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Headline: 'We didn't want to lose the money': An Acai Affair's Isabel Lee on how the \$30k she borrowed from her father spurred her on

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Ever wondered what CEOs and founders are like? Are they all work and no play? Do they have a nurturing or intimidating personality? In Employee No. 1, catch a glimpse of what it is like being a homegrown boss under 40. Take an inside look into their day, how they run their successful companies, and learn what it takes to be employee number one.

Icy, tangy and jam-packed with nutrients, acai bowls have risen in popularity over the years, especially among health junkies.

With nine stores and counting islandwide, An Acai Affair is Singapore's largest organic acai speciality cafe, so you might be surprised to know that this booming business was founded by two 20-year-old entrepreneurs in 2016.

Now 25, Isabel Lee and Anna Ng, set up their first outlet while they were still studying at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Not only did they make the daring choice to sink \$80k into the store, it was also a risky decision as acai wasn't all that popular back then, Isabel tells AsiaOne.

Acai? What's that?

Right now, if you're hankering after a refreshing bowl of acai, it's pretty easy to get your hands on one.

However, back in 2016, when Anna and Isabel first toyed with the idea of selling acai bowls, many people were complete strangers to the superfood.

"They didn't even know what acai is or how to even pronounce it!" shares Isabel.

It also didn't help that that back then, the rare few acai joints in the market were on the pricier end, which deterred people from trying the foreign-sounding dessert.

Thinking that it was a waste the icy treat was so underrated, the duo started brainstorming ways to educate the public on the goodness of acai bowls. Apart from that, they also wanted to make it more affordable and accessible to curious consumers and health junkies like themselves.

At the same time, neither of the girls were keen on grinding away at a nine-to-five office job after graduating, so setting up a cafe that specialised in acai bowls just made sense.

The struggles of starting an F&B venture

However, starting your own business is no walk in the park and one major hurdle that Isabel had to overcome was convincing her parents that she was capable of being her own boss.

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And it isn't surprising that both her parents weren't too keen on the idea, especially since she was so young and still in university.

"They were very, very sceptical about the idea and being typical Asian parents, they wanted me to get a more stable job," Isabel says.

As Isabel's mother herself is in the F&B scene and runs two Japanese restaurants, she of all people knows how difficult it is to run a business, she explains.

"[My mum] was more worried that I didn't know what I was getting myself into."

It didn't help that at that point of time, acai was still a very new product that people were unfamiliar with and there was the concern that it would be a flop.

So, in hopes of making their dream come to life, Isabel and Anna had to put their heads together to come up with a business plan and work out all the projections and numbers to convince their parents that this was something worth pursuing.

That evidently worked out in the end and finally, after much coaxing, they were given the green light to go ahead with An Acai Affair.

However, that wasn't the end of their problems. Another thing Anna and Isabel had to worry about was procuring funds to set up the physical store, which was especially hard for them since they were both still students at that point of time.

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"To start a brick and mortar store in Singapore is very, very costly. The rental is high, the renovation is expensive — basically everything is very expensive," Isabel elaborates with a weary laugh.

Unfortunately, even after digging deep into their savings, the pair didn't have enough cash to splash on the business, so they had to resort to borrowing money.

Fortunately, both Isabel's father and Anna's boyfriend agreed to fork out around \$30,000 each to get them started. In total, including their savings, they pumped around \$80,000 into their very first store at Katong.

But while the extra money gave the two budding entrepreneurs one less thing to fret about, it also created additional pressure for them to make the business work out.

"We didn't want to lose the money and fail," Isabel confesses, sharing that she had her concerns over borrowing such a huge sum of money.

Working with a friend — a perk or an absolute nightmare?

When it comes to working with a friend or family member, many are divided over whether it's a good idea or not.

Isabel herself agreed that doing so can be a "double-edged sword", but as for her situation with Anna, the arrangement works — especially since the pair know each other inside out.

Apart from being able to share the joy of reaping the rewards of their labour, Isabel shares that their different strengths complement each other.

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For example, Anna is a huge risk-taker, while Isabel is the complete opposite. However, she muses that after working with Anna for so long, she has slowly learned how to step out of her comfort zone and face new challenges differently.

In other scenarios, Isabel's reserved personality comes into play and she serves as a "devil's advocate" in their decision-making processes, which in turn has pushed the duo to have more discussions and make more sensible business decisions.

Sure, there have been hiccups along the way and they've had their own fair share of disagreements. However, Anna and Isabel have chosen to use these instances to their advantage and to understand each other's working styles.

"I'm very lucky to have found [such a business partner]," Isabel adds gratefully.

Life as a student versus life as a business owner

For Isabel, one major benefit about being a business owner is the flexibility to curate her own schedule however she likes, especially since she never enjoyed how rigid things were back when she was in school or during past internships.

"My life is very flexible and I call my own shots," she says cheerily. True enough, she's dressed in athleisure when we meet on a weekday morning, and she explains that she's going for a quick gym session after our chat.

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While her work arrangement sounds like an absolute dream, Isabel admits that there are downsides — being her own boss means that the work never stops, even on her supposed rest days.

"We don't really get a break even when we are on holiday or during the weekends," she reveals. "If something like an emergency pops up, you still have to deal with it".

However, the tenacious entrepreneur chooses to take this in her stride as she understands that this is just "part and parcel of the job".

And at the end of the day, Isabel is still winning at life because she is right where she wants to be in her career.

"Success means that I can do something that I like and make money out of it, which I'm very grateful that I am able to do right now."

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