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Oral History Conversation with Lydell Aaron (Beartha)

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LYDELL AARON (BEARTHA)

with Alex Bulkin, Charbel Mouannes, Danielle Silviaggio, Kari Schattinger, and Kate Gardner

Kate: So our first question goes back to your childhood, and your LinkedIn mentioned that you were involved in your community from a very young age, it says 10 years old. Could you talk about those experiences and how they may have influenced what you do now?

Lydell: Yes sure, those experiences occurred at the Inglewood library. If you guys are not familiar with that area it is located in inner city Los Angeles, and it is actually where the Lakers used to play. I started an internet class, after gaining some experience working with the elderly. I was used to working with people, and at the time internet was like dial up. It was 1997 and I was 17 and getting ready to graduate high school. We only had one computer in our school library and not a lot of people knew how to use it so I created a curriculum and posted signs around library and started training students from 13 all the way up to people who were 70 years old.

Lydell: The driver for it was definitely my love of sharing information about technology.. After a little while, the director of the library asked me to work there full time and keep these classes running but I respectfully declined. I just did it to help the community.

Alex: Do you think your passion to teach people about technology from an early age has carried into your present aspirations with Bertha?

Lydell: I would definitely say that there has always been a personal pattern in my life of loving to train people about technical things. I do technical things with my work, and technology and computers have always come easy to me so I would definitely say that early love has carried on with me.

Kate: Where did you originally learn to use a computer and get interested in technical things?

Lydell: So I grew up with a computer for most of my life, but we got to use computers in school playing organ trail and stuff like that in school. And then when I was 17, my dad bought a computer for our house and I started playing video games on it. But it wasn't just that I also started learning to build web pages. I love learning how things work so I learned to do a little bit of programming and a lot of self learning about computers. That's where it all started. I was 17 and I started thinking about what major I wanted to study...

Lydell: I remember when I got to cal poly, which is where I went to college, I was looking through the pamphlets of all the majors... mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, computer science, etc.. and started learning about what all those professions do. And I chose the one that I thought sounded the best, and become the person who gets to wire together electrical networks and other nerdy stuff like that. I have always been a tinkerer and I remember as a kid I would love taking stuff apart like radios and trying to put them back together. I do a lot of prototype work in my job, and work on proof of concept.

Kate: So did the classes at Cal Poly fulfill what you wanted to learn there?

Lydell: They definitely did, but I had a hard time in school. Even from elementary school I scored very low in math, arithmetic in my head has never been my strength... I also learned very quickly that everyone is different. For example, some people can hear music but they cannot sing and some people can sing but they have difficulty reading music. I learned to be okay with the fact that my arithmetic was not very strong but my ideas of theory and concept were and so I just went with what I was strongest with.

I remember in elementary school being embarrassed because I didn't know how to answer my multiplication tables quickly. The teachers in my school wanted to place me in remedial courses, but that did not end up happening. Its cool to look back now and see how i've embraced math and technology in my career.

Going into college classes were very tough, but passion kept me going and I wanted to get through it in order to do what I love.

Alex: So can you tell us a little bit about the social entrepreneurship venture that you started and what your vision is for it moving forward?

Lydell: the company is called bertha, and it is a waste to energy device.it all started in my backyard while reeny and I were working in our backyard. It all started with a picture of a house in a block diagram. I am a systems engineer so I am really interested in how stuff all fits together.

So I drew a picture of a house, and I was interested in sustainable living.

Well what goes into the house? You know i want to build a house one day and like how would i build it I put solar panels you know? And so what I did is I drew a picture of a house with all the different inputs like electricity power propane all those different sources and then what comes out of the house? Grey water, black water things, like that and from that picture I realized there was a missing piece with the waste there was a you know it either goes to a septic system or it goes to a like a septic is what you have in rural areas. It's like a tank that lives underground and when you flush the toilet or use any of the faucets or the uh uh sinks that you know it goes into this tank sits there and overflows into this leach field, and so you really have your septic tank and the liquid kind of stays on top and it just goes. They call it a leach field because what happens is they just rely on time and luck for the fact that this stuff is broken down, and so what happens is you have this like sewage kind of barely treated sewage leaching back into the groundwater of your residents, plus with septic systems you need a certain amount of like acreage. On the sewer side you have homes and businesses that are connected to sewer systems but sewer systems are also underground and they're really expensive they take a city's effort to like lay the pipe for a sewer system. So you have these two extremes, one is the septic system which are used in rural areas and are you know kind of lacking in terms of innovation they they were designed at the turn of the century, then you have sewer systems that are just like an excuse for people to throw everything down because you don't notice you know where it goes and you don't even care. So this missing gap was there in this home of the future and like how could you make that smarter and how could you dispose of your waste and possibly use it back in your system somehow? It literally started that way I still have the block diagram on my computer um it would even be dated so i will know when I like drew it you know uh it was a

