



**A Conversation with Luke and Whitney Wright
Co-CEOs of MudLOVE**

Q. It's so great to be talking with you today. Tell me a little bit about the birth of MudLOVE. What were you guys doing professionally before starting the company? How did the company come about? What was your vision for MudLOVE at the beginning?

Luke: The MudLOVE story began when I was in college. I was lost, not making the best choices and living a destructive lifestyle. I turned to art - ceramics specifically. I was a tennis player, and I sustained a bad injury due to the poor choices I made where I couldn't play tennis. The injury forced me full-time into my new major of ceramics.

I found myself one foot in and one foot out, and then one bad night pushed me over the edge. I decided I was done with who I was and what I was about. I decided to give it all up—my old lifestyle and everything I stood for—and throw myself into my craft.

My journey and passion came toward the end of college. I left there with a deep desire to do something good, but there aren't a whole lot of opportunities right out of college for ceramics majors. I traveled the world, went to Vietnam, and came back broke as a joke. I needed to make some money.

I ended up working with my dad, a staircase carpenter, which requires a lot of innovative thinking. I learned a lot from him. He developed some health complications and decided to retire, so I needed to find another job. I didn't want to start applying for jobs just to make money—I wanted to do something I was passionate about. A buddy of mine offered for me to use his basement as my studio, so I took him up on it. I thought I could sell some things on Etsy and make a living doing ceramics.

That process was an eye-opening experience for me. I was working construction during the day and building the studio at night. On a drive to work one morning, it hit me that God wanted me to do something with this opportunity—to make it about something other than myself and not just about making money. I let that lead me, asked others what I should do, and eventually decided that this wasn't going to be named "Luke Wright's Pottery Shop," that it would be about something more, about what we do. After talking with the founder of Water for Good, who lives in our town, I decided that clean water would be the mission of this company.

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I put those two together, came up with the name MudLOVE, started in this little basement, and then moved into a little garage. On Sept. 3, 2009, MudLOVE was officially born.

Q. What is MudLOVE's purpose, and how is that achieved through the work that you do and the merchandise you create and sell?

Luke: MudLOVE's "Why" statement is to put love in action. We believe that business is a tool that can be used for good or for bad, but we want to be a diverse and effective tool to put love into action. We do that through mud, and thoughtfulness, and creativity.

Q. What has growth looked like for MudLOVE? Has there been any particular thing you can point to that accelerated growth and/or enabled you to get to where you are today?

Luke: Year one, I was very much a starving artist. There weren't people walking around in the middle of winter to stumble upon my studio, and I didn't have a website. I survived, but it was in July of 2010 when I rolled out the first MudLOVE bracelets. My mindset was that I didn't just want to be selling pottery to older, affluent women—I wanted to reach all people. So I made this clay bracelet that looked nothing like they do today, except for the stamped word on the face, and I used hair elastics to tie them together. The words were built from my grandmother's stamp set that I had inherited.

I made 100 bracelets one night, pulled them out of the kiln, and set them on the corner of my work table. It was nice out that week, so I had my garage open, and people would come in to look at my pottery, and they were drawn to the clay bracelets. I tied bracelets for some people, and they loved it. I sold them for \$1 each. I made 100 of them that week, and I sold 100 of them that week.

I quickly realized that I was going to be making more of them. I just kept making them, and by December of that year, I had a line of people waiting for these bracelets. And that was all because people would buy ten bracelets, give away nine, and keep one for themselves. And then some of those nine people who had received it as a gift would come in the shop and do the same thing. That kind of organic community marketing has been happening for the last 11 years, and it brought us exponential growth 7 or 8 years after the first bracelets came out.

We credit our community for growing MudLOVE to what it is today.

Q. When you started MudLOVE, it was just you. Did you see yourself leading a team like you have now? How does today look different that you imagined it when you started MudLOVE?

Luke: Oh, totally different. I remember thinking, "This will be nice, just me on my own, running this business."

One day, I found myself with 150 cookie jars to make, and I had a store that welcomed people in while I was trying to make these cookie jars and check people out at the register, and I was very overwhelmed. I called a college buddy and asked if he wanted to come and work for me for a little bit, and he did. He helped me get through that season and then stayed on and became my first employee.

