

I told my father that I wanted to come to Waynflete and talk about failure and he got furious at me. “Don’t do that!” he urged. “That’s terrible! You haven’t failed!”

I know I was invited here as an example of a successful alumna in a sector where there is a of opportunity and growth. To inspire you. The press has been all over my farm and picked up with much amusement on my waterfront nickname, “the oyster lady.” People love our oysters. So much is going well but we haven’t turned that proverbial corner into profitability yet, and I’m entering my fifth summer.

One of the sad realities about businesses is they have to make money to survive. And 2014 was supposed to be our big year when it all came together. I even started to build a second company based on the notion that the farm would be on autopilot. I kept my two best summer employees over the winter – paying them out of my own pocket -- so I would have top notch guys when the things warmed up and we would start harvesting thousands of oysters a week. Instead we are scrambling to do a few hundred.

This terrible winter was hard on my little sea farm. Big icebergs coming down from the fresher waters ripped up my gear, our bag count this spring suggested we lost 200 bags. And tens, even hundreds of thousands of oysters were burred by unusually copious sediment build up on the river’s bottom.

So the threat of failure is looming large right now on my farm. And I'm scared.

I wound up with this farm after a consulting project went awry. I had a feeling this person wasn't trustworthy, but I did listen to my instincts. (listen to your instincts!)

I hadn't had a biology class since 9th grade with Kathy Remmel. I had been living in Paris, France trading stocks on my computer from my living room and occasionally consulting on start-ups. I knew about money and about business but I had little operational experience. And as far as my farming skills go, I have never been able to keep a plant alive for more than a few days. Had there been a class award for the least likely to become a farmer from my Waynflete class of 1987, I would have won it with a landslide victory.

When I was lugging my backpack around the halls of Waynflete, all I cared about was the world beyond! I had a Pocket Rand McNally Atlas on my nightstand and I would read about all of the amazing foreign places I could live before going to bed. I wanted to work for the UN or be a Paris fashion designer. I had big dreams. None of them involved farming.

So when the farm wound up in MY hands and not in the hands of the person who purportedly wanted to be the farmer, I had a big decision to make. I could abandon everything, which would mean losing the sizable 'short term loan' I'd advanced the dead-beat farmer, and then

I could go back to Paris or on to NYC, get back on my computer, and get back in my comfort zone. The money was important to me – and let me tell you money does matter so never take it for granted – but I knew I could live without it. So, abandoning ship was really the LOW to NO RISK solution.

But the problem was that since I'd been the one setting up the farm – dealing with the state – wholesalers –restaurants – town officials – I was already engaged in this farm. People wanted these oysters. And while I may not have liked oysters at the time, I knew I was making good ones.

And the truth about my life in Paris was that day trading stocks from my living room was a solitary activity, one that only really served myself, and I had become lonely and disconnected. The dream about being global can be a bit misleading. Because your idea of 'global' is someone else's local. And if you're not acting locally. Not participating in the world around you, you're not living a full life wherever you are.

Putting together this little oyster farm pulled me into this wonderful and diverse community of people all along the coast of Maine. It took me out of the virtual world and gave me roots. The pull to be of service to this community, to be part of something bigger than myself was very strong.

But moving forward was a HIGH risk option. I had never run an outboard, it was going to involve years of my life, more money, and

on top of it I got seasick! The stakes were high. But I decided to take the big risk. I decided to jump in – with everyone watching – and just do my best.

Going from trading in Paris to farming in Maine took quite an adjustment. As a daytrader I sat in front of my computer all day – often in my PJs –trading stocks virtually through the internet. If one didn't perform, with the click of a button it was banished from my portfolio.

As an oyster farmer I spend the day hauling oyster bags, sorting oysters, scrubbing fouling off bags and picking predatory mussels off the oysters. There is no “clicking of any buttons on the farm” to fix problems. It is wet dirty hard physical labor. It took a while to accept that as my new reality. At the beginning, I hadn't quite let go of my identity as a day trader so I would interrupt my workflow to make day trades from my phone. I finally gave that up after I starting to worry that I had more iPhones at the bottom of the river than oysters.

Doing manual labor for a living was not the kind of job I expected to do with a Master's Degree from Columbia University in International Affairs. I knew that once the farm got bigger I'd be able to get more help on the water, but for a while, I was the only full-time water worker. But the truth is I've always been a physical person. I love working with my hands and I'm good at it. The physical grind of waterwork is peaceful; it makes you feel strong; it clears your thoughts. And at the end of the day you have measurable results.

Either the bags are clean or they aren't. The oysters are culled or they are not. In our world of hues of gray, life on the oyster farm is black or white. Either you show up before the boat leaves the dock, or you don't.***

And providing my wholesaler George with oysters when he needs them, with all of the work that it represents, is unbelievably satisfying.

Part of the why I like handing George oysters is because it shows that I've actually done something right. Because so often I felt like an imposter. The hard labor was the least of my problems. Actually farming oysters is WAY above my pay grade.