google doc. Uh so that kind of started everything it was like wow waste is missing so I looked up some google videos uh of people building uh something similar to Beartha it's called uh an anaerobic digestion process. It's basically you take food waste organic waste food waste and human waste are the biggest ones you put them in a sealed container at a certain temperature and then methane and the biological process starts happening like bacteria eat on the food and then they poop for lack of a better word and that becomes methane. Uh so it's this natural conversion process and then um so i'm tinkering in the backyard and there was some trial and error before I actually got biogas but towards the end of it when I finally got gas to produce uh like okay i'm good at tinkering i'm bad at starting a business and uh so i decided you know what i'm going to close it down and try to make it into uh a company um and really it's just because there is this big need there is global warming happening right now uh and there is uh um waste in developing countries is an issue like sanitation so it was really hard to tie all of those together into one purpose uh but that came later you know uhh like a way to kind of tie everything together but even to this day when you talk to investors and stuff uh you know it's like where's the where's the you know how do you connect the dots and that's been a challenge how to turn something sustainable minded like I want to give back to the community but also do it in a way that like makes revenue and money and can give back to the community too. Like imagine one day that you're creating your own energy and we are kind of doing it with solar you know it's the first time we've started generating our own energy and I think it'll extend out to other areas like waste um so that's kind of how it started in the backyard a hobby you know and uh at the time I was going through some other life changes but yeah its pretty much how it started.

Charbel: uh so yeah you said you began like looking up videos online of like other people doing it, were there any other like companies already like created doing the same thing as you did you reach out to them to try to get some help or input or like how did you go about taking it from your backyard idea to your next step like as the business?

Lydell: That was a challenge there were videos of other doing anaerobic digestion backyard projects you know you uh have a drum fill it with food waste and you let it sit and then you know uh but going through the process of producing that food waste i thought it was really manual it was really you know there were cases when um what i did was i built a sink with a garbage disposal and then i put my food down that normally cause that's the kind of the vision is you're in your kitchen cooking and you're just doing this and it's no but heres what i had to do i built a sink um doing garbage disposal runs on food and picking up from a local restaurant and then this 5 gallon bucket full of food waste like trying to pour it into the digester and and Reine was helping one day and it poured all over you know she spilled it and it poured all over her and it just like it was gross right it's like food waste, but that's where like these innovations came in ha it's uh the realization that if this is really gonna catch on and if people are really gonna do this in a mass way it has to be and this is where our culture comes in it has to be like integrated and easy to use and not disgusting. You know sealed and everything um. So that's where uh i kinda lost track of the question but uh

Charbel: Oh it was like how did you take it from you know your backyard to like an actual business cause like yeah if there was other companies around at the time like did you try to imitate them or or did you try to coordinate with them to create the company?

Lydell: I was probably more afraid of them you know? The big companies are really able to do things fast um Kroger, there's a video Kroger recently and this is after uh uh like a little bit after

