growing your business because that is so important, especially as a lot of entrepreneurs typically start as a team of one. So we have to give ourselves that grace and we have to be able to allow for those good and bad days.

I do want to ask a followup question about your customers. You had mentioned working with nonprofits initially, and then when you came to identify your current customers, did you go by referral or are you still seeking out nonprofits or are you open to for-profit businesses as well?

Paola Blanco: So I'm open to anything, really. The reason I worked with nonprofits is because it was just a space I was familiar in. It was also value driven. This was a cause that I could really get behind. I know sometimes commercial production of art or marketing really relates to anonymity, but if I can do something to contribute to a meaningful mission or cause, that called to me, which isn't to say that I wouldn't love to work with other companies, but it was just where my focus was and my wheelhouse was at the time. Does that answer your question?

Ciara Ladroma: Yes, thank you. Melody, as your business grows, how do you go about or maybe how do you determine what offerings and products and services you're going to add to your business?

Melody Stein: We definitely wanted to talk about doing collections based on locations to help us plan well. So we decided to start with San Francisco, with the San Francisco collection because that was our hometown. It's where I grew up. The weather there is usually pretty chilly. We're very much known for our foggy weather up in San Francisco. We typically dress in layers. So we ended up wanting to produce ... Well, first, we started with sweatshirts, then with wide leg pants, and then we did some shorts. That way when it warms up, you can wear your shorts or you could put layers back on. So that was something that would fit San Francisco.

then we worked with two colors, and again, obviously, we work with the fog. So the gray was inspired by the fog. We're well known for Carl the Fog up in San Francisco, and then the second color we used was black. Then we ended up moving on to Los Angeles. Los Angeles, obviously, has a lot warmer weather, and in LA, there are a lot of different neighborhoods. For example, there's Beverly Hills, there's the beach, and people dress very differently in both of those neighborhoods. So we wanted to focus on, for example, what I'm wearing now, a boat neck shirt, as well as a tank dress. It's actually something we turn back to front. You can have a high scoop next line or if you prefer, you could have the V-neck and you can put whichever side forward that you prefer. So think of it, it's my take on Beverly Hills movie life, things like that.

So then with our third collection, which is going to be coming out soon, coming out this summer is the Miami collection. So of course, Florida, it gets very hot out there. So we're focusing on making tanks and two tops, as well as linen shorts. In fact, I have the colors right here that we're working on for the Miami collection. Those are very Miami colors to me. So by coming up with collections, it helps me steer where I'm going to go, with what I'm going to be producing.

Ciara Ladroma: I love it because in the beginning of this presentation, you shared that this business came about from travel. So again, you're applying your love for travel and visiting these places into your business and into the growth of your business. It might be perfect because your expansion into Florida and then we have Paolo who is in Florida.

Paola Blanco: Yeah. I'm looking forward to that collection. I definitely want to hop on, but as soon as it's available.

Ciara Ladroma: Thank you for sharing that, Melody. Paola, can you talk about ... I know that learning and connecting is so important to you and in your field. How are you going to determine what services and offerings you maybe continue to provide or you add onto your business?

Paola Blanco: Well, I think a lot of that has to do with bandwidth and value. There's only so much I can do in a day, which is great if I have the resources and capacity for growth, but I also want to be mindful of what's most valuable to the clients that I serve and what they're looking for. In the social media space, video is king, but in terms of accessibility, there's an extra layer of add the captions, add the alt text to your images. So there's an added layer of requirements that need to be considered if I'm going to say, "Yes, the asset that I'm going to hand over to you is accessible and is beautiful and creative as well."

So I think finding a balance between those would be my ideal. In a perfect world, I would love to bring on team members who were similar part of my community, who maybe needed that chance and say, "Yes, I can produce the work," but no one's given me a shot yet. So that would be a dream goal for me.

Ciara Ladroma: That's wonderful. I hope that you get to reach and check that goal off sooner than later. Melody, I would love to know what resources you and Taysia use to grow your business and maybe still to this day.

