Megan Aljian

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Out of the Woods: From the Trail to a Startup

Megan is a senior in Biological and Agricultural Engineering. She's an avid hiker and plant-nerd. Megan is planning to continue working on her startup, Forest Found Products, after graduation, while also working as a Stream Restoration Engineer, continuing to follow her love for ecological work.

I came back to State for my senior year with an odd situation: **People kept asking me to ship them bottles of a mysterious dark green liquid.** It sounds like the start of a drug-bust thriller. Here's what happened: I love plants and studying their traditional uses. Plants can be used as medicines – they were our first medicines, long before modern pharmaceuticals, and are still reliable today. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I used my free time to read everything that I could about medicinal plants, until I could walk down a trial in the Appalachian Mountains and tell you which plants are edible or medicinal and how to work with them. I took that knowledge and spent four summers teaching about plants at an incredible summer camp deep in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. On the trail, we rely on oak leaves to treat bug bites, a traditional remedy that is believed to treat the venom. Parsing out the chemistry still needs more attention, but what we know for sure is that a fresh, crushed oak leaf applied to a bug bite or sting less than an hour old can soothe the itching and reduce the swelling permanently. It's fascinating and beats the over-the-counter options that we see as modern. Oak leaves are my go-to on the trail, but that was not so useful back in the city. What if I could bottle it? There was no history of the bite relief action of oak leaves being stabilized and bottled, so I developed a

now patent-pending method to create an oak extract for bug bite relief, which can soothe bites and stings, naturally. The formula, originally known as "Meg's bug potion," became a staple at camp. **Bottles ran out fast.** People kept asking me to ship them more, saying, "Nothing works like this." Which brings us back to the start: A couple jars of dark green liquid, demand for more bottles, and people telling me that I should look into commercializing.

I did not want to. **Just the thought of starting a company scared me, such a big risk to take and such a public way to fail.** NC State's Innovation and Entrepreneurship program hosted an Open House at the start of the fall, and I was terrified to go. What chased me in the door: my belief that my worst-case scenario was not this idea crashing and burning. **My worst case was never knowing what it could become.** So, I walked in the door and pitched my idea. I was connected with State's LaunchPad accelerator program. I went on to file for a provisional patent, file an LLC, study FDA compliance strategy, and win the Seed2Grow, WolfDen, and VenturePack pitch competitions. No one was more shocked than me. Forest Found Products launched to market with our Bite & Sting Relief as a roll-on and spray-on on March 17th. **Over 100 bottles were ordered in the first four days alone.** Caldwell supported me through every wild and wonderful step. My final ELG helped pay for the supplies to mass produce our Bite & Sting Relief for the first time. More than that, the Caldwell Fellows supported me, even when I became a hermit while working on Forest Found. **Our community comforted me when I fell short and celebrated every win.**

I am different today than the woman who walked into that Open House seven months ago. I learned that there is always more than one way to get something done, and it takes a lot of good work to make good luck. I live by the saying "never let perfect be the enemy of good." So many ideas are never crafted into reality because of the fear that they are not perfect. Go with

flawed, go with imperfect, and work from there. **I would rather do a flawed something than a perfect nothing.** I am so much less scared of taking risks and failing publicly, because so many times, I stood in front of people and said, "this is my idea laid bare. What do you think?" My biggest take away: **Be unrepentantly too much.** I am a lot, and I spent part of college being a little bit less for people. I thought that I was too intense and too driven for people. I am so much happier being unrepentantly too much. You will find people that like you in all of your extra. Most importantly? Setting everyone else aside: You need you, so trust yourself and be entirely, utterly, completely too much. You cannot live someone else's life, so make your own and make it true to you.

Forest Found is my capstone experience of "thinking big." I never saw myself starting a company. That was something that other people got to do, and I was terrified. Forest Found is doing really well, with a lot of traction. **This is one of those epic moments where reality is the dream that I did not dare hope for.** I will keep working on Forest Found after I graduate, while also working full-time as a Stream Restoration Engineer. In two to four years, Forest Found can be a full-time option for me. As is the way of a startup, it could also go up in flames tomorrow, but I will walk this road until I find the end of the story that I am writing with Forest Found. **Even if this story ends tomorrow, I am different from the woman that walked through the doors that first day, and I would walk every moment again to get to be her.**



2022 to 2025: Teaching on the trail at camp, where campers nicknamed me “Nature Meg.” Four years later, the nickname’s still a camp go-to.



11th November, 2025: Receiving the first-place award at the Plant Science Initiative’s Seed2Grow pitch competition – my first pitch competition!



20th September, 2025: Mya and Jenna, two incredible friends of mine, helping process oak leaves in-the-field at our first harvest for Forest Found.



10th March, 2026: Landon, a fellow Caldwell, working on some marketing magic.



14th March, 2026: One of the first product photos for the website.



8th April, 2026: Me and my epic younger brother, Taylor, selling Forest Found's Bite & Sting Relief at NC State's Earth Fair, one of our first in-person events. Tay has helped with everything from harvesting to photography.



6th April, 2026: Some of the first bottles, ready to be shipped for preorders.