

# Sooner Nation

## Angie Cella has shining success with Blinger

By Anna Andersen

**A**ngie Cella's entrepreneurial career began with a dream.

An actual dream, that is—on November 2, 2014, she woke up with an idea for a device that would attach gems to hair. That day, she put some rhinestones in her younger daughter's hair. With that sparkling proof of concept, the four-year process of bringing the product she would name "Blinger" to market began.

At first glance, Cella might seem an unlikely person to invent a product and start her own company—the single mother of four graduated from OU in 1994 with a European Studies degree, spending several semesters at an immersion program in France and working as an au pair in Paris and as a strawberry picker outside of Lyons. Her "hankering" to go to Europe, she says, "was from my dad."

John Brooks, a 1960 OU alumnus with a degree in journalism and mass communication, is known as the "Voice of the Sooners" for his years announcing OU football and basketball. "My dad loved Spain," Cella says. "He would find ways through bartering and saving to take the family there every other summer, staying all summer long at youth hostels and traveling around the country."

Brooks passed on more than a love of travel, though. "I definitely get my work ethic from my dad," Cella says.

Brooks himself echoes this: "I'm pretty much a workaholic," he says. "My kids have reminded me constantly that what they've done, the work ethic that they saw growing up, has made a big difference in their lives." Still, Brooks has been impressed by Cella's sheer persistence in making her bling dream come true. "For me, the one word that describes Angie better than anything is tenacious," he says.

All of Cella's tenacity was required to get Blinger off the ground. Formerly at Arbonne International, she had the skills to sell a product, but not the wherewithal to make it. She reached out to freelance engineers via online marketplace Upwork, at first with little success. "The first engineer took more than half my savings. The second took the rest, plus a \$20,000 loan." These setbacks would have made most people give up. But Cella didn't. There was a third engineering firm, and a fourth; both "took me for some money and for some angst."

In early 2018, she was still trying to develop a prototype simple enough, with as few specially made plastic parts as possible, to keep it affordable as a kids' fashion toy. She convinced a fifth engineer to take the project, admitting she didn't have his full fee up front but promising she would find a way.

"He could've said, 'Mmm, I don't feel comfortable with that,' and then, you know, I would've kept going and found one eventually. But he said, 'Okay!' And he believed me, and I think he felt a little sorry for me" after she had invested four years into the project to no avail. This time her stubbornness paid off. "It's the craziest thing—my dream was in 2014, I hired him in 2018. It took four years to get to the fifth engineering firm, and he designed it in 30 days."

Now that Cella had a working prototype—a kid-friendly applicator that resembles a round stapler—

there was still the question of paying the engineering firm. "I went to my kids, and I said, 'What if we sell the house? And I'll just build the Blinger myself in China.' To most kids, that would be a weird question to ask, but my kids had been on the journey with me. They just stared at me for a little bit, and then my oldest said, 'You gotta do it, Mom.' " Her voice breaks a little as she relates the story. "It gets me every time."

Cella sold the house and half the family's belongings, moving into a townhome with her four children, currently ages 17,



Cella credits her dad, former OU broadcaster John Brooks, with giving her a strong work ethic and a love of travel.



Cella's older daughter Cambria applies Blinger to younger sister Grace's hair.

16, 14 and 8. That summer, after the kids went to bed, she'd stay up late to connect with the Chinese businesspeople making her production units. She booked a booth at 2018's Dallas Toy Fair and received her first product run of 100 just in time.

While in Dallas, she signed up for an event with an organization called Women in Toys, which gave her the opportunity to pitch Blinger to Walmart for 15 minutes. Earlier, she'd had meetings with a couple of toy companies about licensing the product, intending just to practice her presentation; instead, she got two offers. "It was my first real confirmation that I might have a winner here." At the toy fair, she found herself bombarded with requests from women to use Blinger on their hair. After 30 or 40 such requests, she says, she knew success had finally arrived.

Cella eventually licensed Blinger to a company called

Wicked Cool Toys to scale up production and make it available to retailers like Walmart, Target and Amazon. Blinger sold 50 million units in 2019. In 2020, Women in Toys recognized Cella's achievements with their Wonder Woman Award, and in 2021, Cella and her kids moved into the dream house her success allowed them to build.

Cella plans to release "Bijou," a women's version of Blinger that uses real crystals and pearls later this year. "In hindsight, I would've launched the women's version first for branding reasons," she says.

But if there's one thing her history makes clear, it's that Cella won't let a minor setback stop her. She's determined to shine.

---

*Anna Andersen is a freelance writer living in Wichita, Kan.*