Melody Stein: Yeah, of course. So it's not the first time I've actually established a business. I'd actually established several businesses, but the industries were completely different. So this is fashion area, this is where it's brand new for myself and Taysia, even though Taysia did take some minor courses in fashion at Arizona State University. So we have some understanding of fashion and she really loves fashion herself. So I found myself as an older person, I see keeping things simple. So we decided on that, but we really wanted to understand that we know that fashion is a big challenge. So looking for a platform, we decided to actually sign up with Shopify. So that's where we can sell our product on their platform.

Shopify is not only a website builder with apps or everything like that. They also have an office here in LA, and they provide different webinars and different lectures. Especially during the lockdown, they were providing online courses on Zoom. Now, they're finally doing things in-person, in-person events. I think we've taken a few in the course of a month and, really, it's just a wonderful resource and, for me, also network with other business owners and see how they did these things. It's just really been a wonderful resource, Shopify.

Ciara Ladroma: Thank you so much for bringing up how important and helpful it is to attend classes and to attend webinars because there are so many free resources out there that it can be as easy as joining something like this today and then learning and then quickly applying it to your business. So thank you. Paola, what resources did you use to grow your business or still maybe use today?

Paola Blanco: Sure. So I've definitely utilized similar classes through my involvement with Synergies Work. They have several programs, accelerators, incubators. We're actually launching a program called Igniting Ideas for people who are new to business and who want to have those base skills and develop an idea. So they have a great community filled with resources and they've helped me with a bunch of tools. For my wheelhouse, I mentioned things like accounting are difficult. So they recommended FreshBooks. They had a partnership with Zen Business so that the entrepreneurs that were within our program would have assistance actually incorporating and setting up records and those types of things.

Before the call started, we talked a little bit about this AI-based scheduling tool called Motion, which I love because it keeps me on tasks and actually helps my processing. All of those resources came about because of those community meetups with Synergies where we just huddle together, "Hey, what's going on? What are you struggling with? How did you fix this? What are you using?" That's been super helpful for me.

Full disclosure, I am also now onboarded as part of the Synergies Work team. They wanted more than my freelance or business services. So I'm also part of the team member and working with them, but in terms of applying that community to Pixels and saying, "This is how I grow, this is how I scale," they've been a tremendous help.

Ciara Ladroma: Thank you so much for sharing about Synergies. Can you give a brief summary of what Synergies is and then how can people reach out or get more information or even apply for any of the programs? I think it would be so fitting for many of the entrepreneurs watching today.

Paola Blanco: Sure. So the organization is Synergies Work, and you can go to synergieswork.org. Some of the resources they have available beyond the incubators and accelerators are actually articles and videos by and for entrepreneurs with disabilities. We have monthly free master classes on different topics. So anything that comes up in our meetup conversations like, "Hey, have you looked at ChatGPT? How can we use this?" We'll take that feedback and within about a month or two develop an outline for a course and have a focus on, "This is how you would use it if you need accessibility features or if you have these concerns." So that's a really big deal.

We're also having a social platform through the Circle app. So it's also a Synergies platform. Our articles and chat functions are there just in case all you want to do is meet someone like you, which is, for me, before this program, it was really rare to say, "Oh, I know one or two entrepreneurs with disabilities." I didn't have that. So I think that the social aspect of it where we could just, "Hey, how's it going? What are you up to?" is really important too.

Ciara Ladroma: Thank you so much for sharing more about Synergies. Melody, I would love if you could ... What would you recommend to entrepreneurs tuning in today or even those watching in the future who maybe have a business idea but they just don't know what steps to take next? What advice do you have in creating a plan?

Melody Stein: Yeah. So first, I would suggest that for those of you who have an idea, just write your idea on a poster or some other medium right there. If you feel strongly about that idea, then talk with your family and your friends about it, see to get their honest feedback, well, what they think, what do you need for this idea. Have that part of encouragement for you, and see if that you can go to maybe like a popup market so you can set up a booth and test your product and see what type of client you can attract, the people walking by and responding to your product. That way, you can get that free market research right there and you're just collecting all that data. Then you can continue to fine tune your product until you're completely satisfied with the result. We're still fine tuning our product as well.

Ciara Ladroma: I love that. I just want to add an additional question to that. I know that you are in the process of expanding your business. Do you have advice for maybe Melody day one of business, of this specific business of yours that your present self would give your past self?

