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13-year-old Alina Morse in New York City.

Meet the Teen Who Started a Million-Dollar Candy Business

Alina Morse is a rising confectionery star—and doing it sugar-free. BY ALLANA AKHTAR

➤ **IN BETWEEN ATTENDING** middle school and dance practice, 13-year-old CEO Alina Morse finds time to manage six employees and prep for meetings with retailers around the globe.

Morse founded her sugar-free candy company when she was 9 years old, after her dad told her she couldn't eat candy because it was bad for her teeth. Dissatisfied with that rule, Morse—who was in elementary school at the time—wanted to find a way to make candy without that rot factor.

After watching YouTube videos on how to make candy and experimenting with recipes in her kitchen, Morse now runs Zolli Candy and has the No. 1 selling sugar-free lollipop on Amazon. Morse became the youngest person ever to land

COURTESY OF ZOLLI CANDY

on the cover of *Entrepreneur*, met twice with Michelle Obama in the White House, and now sells her product at major retailers like Walmart and Kroger.

Morse says she has known she wanted to be a CEO since she was a toddler. She started coming up with inventions when she was just 3 years old, keeping her business concepts in an “idea binder.” The young entrepreneur settled on teeth-cleaning candy after discovering that tooth decay is one of the most common chronic conditions among children.

“There had been no prior research [into teeth-cleaning candy] that had been done,” Morse says. “We felt that this is a new thing. We’re filling a niche in the market.” Morse learned that the inside of your mouth becomes acidic after eating sugar, leading to cavities and tooth decay. For her ZolliPops hard candy and Zaffi Taffy chewy candy, she turned to natural sweeteners xylitol and erythritol to reduce acidity, balance the pH in your mouth, and as the company says, “Clean your teeth as you eat.”

After she finally nailed down her candy prototype, Morse persuaded her dad, Tom, to help her start a business. By that point, she had saved \$3,750 from birthday and holiday gifts, and her dad matched the amount as an initial investment. Then the father and daughter went to different manufacturing plants in Michigan to produce and package the candy on a larger scale. In her first year, she sold 70,000 ZolliPops and was soon selling in her first major retailer: Whole Foods. Morse saw sales double year after year for four years, eventually earning \$6 million in



“We’re filling a niche,” says Morse of her sugar-free ZolliPops.

sales in 2018. She now employs six full-timers and works with contractors around the country.

“We are the No. 1 selling sugar-free lollipop, but we want to be No. 1 overall because we have a great mission, a great story, and just a great product that not only tastes great but also has health benefits,” says Morse.

During her short career as a teenage chief executive, Morse has found her age to be beneficial, allowing insight into her audience. In meetings with the makers of candy titans like Tootsie Roll and Peeps, she looked around and saw mostly older men at the table—not exactly the target candy-eating demographic.

“Everyone in the candy world is really amazing, but there are no kids in the candy business,” Morse says. “Once I came to that realization—that there aren’t a lot of women CEOs, a lot of kid CEOs—then I was like, ‘Well, let’s see who can make a difference.’”

Morse admits to sometimes not being taken seriously by other

people owing to her age, but she doesn’t let their perceptions get to her. Morse says she’s successful not because she was born smarter than or raised differently from any of her friends—she just felt passionate about business and helping others.

Morse donates 10% of ZolliPop profits to fund oral health classes in public schools through her nonprofit, One Million Smiles, which works to reduce America’s tooth decay epidemic. She also gives lectures to encourage other kids in her community to find their passion and start their own businesses.

The teenage CEO is living proof, she says, that anyone can start a company, whether they’re 9 or 90: “It doesn’t matter how old you are, where you’re from, what you’re doing,” she says. “All that matters is that you want to do it and that you are passionate about it—and that you are going to do everything in your power to help make the world a better place.” ■