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He was a photographer, an artist, a jack of all trades, but from there, the team kept growing, and I never expected to be leading a team. I've learned so much about leading a team and structuring a business, and I've ultimately gone through quite a bit as a leader.

I'm excited about where I am now in operations, and I get to build tools and support the people making the products. During the early days, the growth was such a learning curve for me, but now that I'm in more of a production manager type role, I feel much more at ease about where I am and what I'm doing to make sure the team has what they need to do their job.

Whitney: The answer is no. Luke never anticipated what would come for MudLOVE. He usually says he accidentally started a business.

Q. Talk to me about your products. When you launched MudLOVE, you started with bracelets. How has your product line expanded since?

Luke: The bracelets blew us up. I went from a small pottery shop to a bracelet company for a while there. In 2012, when we moved to a bigger facility, we knew we wanted to round the brand out from a product standpoint, but we were busy figuring out how to make the bracelets fast.

Eventually, we took the bracelet concept and put it right on a mug as we found some breathing room. It helped us branch out from being just a bracelet company and reinforced how we made our products. We've also entered into decal printing and customization.

We've recently put the pedal to the metal with product development and tried to think of products that connect with what we currently have and be something unique and different. A couple of years ago, we launched the woven bracelet we call the Viona, named after my elementary school art teacher. It pairs well with our current bracelet line and offers a splash of color. That bracelet line opened up a door to production in the Dominican Republic, so we have a partner there now.

We recently launched a coaster to go with our mug that can also sit on top of the mug to help keep coffee warm and bugs out. We also launched Bel Kai under MudLOVE, my wife's company, because we love the synergies between the two brands. With our target audience, we wanted to give them something a little different.

In the spring of 2021, we made some ring dishes and plant message markers. We try to be strategic with our product development, but we're also trying to try new things and not feel limited to bracelets.

Q. What do you think your customers love about MudLOVE? What is it about your products that resonates with people?

Luke: Sometimes it's hard to know because everybody's different, but it has to be the word. The simple word that serves as a reminder on your wrist. That's what's touching people's lives, and it's not because of anything we're doing. It's because someone thought of them to buy and give them that reminder and that moment.

We also give a week of clean water for every product purchased. The products are handcrafted, there's a certain look and feel to them that people like, the size is adjustable, so they're very comfortable on the wrist. Those things all support it, but I think it's just that word connecting with people where they're at and what's going on in their lives at that time that resonates the most.

Q. You've talked a little bit already about clean water being a part of your mission. Tell me about your partnership with Water for Good.

Luke: Water for Good is a non-profit organization working out of the Central African Republic, one of the world's poorest countries. They work to get clean water by drilling new wells and maintaining and repairing broken wells. When we look at what clean water has done for people's health—it's incredible—but it's also one of the critical things to get people out of poverty. Access to clean water changes people's lives on so many levels. Women and children are often fetching water, and that walk can be 2-3 miles, meaning they miss out on education, gardening, or basic home activities. Often they're fetching water that isn't even clean, and then they die from diarrhea or dehydration. Clean water is critical.

With MudLOVE, we like to make the analogy that water gives life to our clay, and at the same time, water gives life to other people and to us.

Q. From the business side of things, what advice would you share with other cause-minded entrepreneurs?

Luke: The first thing that comes to mind is that it has to start with the heart. Many people think of "giving back" as a marketing tactic, but it has to come from the heart. I've had plenty of times where I've been tired, at the end of my rope and wanting to give up, and then I think about people who don't have clean water or about the women in the Dominican Republic and think, "Ya know, I'm going to be ok. This isn't about me. This is about creating something that can help others." And that has helped pull me out of a hole many times. Visiting the places we're serving has been a considerable boost; interacting with the people there and learning from them and how well they live in the community is inspiring. Starting with the heart, knowing why you're doing what you're doing is critical.

From a business standpoint, what you're giving has to make sense. I've given way too much early on—I was an artist, still am, and in many ways am more of an artist than a businessman—but I've had to learn the hard way through giving, learning where I can give without giving, too much or too little. I think there's an element of giving that has to hurt a little bit. I think there has to be a little bit of a sacrifice so that it doesn't just become routine.