i created the initial Beartha, but uh Kroger a national food chain um they have a program where they send they grind their food on site and they deliver it using trucks to one of their large anaerobic digester systems like multi-million dollar system. Um so there is a little bit of i guess you can call it competition there but not really competition. These systems exist on large scales you can go to like agricultural areas and find them really big scale uh what was missing wa a small scale digester. Um there's another company called Home Biogas that recently raised uh 250,000 dollars. Um the way it happened for me is um I spoke to an Angel Investor, uh and the Angel Investor said "Well ma- you know maybe you're not far al- enough along yet but we will refer you to this team who are doing the same thing and the team is a UCSD team uh called Waste Lights." So i reached out to those uh that team and they were having trouble doing the biogas part too. So uh also they wanted to generate waste light so waste to light uhh an and deploy it in developing countries and they were having a challenge. So, I did reach out to some teams but at the same time it was a challenge because I didn't know whether the idea could be patented or trademarked and all these like, you shouldn't tell anybody and you should or you should share. I was like what do you do, how do you like go to the next step, and i'd been thinking about that for a long time, and today where I'm at is that it was a realization that there are many cars on the road, there are many appliances. You have Kenmore, you have Viking, you have maytag. There are many like if it is something that is really gonna catch, people are going to imitate it, and where i'm at now is like well you know people might imitate it but what do you have thats different thats special you know. You're starting a company and what can you do that sets you apart from the others aside from just building a product that works. And I believe that's where this social entrepreneurship, giving back, and just doing something really different, not in the old model but something new. So that kind of answers your questions about like who did I take it to, how did I grow it? Where i'm at now is that i'm in touch with this waste lights team to build a second prototype to quantify the performance. The idea is that if you take this little module and you measure how well it works, meaning you put in this much food, this much gas comes out or this much waste comes out. Once you have those numbers you can start to plug it into certain business models and say "Hey you have a small restaurant. How much food every week do you have?", and they say like "Hey we have this much food", and then I can plug that into a little spreadsheet and say "Well you have 555 Kilowatts of energy that you could be using or selling", or something like that. And so where I'm at now is plugging it into a business model, intentionally not going to the big guys yet though because I'm still very vulnerable, and securing the patents and all that stuff takes a lot of money. So my plan or strategy has been to trademark because even though you see everyone's car, and you have millions of cars on the road, and they're all copying each other, there's a reason why people like Acura's or BMWs or Hondas and so trademarking is one way to achieve that. You trademark something, you say "hey this is my design of a logo, this is my business name, or its kinda the identity" and that has been the plan so far. To do that until I can raise enough money and then do some of the innovations, which when you're going through this process there are a lot of innovations but you don't realize them until you really get in and start doing it. And if I had just read articles online they'd say, "oh it's impossible" and maybe it is impossible, but sometimes you got to check for yourself you know? And it's missing and just seems like a logical thing we need in our world right now so ya.

Kate: Is trademarking easier than patenting and copywriting? Is that why?

Lydell: Ya absolutely. A patent requires like patent searches and an attorney and it's expensive. Whereas a trademark you can still go through an attorney but it's like you're just filing. Like

"Hey Beartha the name", or you know you're just saying that I own these trademarks whether a web domain or a logo or just the business name. So it was a lot easier.

Charbel: Ya so you said what differentiated you was making it into like a social entrepreneurship. So can you elaborate on what social works you're doing? So how you're giving back compared to the bigger companies that are just using it to make profit?

Lydell: So one thing that I've been researching now is the Carbon Credits concept. You may have heard of it and there are different names with slightly different meaning, but the idea with these Carbon emissions is that there are companies who are giving, who are emitting lots of Carbon through their industry and there are companies who take carbon out of the air in some way. So the cool thing about Beartha is that if you can envision it attaching to the side of your home and then processing your food waste, capturing that carbon dioxide biogas, that is 60% methane and 60% carbon dioxide, like the two greenhouse gasses right. So you have a system that can like collect it and stop it from going to the atmosphere, so its like there has to be a use in that, but um sorry I lost track of your other question

Charbel: Ya just like what's the social aspect that you said is differentiating you? Cause there's all these other companies doing it and you said you want to be different and that's where you took the social entrepreneurship, so what is that?

Lydell: So Carbon credits, I would like to explore a way where if Beartha is set up in cities around the world or around the city that those Beartha installations, the carbon credits that they prevent, that they accumulate, so you basically accumulate money for keeping carbon out of the atmosphere. I'd like to set up a program where either people who work in the company near that location, that some of that money, what happens is that companies are emitting carbon, and Beartha is taking it out of the atmosphere, so these companies that are emitting put money and say "Hey we're admitting too much sorry here is some money", and then another company who has an idea that can take it out of the air can have some of that money, I'd like to find a way to give that money back to the people. So like almost like stock right. If you have stock and you're investing it can either be the community that supports the project or the people who are working in the company. I don't know the scope yet but that's kind of the vision to have some way where money from this system can like directly go back to the people like not through you know what I mean? Ya that the vision right now and I'm still doing a lot of research and it actually goes way out of technical stuff and way more into social and business and like lots of other fields. So that's where the social entrepreneurship thing kind of comes in.