Melody Stein: Like I said, I started when COVID was rampant. I wish I could have the market research faster instead of just keeping guessing as what the product is. It cost me money and time and, really, I opened my business officially in November of 2021. So it seemed like it was a good time to launch the business. It was great. Then January 2022 around came around and Omicron was everywhere. Everywhere got sick even more. So that's when I thought it was the wrong time to launch. So I just had to keep going and hope things will be going well until June of 2022,, no, it was '22, June of '22, I was able to have those popups and go there and collect that market research. So I realized there's never really a perfect time. Sometimes you'll get thrown into a situation where you had to figure out a way to overcome adversity and just keep going.

Ciara Ladroma: Thank you so much. Paola, what about you? What do you recommend to that entrepreneur who's tuning in today who maybe has that idea but don't know what to do next or don't know how to start their plan?

Paola Blanco: So a couple different things, and this is a slightly shameless plug, but we do have a program that we're starting. It's called Igniting Ideas for when you just have the idea and you don't have your resources or that base knowledge. That's a good place to start in terms of education. In terms of day one me versus me now, one of the things that Melody spoke to was having that MVP, the minimum viable product, and how you work really hard to get all this research done and look for that right time. There really is no perfect time. I think a lot of that fear of the unknown keeps us stuck a little bit, and along with that, along with the fear of the unknown is this expectation that we can't fail.

The reality is, as business owners, there are going to be challenges and sometimes there are going to be failures and needs to pivot, but those don't speak to your value or the value of your ideas or your concepts. They're just obstacles that you need to find a workaround for. So don't be afraid of that experience as well and know that if it's something that you're passionate about and that you work towards, you can definitely achieve it.

Ciara Ladroma: Thank you so much for that. Melody, my next question is, so thinking back when you first started your business, was there any change in how maybe you thought it was going to go versus what actually happened? So for example, maybe you wanted to provide a specific product, but you actually found yourself providing something totally different.

Melody Stein: Yeah. So right now, I'm in the fashion business. So it's been a little bit over a year. So we're still in the newer early stages, but I want to share another example from a previous business. I've been running that one for more than seven years. So I remember I actually established a restaurant. We had a menu, trying to create our own menu, and I wanted to show my skills, what I can do, but what I didn't realize was that when I started the process, actually, it really impacted the labor and food costs. So trying to do everything at once and it didn't sell. Mostly it would sell what we would ... This other one I tried and wouldn't do. I tried to put it on the menu, but then I realized it ended up costing us a lot more than it actually made us.

So I decided to actually drop that idea and focus on really our MVP, the minimum value product, which was our pizza at the time. So we're trying different toppings on that, but honestly, we figured out what sold the best and trying to figure out the best value for what we were trying to do. So looking back, trying a lot of different ideas, I would figure out we try and start with one idea and then add as we go along later.

Ciara Ladroma: I love that you mentioned as you were looking to change the menu, you realize that a single change can affect other things as well, but it's also part of the learning experience in order to change so you can grow. I really applaud you for being an entrepreneur with multiple businesses. Can you remind me if any of those other businesses are still active today or is all of your focus right now on your MxT 2510?

Melody Stein: Right now, the clothing business ... We're actually going to open another food business pretty soon this summer.

Ciara Ladroma: Wonderful. I can't wait to learn more about it. Paola, so same question to you. Thinking back when you first started your business, was there any change in how you thought it was going to go to what actually happened?

Paola Blanco: So starting out with a degree in advertising, you're taught all of these tenets. You have to have your market research report and you have to have your business plan that's a hundred pages in, and you have to have all of these campaign details. The reality of running a business day to day is that, at least in the beginning stages, it's very much in the moment, spur of the moment or just rapid decision making, and you wouldn't have all of this development time to say, "Oh, I can take a week and figure out a campaign." It's just not feasible. So going from the theory to actually putting it in practice and having that confidence in yourself to say, "I could make a decision, and whether or not it was the right decision, I can track it and modify accordingly," like Melody did.

That was something that I didn't really expect. I thought, "If I just put it all in place, if I cross all my Ts and dot all my Is, it'll work." A lot of it also has to do with timing and who you know and also what the perception of what you're offering is currently. 10 years ago, accessibility and web wasn't really a thing that companies were talking about openly or as a big deal or even at all. So what you offer also has to align with what the market is looking for, and that's something that will change over time and you can adjust too, but as long as what you're offering fills a need, fills a space, I think that you're good.

