

STRATEGIES

For fast-growing companies and careers

Michelle Davenport Johnson, Ronae Brock and Tehma Smith Wilson are the co-founders of Earth's Enrichments.



PHOTOS BY KAITLIN NEWMAN

HOW I...

GUARANTEE ORGANIC

These women combined their expertise to create a line of safe hair and skin care products



In a large household it can be difficult to find a soap that everyone likes and can use.

With skin sensitivities and age and gender differences, it can get expensive buying multiple brands.

That's why Ronae Brock, Michelle Davenport Johnson and Tehma Smith Wilson set out to found Earth's Enrichments, a hair and skin care line certified as USDA Organic and based out of Remington.

The three women wanted safe and organic products for their families to use, and after a year of research and development, realized that such a product was not widely available on the market.

In 2012, Earth's Enrichments launched with the help of Davenport Johnson's family, who let the company set up shop in a 15,000-square-foot manufacturing facility they own.

Since then, the company has grown enough to allow Brock, Davenport Johnson and Smith Wilson to leave their former jobs. Now, running the business full-time, each woman brings something different to the table.

BY THE NUMBERS

4,500

products sold in 2016

33

products offered including bar soaps, sugar scrubs, bath salts, body balms, a hair care line and more.

13,500

products sold since starting the company

Brock has a background in product development from her time working for Johnson & Johnson, as well as marketing and sales experience from working at T. Rowe Price Group.

Davenport Johnson brings over 20 years expertise in manufacturing to the company, and Smith Wilson is an attorney with a background in contracts and sales negotiations.

Together, they have big plans for Earth's Enrichments.

Why was it important to you that the products be certified as USDA Organic?

Smith Wilson: I think it gave us more confirmation that our products were needed. As we started to do research we realized there were not too many products on the market that were true to that label. Our products carry the USDA Organic seal. That lets you know that everything in our products is 95 percent certified organic or greater. A lot of products they might have organic as part of their title or organic on the front, but if you look at the ingredient list, they might just have one or two natural, organic ingredients in the products. And the rest of the ingredients are still pretty much the chemicals and the parabens and the sulfates that are not good for the skin and the body.

We wanted to make sure that our customers knew exactly what they were getting when they purchased our products. We wanted to insure the integrity. That's why we wanted to get something that customers could look at and tell that it was top-notch, top quality, and that it wasn't what they call "greenwashed." And when we were exploring the market at the time, there were not too many other products on the market that had the seal. We figured that would differentiate us from other products on the market that were natural and organic.

How did you determine that was the right market to launch in?

Brock: The desire and need for organic products I think was going on in the country generally speaking, and probably as a result of a lot more education out there for people. We benefitted from that education too as we were examining which areas we wanted to go into,

what areas of growth there were. We certainly didn't want to launch a product line into a declining growth category. Within health and beauty products, the organics were growing more and more and I think a lot of that had to do with consumer education. And we were a part of that as we were looking at what we wanted to go in when we were doing our R&D, which we did for about a year and a half to two years.

How much more difficult is it to produce a product that is certified as USDA Organic?

Brock: We feel it's worth it. Part of what we do is consumer education because prior to us getting more in depth with all of this I would just go to a Whole Foods or a health foods store and think that everything in there is kind of equal. And it really isn't. There's a difference between all-natural, mostly natural, organic, mostly organic and certified organic. Those things have meanings, not all things are created equal. Some of what we have been doing, particularly in our face-to-face with customers, has been explaining to them the difference between the products. Although we keep our pricing relatively low, especially compared to our competitors, it's not going to be the same kind of pricing as the products that have the chemical ingredients in them. All of our products are hand-crafted. Our eyes and our hands

are watching everything that is going on with it.

What is your facility like?

Brock: The square footage of the building is about 15,000 square feet. We use a portion of that for our manufacturing, storage, packaging, receiving and we have the ability to grow and expand as needed.

What's next for the company?

Brock: We are in a great position to scale up. We have a lot of different initiatives in the pot that if they take off we will be in a good position to scale up and be ready to meet that demand. It takes some rubber on the road but we have some things in the pot.

Smith Wilson: Our goal is to grow and expand so we can employ people in the community and we can give them opportunities to get involved. Since its small they would pretty much be able to learn the inside and out of the business, whether it's the manufacturing or the marketing or the sales and things of that nature. We hope to get to a point in time where we are able to expand that offer to people in the community.

Where can your products be purchased?

Smith Wilson: Our bar soaps are sold in Whole Foods Markets. The Whole Foods they are sold in are Georgetown, Bethesda and Rockville. We are hoping to expand and grow to a lot more Baltimore markets. Other markets we are in are Dawson's Market, which is out in Rockville as well, and we are in David's Natural Market, which is out in Columbia. Obviously online, and Amazon, but also we have a storefront at our manufacturing location. People can stop by and pick them up the products themselves and smell them there.

- Carley Milligan

Michelle Davenport Johnson has over 20 years of experience in manufacturing.