Kate: That's pretty cool because like it kinda goes back to when you were talking about the computers, where then you were giving back to the community. So now you are. We've read about social entrepreneurs and how they just sort of become them and don't ever have that goal in mind and there may be a turning point or influencing factor. Was there anything like a major turning part or do you still...

Lydell: I still don't consider myself a social entrepreneurship and in fact the only reason I'm using that term is because it allows us to be like "ya ya I know what that is". I didn't know what it was and in fact that word is helping me bridge this idea to people who wouldn't have understood it in the past, and it's also helping me develop a vocabulary and talk to people, and it's also helping me raise money cause I can say "ya I'm a social entrepreneur" and they're like "ok

we'll give you some money". It's just timing. Ya years ago you wouldn't have heard the term, and you would have said "hey I wanna just do this system that gives back to the people" and people would go "oh cool really good luck" ya know and now it's easier because there is a vocabulary and there is this consciousness, this awareness, that wasn't there before.

Kate: Intersting. I like it.

Alex: So do you think this like increased consciousness today is like a big factor that's going to help you create?

Lydell: Totally, yea I think so, its like perfect timing. Uhm, uh there are uh accelerator programs around the city that are for social entrepreneurs. Uhm, uh Unreasonable Labs or Impact without Borders. Uhm, there uhm, those are two that I know right of the top. But yea this term and this uh want, desire to give back, is definitely helping. Its allowing me to go in front of investors and say hey not only do I have something that I think is going to help a lot of problems like uh mainly greenhouse gas emissions, uhm uh waste sanitation in developing countries, uhm reduction of waste meaning what goes in of 100% like 10% comes out, like it's a huge reduction even if you do have one of those traditional systems like a sewer or septic uhm and then this part of giving back, like when you install something the real idea behind uh Bertha it kind of lends itself to computing. Uh in traditional computers you had like this central computer that did all the processing for like a million users but now we're learning that computers can be they call it decentralized so you have like multi core processors that's another example you have instead of one big processor you have eight core doing little tasks. You also see it in the waste industry, in the energy industry, where instead of huge power plants were preferring to have solar on everyone's home and everyone contributing, so this trend is like, is definitely apparently now and Bertha hopes to help in that trend.

Kate: Yea thats really cool how there's like uh as you were saying like uh the support systems I guess. But do you have any personal support systems like with family or anything cause obviously it's pretty difficult, it's expensive, takes a lot of your time and if you don't mind talking about any personal support you have.

Lydell: Yea totally, of course. Yea that's a tough one because I find it hard to ask for money and for help and then also when you have a big idea you wanna tell people about it you want them to help you but you also you know there are questions I have there are doubts I have that it'll work and the only way to vet that is just to continue and test. Uhm asking for money has been a challenge for me and it still is from family. I think I have some family members that would pitch in but when I go to those family members I'd love to have something working and like you know what I mean just say yea it's working i just need some money and i'll pay you back. So yea I'm kind of that personality type uh which could be limiting or it could be empowering too depends on the end game. Uh but yea it's definitely hard to ask for money. The money sources so far have been my own and I think when I get to a good enough milestone where I have more confidence than I do now I think I'll probably ask a lot more people for money ha but then I'll be prepared to pay it back too cause by that time I hope I'll have done my math and figured it all out yea.

Kate: What about the mental support? I mean just uh like encouragement or anything. Has there been anyone specific?

Alex: Like any role models?

Lydell: Man it's like uh you definitely have to be your own role model in some way and believe in yourself. I've gotten a lot of inspiration from uh the previous President Obama. Just like his coolness and the way he can kind of handle difficult situations uh for better or for worse and I even see benefits in the current president too. You have to be able to see benefits in everything. That's important. But as far as role models it's been hard to find a role model. However though I was in a situation where there was a friend's father who helped me out. He loaned me money once like I was doing I was really bad in my finances he loaned me a lot of money. He was this really wealthy, he developed this laser technology and in some ways that might have been a role model what he had achieved. Really uh big family, property all that good stuff and he seemed humble too I think that rubbed off on me and he let me borrow this huge sum of money and uh when I started to pay it back I was about halfway through and he wrote me a letter he said you know instead of paying me back the rest I suggest you watch a movie called Pay it Forward and that can bring me to tears. It was really powerful. It left an impression, so as far as role models his name is Don Syphers and like it would be nice to go back to him one day and say hey I have this thing. It turns out he's a venture capital investor and his company actually has waste treatment in india and other developing countries so it's just weird how one day it's add this to your profile, so when I do go back to him as a role model I'd like to have all my ducks in a row yea uh so yea.