Ciara Ladroma: I absolutely agree. Last question for both of you. Melody, how can everyone tuning in today help you and your business?

Melody Stein: I would love for you all to follow us on Instagram, MxT 2510. We're sharing a lot of information and also lessons about sustainability and the process, for example, how to find clothes, where they're manufactured, and why we would need to use organic cotton, things like that. So you can learn more about sustainability right there. Also, of course, our website with all our family and friends.

Ciara Ladroma: Perfect. Thank you. I'm just going to put in an additional plug of follow but also buy, buy something, especially if you are traveling or just are looking for those staple items in your wardrobe that you can rely on every single day for whatever scenario. Paola, what about you? How can we help Pixels n Papers today?

Paola Blanco: So I think that because my focus is on accessibility and especially web accessibility, it really starts with having conversations with your users. So if you are a person who is online who needs any accessibility or if you are a company who really doesn't really know how it relates to what your plans are or what they could be, I'd love to have a conversation. You can reach out to me through email. I'd really love to learn from you and be able to work together so that what you have or what you work on or even just what you know is augmented by that additional accessibility piece.

Ciara Ladroma: Perfect. So I am going to welcome us into our Q&A portion of the presentation. Just give me one second. All right. So first things first. Thank you, Paola and Melody, for sharing your stories and your expertise with us. I encourage all of you to connect with both Paola and Melody to learn more about Pixels n Paper and MxT 2510 to build community, to learn more about their businesses, and to help guide you with your entrepreneurial goals.

Then on this slide, you can find their contact information, as well as their business websites. Then if you have any questions for Molly or if you'd like to connect with us, please feel free to reach out to us via email. Molly is going to go ahead and drop our contact information into the chat box, and then feel free to take a picture or take notes of the contact information for Paola and Melody here, but I would love for us to get into the Q&A. Molly is going to lead us through those questions. Mol, do you have any questions or comments from the group that we can chat about?

Molly Sullivan: Yeah. I would love to ask just a couple questions that have come in, one for Paola and one for Melody, but first, I just want to echo the huge thank you for both of your time today. It's been an absolute joy to hear about all of the amazing things that you're doing with your businesses. So going back to the topic of this particular webinar, which is a bit of a focus around business feasibility. Actually, I have a followup question for both of you about that topic. So Melody, if we go back to your description of how you began to explore this business idea, this clothing business, this fashion business, you mentioned that you had people try on clothes and give you feedback. So was there any feedback you got that made you rethink what type of clothes or what material or any details? How and in what way did you use the feedback you got?

Melody Stein: Yes. I do have one friend, actually, who was tall, actually about maybe standing around five foot 10. She tried on a pair of pants, and I looked at that and I realized that the pants were way too short. Then I had another friend who was similar height and it fit her perfectly. So then I realized that maybe everyone doesn't have the same body length or any body dimensions like that. So trying to figure out how it can fit most folks. I did talk to our manufacturer and I said, "What's the best length to do?" and they honestly said, "If the size is fine, but if we're worried about length, then the first thing actually is we would need to ..." In San Francisco, a leg might be one size, in LA might be different size to fit for taller folks. Like me, if it were long, what I would do is I actually would get it hemmed. So there's really no specific one design of pants. I could just fit it and cut it and fit to myself. So that way, we can actually improve the fit for everybody.

Molly Sullivan: Oh, that's a great example. That's a great example. I think what's so true during business feasibility is that you get all of this information that comes in and it doesn't always match what you were envisioning you were going to get. So to be able to pivot and say, "Okay. What do I do with this??" Don't just drop it and say, "Oh, well, I'm not going to have a clothing business. I'm not going to have a fashion business. This isn't going to work," but that you reached out to the manufacturer and got some insight from them because they have some experience and gathered some more options and ideas and went from there. That's fantastic. That's great. Thank you.

So Paola, when you were restarting your business, you mentioned that you revisited what services you would offer. So you took a pause and said, "What am I going to do? I did this before and I have some experience." So when you were revisiting your menu of services, how did you go about deciding which ones you would provide? Did you go off of your experiences? Did you talk to people? How did you begin to identify what specific services were going to meet a need?

