URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/founder-market-fit-2/

Maria Barrera, founder and CEO of Clayful, shares how news about kids' and teens' mental health during the pandemic inspired her to start her company. She explains how her experience as an engineer helped her need-find as she explored a problem she deeply cared about.

This clip includes references to trauma and suicide. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is a hotline for individuals in crisis or for those looking to help someone else. To speak with a trained listener, call 988. Visit 988lifeline.org for crisis chat services or for more information. The Crisis Text Line is a texting service for emotional crisis support. To text with a trained helper, text SAVE to 741741. It is free, available 24/7, and confidential.

Transcript

- I was at NEPRA for a long time.. 00:00:04,560 We sell to schools.. It was all around how to use technology and education, right? How to use technology in a classroom.. And this was right when iPads were coming out.. Chromebooks didn't even exist yet, so a long time ago.. And our thesis there was how do you take these devices that are making our run into the classrooms and make them into instructional tools that teachers can leverage to bring instruction to a new level? And learned a lot through that journey, especially how does K12 work and what is the impact on technology and in just like new things coming up for students in particular.. Fast forward, I joined ChartHop in January, 2020.. Good times, we didn't know what was coming obviously, but two months later, a pandemic unfolds and we sold into human resources.. So as you think about the pandemic unfolding, one of the first departments, if you will, to get affected was HR, 'cause they're thinking about, oh, how are you taking our people remotely? How are we thinking about employee engagement? How are we thinking about employee mental health? So it became very clear that mental health was deeply affected by this pandemic, all that was unfolding.. And while it affected all of us in some way, shape or form, for students, particularly like if you think about elementary and middle school, high school students, not having structure, not having socialization, not being able to go to school, not seeing your friends every day, like that type of isolation is not just hard..

It's like cognitively debilitating, right? And so as I was starting to look into it more and more, I see this article about eight year olds dying of suicide.. And that moment was that inflection point where I'm like, okay, well if back up, like if our system is at a point where an eight-year-old not just knows what suicide is, let alone is carrying on with it, something's wrong.. Right, and that's where you bring it back to mechanical engineering.. We think about systems, right? We think about the whole thing and looking at our mental health and our education system, if that's where we are, there needs to be something that needs to be done differently for us to not have eight year olds dying, right? So that was a big inflection point at that point texted my CEO, I was like, we need to talk tomorrow.. It was 2:00 AM on a Tuesday, I remember vividly.. And at that point, I basically quit my job and just started trying to figure out how do I do something about this? And in true D School fashion, went into a lot of need finding, talking to everyone I could talk to.. And there were a lot of different aha moments through those conversations.. One, a conversation with a clinical psychologist that said, no, by the time a kid gets to me, everything that has to be undone just takes much time.. So like anything on the prevention side could have 10 XD impact.. And like that really landed with me..

So I'm like, okay, cool, we need more prevention.. Then you talk, I think about myself, right? Coming from Columbia when I was 10, wonderful family, wonderful parents, loved my mom.. She was amazing, she was working two jobs.. She was busy, she had left her whole family.. She had like literally left his whole life in Columbia to give me a better life.. Hope I'm making it worth it, and I wasn't gonna go and tell her, hey, I need help.. Like my friends are being mean to me, right? Or like, I'm going through this.. I didn't feel like I could be a burden, right? So I wanted to build something that did not have to rely on the family being the main driver of the student's mental health.. And then the third piece was really thinking about the financial aspect of it, right? So if you wanna build something that's preventative, it turns out the healthcare system is not there yet, right? Healthcare is very, very reactive.. So as we again think about the system like, okay, healthcare doesn't necessarily is gonna pay for it..

I don't want families to pay for it 'cause I want this to be accessible.. I believe in equity, I believe in building something where families without disposable income can benefit.. So then who else can care, schools, and it turns out I have a little bit of experience in schools.. So it became this kind of interesting moment of founder market fit where there's this problem, in following months you start seeing students making their way back into schools and all this information about how COVID has affected their mental health.. and how that's showing up in schools, right? Kids not knowing how to behave.. Kids throwing chairs across the classroom 'cause they're upset, kids putting out, like literally lighting fires in bathrooms 'cause they don't know how to deal with their aggression.. So schools are dealing with this big problem and don't know what to do about it.. I'm like, okay, well there's something here, right? All these things are happening.. And then unfortunately a couple months after that, there's a big shooting in Uvalde and the government decides, this is our wake up call that we need to provide more mental health support across the board and funding be becomes more available.. So it's all these different pieces and when I was sitting at 2:00 AM on a Tuesday night realizing like, this is what I wanted to do, none of those things were in the cards, right? I didn't know any of that was gonna happen..

So it definitely is one of those like right place, right times.. But also like I was so obsessed with the problem that I kept on finding solutions like along the way...