Danielle: I guess too how have you been able to mentally overcome like all these challenges you've talked about like starting up a business and like keeping yourself like personally motivated? And if you had any advice to anyone else who would want to start their own company?

Lydell: Yea how have I stayed motivated uhm it it it's this reverse psychology question that i ask myself which is if i don't do it someone else is probably gonna do it that like i tell myself that when i'm like doubting like i don't know an then I'm like well if I don't do it well we've already seen it you guys seen back to the future movie where they're putting food in the little uh mr uh mr whatever its called i can't remember the name right now but they're taking food and putting it in the car these little visions they tell us like hey it's possible you just have to put the pieces together so I tell myself that little thing like that if i don't do it then someone else will and that's a bummer like if you have a really cool idea you wanna see it follow through and see it to completion and then advice to other people just that piece of advice if you don't do it then someone else will but sometimes that's not enough it often when you're trying something new there are people who will intuitively say well I dont think thats possible or that might not work I found the best tool is to listen to those people don't take it personally but take it as and we do this practice take it as advice and figure out a way it's a technical word to mitigate it in huge projects that I've worked on we do this process called risk management its when you get in a room and you have a product or focus and you ask people well what are the risks of this thing it could blow up it could hurt somebody it could suffocate somebody and its lists them it's really huge and with every issue on that list you take it and you say well what can I do to lessen the risk if its explosion can we add guards and explosion you have to break it down into types and it's really an interesting exercise when someone is a naysayer and says no you can't do it ask them why and star that brainstorming process it's a really good way tool to maybe turn a negative quality or criticism into something that's empowering you can say hey i thought of that here's what we do. Well, what if it doesn't catch on? Well, here's what we do, and you just keep

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adding on to that list. And I think any project will be successful if you actually listen to the negative stuff and figure out a way to mitigate it or reduce the chance of it happening. So, as someone starting out, just remember that you know get those bad, what's gonna – you actually want to hear what's not gonna work. You, if any was gonna tell you the positives or, I'd say listen to all the negatives and focus on those and because then you'll be successful I think.

Kate: Has that advice helped you further Beartha, and have you experienced that with this?

Lydell: Well, it's still in it's infancy, so only time will tell. But, I am still here and I am still in contact with people who believe in the idea. Um, and I still talk to people and it's just spreading. So, even if it's not Beartha, it's some other thing and we're all ready for it mentally because we've heard and we've like embraced it and know that it's time for something like that to happen.

Kate: That's cool

Lydell: Yeah

Lydell: So, those are just like a few obstacles that you have like you know overcome, but do you see bigger obstacles in the future other than the patents. And like what other obstacles do you see yourself and how are you like mentally preparing for when you take the next step to make it bigger?

Lydell: Definitely one-step at a time, because when - when I think too far it get's really overwhelming. You know it's like whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa you know like there's a lot like even now I'm like "oh man". So, so obstacles um just one step at a time like my next step is the measure the performance of one unit and then just you know to see if I have two, do I get twice the performance? And then look at numbers and then just let the numbers speak. So, almost going autono- going autonomy mode. Saying hey I know all the what people said shouldn't work and I'm going to remember that so if I see those issues, but like one step at a time. Some of the other obstacles that I see and have heard from others as well is the competition from other companies. But, I think a more collaborative approach would lessen that. So, for example you come into a city and say I'm gonna take your waste management and put it to the side and set up Beartha's and sell it to the people. Well, that like isolates the waste management. You know – I – we've seen that disruptive technology, they even have a word for it. I like the idea of collaborative uh disruption. Where, you're saying, Uber is another example, you know. Uber set up a Taxi Driving service, or a ridesharing service, that you can pay for. Their approach I would call disruptive, meaning there's a ta-, there's an existing infrastructure and they come in with a new infrastructure. Um, now if you take Uber and you think of how could that have been different? Maybe they could have gone to the Taxi companies first and say we'll sign your cars up or you know some kind of collaborative approach. I don't know the business model. Uh, so I'm taking ideas from that, though, in that if you come into a city and you're now processing waste, what would the city want back from you? Like they'd maybe want metrics of data like how much biogas is created. They want some stake into it you know and so being okay with giving away something like data is really important. Uh, that's one of the challenges upcoming you know that I plan to work with. But there will be others, um, probably a whole bunch of them. You know, like people taking ideas and people copying and people uh sabotaging machines and all kinds of stuff that I think one day at a time is the best way to handle it.

