



ESSENCE OF SUCCESS

Nana Korolev used a homemade Russian herbal recipe
to become a Canadian shampoo entrepreneur

BY LISA EVANS

PHOTOS BY MIHO TAKAYA



I would never have been able to do this in Russia. Have my own shampoo? Forget it!”

Her jet black hair glistens as the overhead light hits it. As the owner of Nana Essence organic shampoo, I expected her to have nice hair, but my expectations are far exceeded. I soon discover, even more remarkable than her

gleaming mane, is her strong work ethic and determined character.

Tall and slim, a physique likely the result of her days as a competitive swimmer, Nana Korolev settles into her seat at a bustling Bloor Street café, and

talks openly about her rocky road to success.

Korolev came to Canada in 1991 with her eight-year old son, Igor, \$11 in her pocket and not a word of English. “I sold all the jewelry I had in Russia, bought the tickets to fly here and never looked back,” she says pointedly. In fact, since arriving in Canada, Korolev has never returned to her country of origin. “I appreciate Russian history and Russian culture, but I don’t like the system there. Canada is home,” she says.

As she recalls the day she and her son touched down on Canadian soil, she melts a little, describing the moment she broke down crying in the airport, briefly doubting her decision. “I just came with no money,” she says, painting a picture of a scared young lady, an image in stark contrast to the strong, resilient woman who sits in front of me, clearly able to achieve anything she sets her mind to.

Living in a basement apartment in downtown Toronto, Korolev worked as a nanny while she took English classes. “My son learned English faster than I did,” she laughs. After getting her real estate licence, she moved out of the basement.

But, in addition to being a realtor, an entirely new entrepreneurial path came to pass a few years later when she created Nana Essence, a self-titled line of certified organic shampoo and personal care products.

Starting the company was a matter of circumstance. After the birth of her daughter, Selena, Korolev experienced hair loss

— a common occurrence in breastfeeding women whose bodies struggle to retain the nutrients required for strong, healthy hair. Remembering a collection of herbal recipes she’d saved from her days as a competitive swimmer that had brought her chlorine-damaged hair back to life, Korolev began boiling herbs in her home. The mix of nettle, white oak and birch formed the basis of her hair remedy. “I had some left from when I was making it and gave it to my girlfriends and my girlfriends said, ‘Oh my god, where did you get that water, my hair is shining so much, I need that water,’” she says.

Realizing she had something special, she decided to take her product to market. “I was buying vitamins already from one of the health food stores and I knew the buyers there so I approached them and they said ‘we’ll try to sell six shampoos,’” she recalls. Korolev packed up a box of six shampoos and six conditioners, offering a buy-one-get-one-free promotion, trying to entice customers to try her new homemade line.

She’d already placed bottles in 10 different Toronto stores when she was introduced to Donmar, a distributor of organic products to health stores across Canada. “They took me under their wing,” she says. With Donmar’s help, Korolev was able to place her shampoo in 160 stores across the country.

Pleased with the success of her shampoo, conditioner and hair mask, Korolev has since created a body wash and deodorant, and

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is now working on producing a body lotion and face cream that will appear in stores later this year. While she also still works in real estate for Right At Home Realty Inc., in Mississauga, she is committed to growing the company and has plans to create a men's hair care line, too. "Slowly, slowly, I will get there" she says, referring to her dream of expanding Nana Essence into an international company.

Although we're here to discuss the success of her business venture, when asked whether she feels she is successful, Korolev proudly boasts that her greatest achievement is her children. "They're my biggest trophies. They're my biggest accomplishment," she says, comparing her parenting style to *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* author Amy Chua. "I consider myself lucky to have amazing



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kids. When you put into your kids, you will always think you are successful.”

Applying the same discipline she uses in her business to her children has proved a successful strategy. It appears both of her children have adopted not only her enthusiasm for sports, but her strong work ethic as well. Her son's success in track and field earned him a professional scholarship to the United States, where he recently completed a degree in biochemistry, and her 14-year-old daughter is already an accomplished golfer who speaks five languages and occasionally accompanies Korolev to trade shows in Quebec where she uses her French language skills to help her mom sell Nana Essence products. "They see how hard I work, that's the best example for them," she says. Her children also help with other aspects of the business. "I can't write emails," chuckles Korolev.

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and entrepreneurship hasn't been an easy road. "I swear to God, I have no idea how I do it," she laughs, admitting she doesn't have much time for a social life. While satisfied with the success of her company, Korolev still feels that as an immigrant she is playing a game of catch-up, especially when it comes to language skills. "I came when I was 29 and maybe I should have left earlier. When you're 29 and you start speaking all over again it takes you a good few years. I'm still catching up on English, still reading a lot," she says.

Her advice to newcomers who want to start a business venture is simply to work hard. "When you work for yourself you have to work twice as hard as you work for somebody else," she says, adding that Canada has provided her with opportunities she never dreamed of while living in Russia. "I was just lucky to choose this country," she says, describing her arrival in Canada as destiny. "My son always asks, 'Why Canada?' And I don't know. I believe whatever happens, happens for a reason. There has to be a reason, something

or someone [that drives you to a place]," she says. Becoming an entrepreneur is something the young woman who stood crying in the airport never imagined. "I would never have been able to do this in Russia. Have my own shampoo? Forget it! You have to have deep pockets. This is what I love about Canada," she says.

Having just celebrated her 50th birthday in June, Korolev talks about that milestone, joking, "I have so much knowledge now."

Knowledge, and big dreams. "I want every corner of the world to be selling my product." 🍁

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