To put it in perspective, four years ago, I didn't actually know the term bi-valve. Everyone around me was talking about "Bi-valves" and while it rang a bell, I just didn't know what it meant. I had to look it up on Wikipedia. In case you don't know – it's means an organism with two shells. Like the oysters I was growing on my farm.

And farming is incredibly hard. On a daily basis, we grapple with all of the big news you hear about global warming: wind storms and rising sea-levels destroy my gear, invasive algae threaten to deprive my stock of dissolved oxygen, rain storms bring man-made pollutants down the river and onto my farm, acid rain compromises new shell growth, new viruses that used to be "southern water" problems are making their way north and killing our oysters and then there was the winter we just had. Farming can be brutally hard and even well

seasoned farmers have to learn on their feet. Each season is different.

Strangely, the only thing that has come close to helping me prepare for this undertaking is learning languages by immersion. At 15 I spend my Junior Year in France at a French boarding school in rural France. And I just had to think on my feet and go for it. I had to pass my classes. So you start listening to others and you start imitating. First I wearing lots of scarves to look French, then I tried to sound French by pursing my lips a lot. And then, just like running an oyster farm, you surrender yourself to humiliation time after time with broken god-awful 4-year old French until you start to get it right. But it happens.

And just like in France when I was willing to struggle and learn and put myself out there speaking an absolutely moronic French, when I put myself out on the limb creating an oyster farm, I discovered a community of people who were there to help me, encourage me and push me along. UNE professors advise me, they send me interns and are breeding my oysters in their labs. People in the community invite me to speak at local churches and clubs. They ask how they can help. They want to volunteer. Restaurants clamor to get product and support local farms. The press has been incredibly kind to us. It's a bit of an out of body experience every time I read about "Scarborough's Oyster Lady" and realize they're talking about me!

In our case at least, it takes a village to raise an oyster.

We have made progress. Despite the apocalyptic winter, we do have more oysters than ever. The oysters that we are digging up out of the wreckage are better than ever. I get calls from all over the country asking for them.

And operationally, we're finally getting in the groove. I have a small but talented team. They can do everything. They didn't have the benefit of the education we all have had, but they seem to have this infinite skill set in these practical hands-on things. During the lull of this winter I asked them to design a portable sorting tool that would sort oysters on or off the boat and soon enough they presented me with a design. It was genius. Others have already copied it.

We're the first to do oyster farm tours in Maine and I even got a law changed so we can sell oysters directly from our farm. Someone in the government paid me a huge compliment the other day. He reminded me that I'd said I probably wasn't the most gifted farmer but he said my impact on the Maine oyster industry had been enormous in the past few years. He attributed it to the fact that I didn't have a fishing or science background and suggested my fresh approach made the difference. He's right. So instead of looking for the perfect opportunity to match your skills and interests – try just bringing your personal touch to the opportunity at hand.

We're doing things right, but we just can't seem to get enough volume of oysters to make money. And in the end it's a business. It has to make money.

It's no secret that we're having problems. A wise woman in France once said to me, "On finit toujours tout savoir de toute facon." "Everyone ends up finding out everything anyhow." Especially in a small place like Maine. So I put the news out there. I'm not ashamed of it.

I told my team. "The coffers are getting low and I need you fully on board right now." They doubled up their efforts. And slowly, they are finding lines of buried oyster bags. Two weeks ago they found 20. Last week another 30. This week 40 more. Maybe we didn't loose over 200 bags after all.

I called the Department of Marine Resources who manages our activities on the water. I said, I don't want to have to close our doors but I needed to figure out a way to find buried oysters. They helped me push trough an emergency request to comb the bottom of our river. Normally this request could have taken up to 6 months. It took 3 weeks. I've have worked so hard, that now others are vested and don't want to see us fail. We started dragging yesterday. No news yet. There's a learning curve.

When I agreed to come speak to you all a few months ago we hadn't discovered the winter wreckage, and I was sure I would be telling you

that after all of those years of hard work my farm had finally made it. Work hard. Succeed. But I don't know if that's true. I don't know if my farm will make it.

So last week I called my dad and told him I was going to write about failure. When he protested, saying I haven't failed. He didn't mean the farm hasn't gone belly up. The jury is still out on that. But the farm can fail without my failing or the experience being a failure.

I have gained the respect of the waterfront community because I was an educated woman who wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty and do hard manual labor. I earned the respect of the business community for being forthright and building a strong brand. I earned the respect of my employees for being fair. I have earned the respect of the fisheries community for dealing with infestations and just getting product to market.

My company can fail but I have built a reputation for myself for hard work, fairness and forthrightness. And in an economy like ours where you will likely have many jobs and many careers, the best thing for you to build for yourself is a reputation. And it's never too late to start and it's never too early to begin.

Had I not left my computer and cushy life in Paris, I would never have been invited to speak to you.

The rewards I have reaped so far have so been worth the risk. Take risk.