Paola Blanco: Well, there were a couple different ways that I went about it. One was looking at past feedback from different clients and what were the repeat requests. If I knew that small businesses really didn't have anyone with a graphic designer on staff and they needed five social media graphics a week, and that request coming in week after week after week, then I knew that that was going to be something that I needed to be a cornerstone of the services that I offered.

There were also some services that I thought would be really in demand or I thought would be really helpful to them, but I'll give you an example. So with some clients in terms of copywriting, I can speak to general terms and ideas and hooks, but sometimes especially small business owners want to reflect their own voice, their own ideas, their own tone, and instead of going back and forth 17 times so that I knew the exact copy, I'd say, "Well, this is a template and you can customize it or tailor it to whatever feels suits you best." So it was really situational, and a lot of it had to do with feedback.

Also, a lot of it had to do with my strengths as they were developing. I don't like Excel. A lot of ad spend has to do with Excel and crunching numbers and figuring out percentages. So if that's something that's really important to a client, I'll offer it, but generally won't do full scale media buy plans because it's not something that really brings that value versus the energy I'd expend on an Excel sheet for five or six hours.

Molly Sullivan: Yeah. That's fantastic. I love how you got information from multiple places. I think that's such an important part of feasibility, that you're not putting all of your eggs in one basket, just going off of one piece of information you got that indicates this could be a good idea, but digging in further, getting more information. Such a big information gathering phase, feasibility.

Paola Blanco: I think another really important thing about feasibility is figuring out what those processes mean for you personally. I mentioned some of my struggles in terms of numbers or calculating, and if that's something that you see and that you experience, really be willing to say, "Okay. Well, what are my resources? What can I outsource or change or put in place so that this becomes something that's doable for me and not so much of a struggle?" I think that's a really key piece of feasibility is playing to your strengths.

Molly Sullivan: Yeah. Fantastic. Great. So a question came in the chat box, and sometimes ... The question is ... I'll ask the question first and then give clarification. So the question is, have either of you accessed resources or financial support for your businesses from your local vocational rehabilitation agency? We often even have vocational rehabilitation counselors that join the webinars as well. So I guess I'll start with you, Melody. In California, I believe the agency is called Department of Rehabilitation.

Melody Stein: Actually, with our clothing business, no. I cast my retirement, actually, and invested in the small startup process. Really, I wanted to grow this slowly because a lot of the big expenditures are created. So I would use the sales, then I can actually rotate them into the business. So if I need a greater sum, I then would look for grants, maybe take out a bank loan for that.

Molly Sullivan: Great. Thanks, Melody, and Paola?

Paola Blanco: Sure. So my experience with voc rehab was that they're a great organization, but I was able to use their resources earlier on in life to help with my college education and some needs surrounding obtaining my degree. As a business owner, I really haven't had the opportunity to utilize some of those resources. What I did instead was find a small business brand to help with some technology purchases and software that helps me run more efficiently. It's really more of a bootstrap business. I haven't had the opportunity to take out loans or do anything like that. I think part of it is because I want to feel like I'm in control of where I am and where I'm going. If there's that additional pressure of outside financing, it's great, don't get me wrong, but I think for me right now it would be an added stress. So I know that there are some things available that I might need to explore further, but I haven't utilized them.

Molly Sullivan: Yeah. Fantastic. Great. Well, I think that's it for the questions that have come in. Thank you both so much for your time and answering those and in sharing the information here. Ciara, anything more from your side?

Ciara Ladroma: Thank you so much, Molly, and those were really great questions. I love the conversation that came from them. So I would love to move us into the next part of the webinar, which is to share about upcoming presentations and events with the National Disability Institute team. On Wednesday, May 2nd from 2:00 to 3:30 PM Eastern, we have the Entrepreneurship Disability and CDFI's webinar, and that is going to be focused on CDFI and founder experiences presented by the Disability Opportunity Fund. On May 3rd, we have the Social Media Accessibility presented by Results One, LLC. That's also going to be at 2:00 PM to 3:30 PM Eastern time. Then we also have May 10th, a Wednesday from 2:00 to 3:30 PM Eastern, which is called Pro Tips for Grant Writing, and that's going to be presented by Hello Alice. All of these events including today's webinar are recorded, and so they will be available-