Kate: It sounds like it takes a lot of trust. So, how would you maybe figure out who to trust or do you maybe have like a method that you plan to use or?

Lydell: Yeah, that's a tough one because you really don't know how to trust. I mean, energy is a big one. You look at someone and feel their energy, you know their vibe and that's a really important one. It's intuition. I think that's a really strong one. But then in business there is no vibe, there is none of that stuff. So, contracts and writing you know writing making things – making sure that things are written and uh that you kind of have to enter the business mode. What that means, business means a lack of emotions. So yeah, I think that uh, I think well, I just said that. Business typically business people have a lack of emotions and more of contractual agreement is what I mean by that. So I think it does take intuition to know who your partner is but then also like a good contract to make sure that those doomsday scenarios don't happen – a blend of both. Yeah.

Lydell: So, earlier you mentioned – I forgot his name, Mr. Sy-

Lydell: Syphris, yeah

Lydell: yeah, he told you to pay it forward. Is Beartha kind of you way of paying it forward?

Lydell: That would be really cool if it were.

Lydell: Or, you know have you done anything else to kind of take those next steps to you know like better someone else, spark a thought in one of your colleague's minds?

Lydell: Um, it's one of those things where I don't think I will ever be done paying it forward. You know, I don't know if I'll be able to go and help the little old lady with her bags and say " Oh, I've paid it forward" you know what I mean? And I feel like it's it's it's an idea it's a seed being planted and it will always be there when someone – when you do see the old lady and you know "oh maybe I should help her, pay it forward" and then say "well, that's not enough though", and there's a community out there that needs help and let's do that because it's kind of paying it forward. So it's almost like you cant, you don't run out of this money – this currency to pay it forward. You'll never run out, so you just keep doing and I don't do it consciously, you know I just saying if there was a pay it forward, there's not a moment that I think I'll be done it's just going to keep happening at this point. It's like it doesn't just turn, there's no off switch, you know.

Lydell: But yeah, it's pretty cool because like I – The way I saw it was you're already giving forward because by creating your company you're trying to you know use the wasted stuff to create energy. That's self-reproducing I guess.

Lydell: Yeah, like self-reproducing. So yeah, did that answer your question?

Lydell: Yeah, yeah it did

Kate: Well, I think we want to be respectful of your time. We only have one more like – one more question

Lydell: Yeah, no worries

Kate: um, I was just curious, you know you've talked a lot about um the hardships and the difficulties with getting everywhere. With the benefit of having hindsight, is there anything you regret or wish you could have done differently? Or are you happy with the past so far?

Lydell: The good news is no, not so far. Like, I'm like "Okay I'm still here" uh, I, I, I um there's some life changes and transitions. If I'm still here and I'm still pushing it. I'm talking to you guys, that means something's going further than it did the day before. This even makes me super happy that you guys are studying and that I mean this is business here so you guys might be the Venture Capitalists that are talking to early-stage entrepreneurs and able to help them better. So, even this is a success you know like for me and like my own development. And "hey how far did you get?" well, I talked to a class – cool, you know like even that's cool but I think it'll go even further than that but yeah uh this is definitely a check in the milestones. So, looking back, no, not yet. No regrets yet at least yeah. Maybe more money. More money would be nice.

Kate: Hopefully, coming soon

Lydell: Yeah yeah totally

Kate: Well, thank you so much. We appreciate all your time

EVERYONE: "Thank you"s

Lydell: Thank you guys, yeah

Kate: We have sunglasses for you

Lydell: Cool, cool, very cool

— End of Transcription —