There's a huge amount of trust you have to have in the organization you're supporting; a constant communication flow is important. You have to take what they're doing and pitch it just as well as you could your own company. If I can't articulate what Water for Good is doing clearly, and as confidently as I could with MudLOVE, then I don't think I've learned enough about them, or maybe they're not the right fit. Being able to pitch them as though they're your own company is important to me.

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Then you need to package that in a way that makes your customers want to be a part of it. For MudLOVE, that means communicating that we donate a week of clean water for every product purchased. There's also so much more we have available for them to learn and that we want them to learn about Water for Good, but having that high-level point that gets customers excited to be part of the story is critical.

Q. Aside from your Water for Good partnership, and your production partnership in the Dominican Republic, how have you seen your products impact the lives of others? Do you have any specific inspirational stories to share?

Luke: One of my favorite stories was from a guy named Maury Hester. He was an older guy who was retired, and he volunteered by mopping the floor at the post office. I saw him often during the early MudLOVE days. He always called me the wrong name; he called me "John the Potter," and I didn't have the heart to correct him.

He was an upbeat guy, kind of annoying sometimes, but he was a character. He would come into my shop often, just him, and he was always purchasing two hope bracelets with a brown elastic. Eventually, I got curious and wanted to know what he was up to.

The next time he came in, I told him he ought to consider buying them 12 at a time to get a discount. He said, "No, no. That's not what I'm going to do. I'm going to let you know what I've been doing with these. I've recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and what I do is buy two hope bracelets, and I put them on the turn signal of my old truck. And every time I hear of somebody that has cancer, I give them one of these bracelets. And once the second one is gone, I come back in here and buy two more."

This guy, whose life had a sort of a clear timeline on it, was spending his last days using our product to touch the lives of other people who had cancer. It was just so inspiring. And it happened at a time when we were growing, and it just helped us see that every bracelet we send out can encourage and change someone's life.

Q. The two of you work together as co-CEOs, and your company is (almost) 12 years old. What insights can you share about how you work together well?

Whitney: The jewelry business I started is 14 years old, so I was a couple of years ahead of Luke in the entrepreneurship journey. I came into Luke's life during year two of MudLOVE, right around the time bracelets started flying out of his studio. He was receiving a lot of requests for custom items and personalization, which was what my business was built on. So that's what brought us together—the first time we ever hung out, I showed him how to build a website.

The fact that we were both entrepreneurs brought us together, though I feel lucky that we didn't dive into a business together because I think that would've been a lot harder. We had both founded our companies and were a little bit established when we found each other. We've been married now for almost eight years, and I would say that we're lucky that working together is probably the best part of our relationship still.

Our businesses collaborate well, have a similar customer base, and our giftings are in different areas, so we balance each other out. I would say only recently we've found ourselves in one of those scenarios where we have to remind ourselves not to talk about the business sometimes. There are lots of nights and weekends when we're talking about the business out of necessity. Sometimes it's the only time we can connect. In this last year of getting our hands in the business more, and as my hours increased more, too, there were times we needed to just say, "Okay, we're having a dinner out, and we're not talking about business."

Luke: I think it's been good for accountability and humility, which are things that are important in working in business in general. We listen to each other to understand, we can't just be stubborn about certain things we like or want, but we try to have open hands about the company's direction. Practically, we have four kids at home, and we just had to create a schedule. Whitney was staying at home with the kids for a while, and when she started back, we had to sit down and say, "Okay, I'm going to be on daddy duty these days, and you're going to go to work these days." We had to find a balance, practically, with the schedule, which is always a challenge no matter what.

We don't have a "secret recipe;" I think it's just constant checking in and adjusting, trying to be aware of where each other is at, the workload we have, and how we can support each other.

Q. 2020 was a crazy year. How did COVID impact you guys as a company, for better or for worse?

Luke: When it all started happening, we closed the shop down and decided to sell one product in collaboration with Ben Higgins and Generous Coffee, and we were shipping from our playroom in our house. It wasn't going viral, I'll say that.

I remember our 11-year-old carrying boxes to the post office down the street. There was something sweet about it at the time, but it was also challenging because the government was trying to sort out the funding and what that was going to look like, and we were having a hard time making payroll for three people making minimum wage on our staff. It was very hard.

We implemented daily check-ins with our friends in business, and we'd give each other all our bad news and try to support each other through that.

