

Pick yourself up

Don't give up — success can follow failure, as these entrepreneurs show

By VIRGINIA BACKAITIS

HE didn't mean to craft a rags-to-riches story when he left his parents' wholesale tire business in 2017, but Queens native Jared Kugel, 36, was so sure that the world needed a search engine for tires that he even convinced an investor he met on LinkedIn to provide the seed money for his startup.

"My idea was terrible," Kugel said in retrospect.

So was his next brainchild, a mobile service that would come to your home or office to install your tires. Kugel tried to make the business work, but then he ran out of money. Like, really ran out of money — living off of crackers and jelly while selling his furniture on street corners in his Murray Hill neighborhood.

"They started to foreclose on my apartment," said Kugel. His pride wouldn't let him go to his parents' house to eat a good meal and ask for help. "They had enough to worry about," he said.

Besides, he had another idea — an e-commerce tire business that would educate consumers and help them select tires based on where and how they would use them, while taking their budget into account. Kugel planned to call his new business Tire Agent.

"We would offer white glove service, the most payment options and installation at the customer's home or office," he said. He was pitching investors just as the bank got ready to take his home.

Just before the bank tossed him out, leaving him feeling disgraced and homeless, seven investors Kugel had approached decided that Tire Agent was worth a shot. They handed him a combined sum of \$750,000 to start his e-commerce tire business.

First, Kugel hired a software engineer to build Tire Agent's site. Next, he approached brands to become suppliers for his business. Content had to be created for the site, including detailed information on around 50 different brands of tires. Customers could input information about how much and where they drove (whether highways, country roads, sandy beaches, in hot or cold climates), all of which should be considered when you pick a tire.

There were relationships to build with advertisers, bankers, credit card companies and more. He wanted to offer his customers no-money-down financing and no credit checks. Kugel had so much to do, he hardly slept. His social life, early on, was limited to his co-workers (there are around 30 now), other



THE WHEEL DEAL: Jared Kugel went from being practically homeless to running his own successful tire business. Keshawn Warner (left) went from a pot bust to owning a winning cannabis dispensary.



tech company founders and family.

Even now his downtime is near nonexistent. "My idea of a good Friday night is on my couch with my computer," he said.

But there is something amazing happening to his business. Tire Agent now ranks 936 on the 2023 Inc. 5000, placing his startup in the top 20% of the fastest-growing private companies in America.

What kind of wisdom has come with Kugel's experience?

"Know that the journey will be hard at times and that having bumps in the road is completely normal," he said. "Focus on the journey and not the bumps."

Harlem resident Keshawn Warner, 45, had several of those bumps in the road, too, but could have never predicted that one of them — getting arrested for attempting to buy weed 15 years ago — would bring him good fortune today. But that's exactly what happened.

Flash back to 2008. "I was in the vestibule of a building on 119th Street in East Harlem, the gun was pointed in my face," he said. Warner had walked into a sting operation where the police were busting people for buying cannabis.

He was immediately cuffed and frisked, then locked up in jail. "I was released the next day, with a court date pending," he said.

When it came, he was handed a fine, but now had a felony on his record. The latter kept him from being considered for many jobs, including one at the FBI, that as a college grad from Norfolk State, Warner was qualified for.

"One arrest in my life stopped me from moving forward," he said.

Warner got busy, typically working two or three jobs at a time. His primary role, as an information technology specialist at a hospital in Manhattan, has always been augmented by others, like at the YMCA, a gym and a pharmacy in Harlem which he co-owns with his wife. In 2016, when Warner heard that cannabis would be legalized in Massachusetts, the wheels in his head began to turn. He and a few of his buddies, Rich Rainone and Chris Vianello, could open a cannabis business in the state.

The partners had a name lined up, Dazed Cannabis. When they opened their first location in Holyoke, Mass., in 2021 they concentrated on providing the best products and experience.

Warner's business experience and his previous cannabis conviction came together in his favor when recreational weed became legal in New York State. Regulators said that they wanted people who were affected by cannabis criminalization to get the first dibs on licenses in an attempt to address perceived injustices stemming from the war on drugs and to ensure that major corporations don't monopolize the industry.

Next, he had to win a lottery that included at least several hundred New Yorkers with the same credentials. When Warner found out that he was fourth in line to open a recreational cannabis dispensary in the city, he and his partners went at it with a vengeance, as well as a little help they received from New York's Social Equity Cannabis Investment Fund.

Their business had a better-than-successful soft opening as a pop-up in Union Square last summer — in fact, the two businesses combined grossed \$1.2 million in 2022 — with the New York location formally opening last week in "NYC style, with an epic grand opening party that mixed music, fashion, entertainment and culture for an unforgettable night," said Warner.

@work

Q&A

CAREER COACH

[GO TO GREG]



My husband pushed a colleague at work. He was in his face and my husband felt threatened. The guy went into the manager's office; the police were called, and my husband was fired. The other guy regretted this and is coming to court this week to support my husband and drop the charges. The company said my husband could either retire or resign. We want to clear his name and fight this. He has been with the company for 20 years and has never had an incident. Does he have a chance?

If you're asking me about your husband's chances of having the charges dropped, that's not a question I'm qualified to answer — but, I've watched enough "Law and Order" to feel pretty good about his chances. Getting his former employer to rescind their decision to fire him is less likely. Even if the charges are dropped, it doesn't change the fact that he physically assaulted an employee. Even if just a shove, and even if he felt threatened, he wasn't touched by the other employee. An employer has the right to terminate someone for getting physical with another employee.

Last week you wrote that the law doesn't specifically prohibit employers from asking about age, only that age can't be a factor in the hiring decision. Why would an employer ask about age other than to help make a decision?

I received lots of mail on this one. Let me be clear — there are questions an employer should not ask because it could give rise to a claim of discrimination, but that's not the same as the question itself being illegal. Do older workers have a more difficult time finding a job? Absolutely. Does age discrimination exist? Yes. If an employer is unprofessional enough to ask that question, could that be an indication the answer was a factor in their hiring decision? Yes, of course there could be a correlation. But, it doesn't mean it was the basis for the decision. And simply asking the question is not illegal. However, challenging the decision with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and in court is the right action to take to investigate the employer's conduct further.

Gregory Giangrande has over 25 years of experience as a chief human resources executive. Hear Greg Wed. at 9:35 a.m. on iHeartRadio 710 WOR with Len Berman and Michael Riedel. Email: GoToGreg@NYPost.com. Follow: GoToGreg.com and on Twitter: @GregGiangrande