

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for having me here.

My name is Claire Zhu, and I'm the CEO and Co-Founder of Hootie Hoo. We're a relatively new brand based in Saint George, Vermont, specializing in high-quality children's technical apparel. With nearly 20 years of experience in the garment and outdoor industry, including over 9 years at Burton Snowboards, I embarked on this journey less than 3 years ago alongside a partner based in China.

The motivation behind starting Hootie Hoo stemmed from a personal need. As a parent, I struggled to find outdoor gear for my kids that matched the technical quality of my own gear without breaking the bank. Quality family time outdoors is paramount to us because we believe that some of life's most important lessons are best learned in nature. Every day presents a new adventure in the great outdoors, offering endless opportunities for exploration, adaptation, and growth.

Running a startup can often feel isolating, but being a part of VOBA has made this journey both easier and more enjoyable. Thanks to VOBA, I had a lot more opportunities to connect with local retailers and industry colleagues. I'm also thankful for the chance to share my story on a panel at the VOBA Outdoor Economy summit, which opened doors for networking and collaboration within Vermont's outdoor industry.

One of the significant collaborations facilitated by VOBA was with REI in Williston. Through their "Local Buy" program, we've been able to showcase our products in-store, providing customers with firsthand experience of our brand. Additionally, VOBA sponsored us, along with five other Vermont brands, at the Snowbound Expo in Boston last November. This exposure at the largest consumer-facing snow show on the East Coast was invaluable to our brand's visibility and growth. As a result, our products are now available not only in national retailers like REI and EVO but also at local ski resorts such as Stowe and Mt. Hood. These achievements reflect the collective efforts of our team and the invaluable partnerships forged along the way.

Vermont, often known for its ski resorts, is also a thriving hub for new brand launches, product innovation, and sustainability initiatives. The state boasts the highest number of B-Corp companies per capita in the country, making it an attractive destination for businesses seeking to align with socially responsible practices.

Last year, the outdoor industry contributed \$1.9 billion to Vermont's GDP, and with continued investment, this figure has the potential to be bigger. The state's natural and recreational resources offer an unmatched work-life balance, attracting individuals seeking health and happiness. As highlighted by the 2023 Outdoor Participation Trend Report, outdoor recreation participation has been steadily increasing, presenting opportunities for Vermont to position itself as a year-round outdoor destination.

By leveraging Vermont's natural beauty and fostering a thriving outdoor industry ecosystem, we're not only enhancing the quality of life for residents but also attracting visitors from across the East Coast and beyond. Vermont has the potential to become the "backyard of the East Coast," offering nature-centric experiences in all four seasons.

In essence, Hootie Hoo's journey is intertwined with Vermont's vision for sustainable growth and outdoor accessibility. Together with VOBA and other industry partners, we're contributing to the state's economic prosperity and establishing Vermont as a leader in outdoor innovation and sustainability.

Thank you very much.