At some point, we decided that even though we didn't know how long we'd be around, we're MudLOVE, and we're going to do something to help. We implemented a Pay Hope Forward campaign, where you could buy our hope bracelets for healthcare workers. After George Floyd's death, we started a Stand for Equality campaign where we sold bracelets with equal signs and Black Lives Matter bracelets, and we were able to get 1,100 of them paid for through anonymous donors. After we went through the 1,100 free bracelets (paid for by donors), we offered them at cost. That campaign is still going on.

We tried to take advantage of a challenging situation to love people and put our mission first, but we also knew we had to systematically change the business. So we got smaller, leaner, and realized what we were truly capable of with a smaller staff, and we made a ton of improvements. The silver

lining is that I'm now in charge of operations and product development, which is where I operate best, and Whitney is very involved and in charge of the sales and marketing side, which is where she excels. We were able to get our hands into the business and start making changes.

Q. As entrepreneurs, you often wear all the hats and work harder and longer hours than when you're working for someone else. How do you prioritize your mental health, and how do you each take care of yourselves?

Whitney: I am a tennis player, and I play weekly. I was recently building our new website and kept thinking, "I should not be going to tennis today," but every time I did, I was like, "Nope, this is what I'm doing." It's one thing that I've decided I'm not going to let anything get in the way of. I love it, it's part of my community, and I have friendships there, too.

We also do a really good job of dating each other. We try to go out at least once a week, and we try to take trips together without the kids pretty often, once a month or two.

Luke: We're no experts at it. We go to counseling, separately and together. We try to do the little things like eat healthy, get enough rest; I think it's just a lot of little things, not just one big thing that we do.

Whitney: Our community helps, too; we've maintained close relationships with two couples specifically that share similar values and lifestyles.

Q. What has leading and growing this company taught you about yourselves?

Luke: I tend to learn from my mistakes more often than I just learn from preparation. Leading MudLOVE has taught me how to take my experiences, downfalls, and mistakes, and use them to better myself and the company, and have confidence in that. And I would say that's come to fruition more recently with COVID; we have a much better instinct about what needs to happen. I've learned not to let my mistakes get me down or stop me from trying but instead keep moving forward.

Whitney: For me, it feels more recent, too, because after having four kiddos. Just this last year and a half have become much more involved and working more than before. My previous entrepreneur life was very much creative for the most part, only working on my jewelry business as being a mom allowed me to do. But more recently, I've stepped into more of a leadership role, and I think it's given me the confidence to lead. I've never really considered myself much of a leader, but it's been a natural fit, and that's been surprising to me.

It's humbling because we have a fantastic team, and even though I've been around for many years, I hadn't been in a place where I was leading anybody. Everyone welcomed me in, and they're an easy team to work with. As much as I have a renewed confidence as a leader, I still really look at them as leading me most of the time because they're such a great team.

Q. What does success look like for MudLOVE?

Whitney: At the very base level, this feels like a gift, to be at the helm of a business that's still standing, especially after last year. I am humbled that God's allowed us to keep running this because it's easy for small businesses to have to close their doors these days. Being able to continue means that we're still able to make a difference. We hear thousands of stories about how people are using our products to love on others; so every day that we're in business means that's happening, it also means that people are getting clean water, it also means that women who come from really unjust circumstances can change their lives. So every day we keep our doors open is a success.

Luke: I think it's challenging to balance the mission and business, even though they're intertwined. Success can look like many different things; from a business standpoint, it can look like a focused team, getting products out on time with the best quality possible. But my mind is going toward being thoughtful about every decision we make. It's so easy just to make decisions that can look like they're good, but behind the scenes can be hurting someone, or they're just not the right ones. I think just having that thoughtfulness, that creativity every day, that intentionality is success in my mind.

Q. What's next for MudLOVE? Anything new and exciting on the horizon? Anything else you want to mention?

Our website is technically not new anymore but is the fruit of a whole lot of work. On a local level, about 45 minutes down the street in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, we have a place called goodMRKT, where we've partnered with Vera Bradley to be a pillar brand in that store. We're excited about that opportunity because it's provided demand for more outsourcing to the Dominican Republic, which has been bringing us a ton of joy because they will be able to triple the size of their operation.

Overall, you can expect more innovation of products, more unique collaboration from MudLOVE; we're hitting it hard with new ideas and going in with no fear, ready to try anything.

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