

Frederick Factor - The Authenticity Factor Transcript

Sandy: Welcome to the Frederick Factor! Everyone who's lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick, Maryland knows that there is something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible, diverse community that continues to grow. Here, on this podcast, we will be bringing Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight to share their stories with you and find out what's your Frederick factor! This episode of the Frederick Factor features a lively and fun conversation with the father-daughter team behind Frederick's Puerto Rico Distillery; Angel and Crystal Rivera. They share their love of Puerto Rican moonshine and what makes it so special. I spoke with this father-daughter team and they shared their journey of bringing this beloved beverage right here to Frederick, Maryland. They opened their business during the pandemic and they talk about all the reasons they have fallen in love with this community.

Sandy: So I'm going to start off by saying, welcome. Welcome to the Frederick Factor.

Crystal: Thank you so much.

Sandy: I appreciate you being here and can't wait to dive in on this conversation. First off, I'd love it if you could introduce yourself. For our listeners, we have two guests, both, you know, together in the same room that are working together with this company. So Crystal, if you want to, lead off and introduce yourself, that would be awesome.

Crystal: Yeah, my name is Crystal Rivera, and I am the co-founder of Puerto Rico Distillery along with my father, and I'll let him introduce himself.

Angel: Yes, thank you, Crystal. My name is Angel Rivera, Crystal and I have this crazy idea to continue to work together and expand. So yeah, thank you for having us on the Frederick Factor, we're excited to be here.

Sandy: I'm so glad. So tell me, tell me about Puerto Rico Distillery, what is it?

Crystal: It is a passion project that took on a life of its own. Basically, it started with family traditions that have many generations deep, many years in the making in Puerto Rico, and my dad learned from his dad when my sister and I came to an age-appropriate point in our lives, we learned when we would go to Puerto Rico and visit our family down there. So, "Pitorro", Puerto Rican moonshine, that's one of the nicknames, came to be an experience that we looked forward to. And we ultimately got tired of only getting to experience it one or two times a year, when we

would visit our folks down there, and we kind of just looked at each other one day and said, “What if we were to actually, you know, try to make a go this and open a distillery?” And we were crazy enough to do it. That's my recollection of things.

Angel: And that is pretty much close to the way I would describe it as well. I think a lot of people that are in the industry tend to or at least I think I have a passion for spirits, have a passion for distilling, and want to do that, and then they have to come up with a business model: what do they call the distillery? What do they distill? All those different things. In our case, moonshine is something that is part of the culture, very ingrained in the culture. I grew up in it, I raised Crystal in it. And I think that's kind of what she was she was alluding to, right. It's been, it's been with us for a long time. It's part of our life, it's part of our culture. So we were in love with it, we practiced it, we did it. And it when we decided to open a distillery, it was a continuation of something that we've been doing for a very long time that we're very passionate about and that we care about. And we definitely want to make sure that we can make a living off of it, it is a for-profit venture, but there's a lot of love that goes into Puerto Rico Distillery.

Crystal: Right, I don't think that we would have opened a distillery if it wasn't for essentially not being able to get it like, seeing the hole in the market, and deciding that we would take it into our own hands to fill that hole. We don't do anything except for Pitorro. So we let other people deal with vodkas or whiskies and you know, that they're better off for it. I just figured that we should do this one thing that we love, but do it exactly how we want to do it and just, you know, do it to the best of our ability.

Sandy: I love it. I lived in West Virginia for almost 30 years. And moonshine has a very different you know, meaning but it's still that element of community and culture and growing from your roots and passing down generation after generation. So maybe it is all exactly the same. I don't know.

Angel: So it is there are some variations, a lot of the traditions are a little bit different. They both have a plan this time aspect to it right. An origin in and being passed down from generation of you know, trying to make a living, given the circumstances that you find yourself in and maybe a little bit of being rebellious and not wanting to pay the taxman. Obviously, we are everything is legal, but we try to instill in what we do a lot of the traditions and you know our tagline is “Puerto Rican born, Maryland Made”, so we part in part of what we do, we share a lot of our culture and our traditions, but we also pay tribute to the moonshiners here in the States, because we do believe that it's all one big family that we all except for maybe, you know, speaking a different language, we all really have the same background going into this.

Sandy: So why Maryland? Why “Puerto Rico Born, Maryland Made?” Why did you decide to start distilling this here? Why, you know, why grow the business here?

Crystal: Yeah, so we landed in Maryland, thanks to the Navy. I was born on the island. But a year after I was born, we started moving around with thanks to Dad's service. So we've been in Florida twice, Maryland, twice, Massachusetts, Japan, for a little bit. But Maryland was the last place that we ended up and ultimately became “home” or whatever that means for us, as Navy people. But we were for many years in Colombia, over in Howard County, and when it came to opening up a business, there was a sort of siren call that Frederick had for us. But whenever it was time, you know, Frederick seemed like the place to go for it.

Angel: In the 19 years that we lived in Colombia, we visited Frederick on a number of occasions, I'd say six or seven times, in that every time we wanted to sort of go down a winery, distillery, or brewery trail when we wanted to make a day out of that, we always came up here. So when it came time to open the distillery, the first place we thought of actually was Frederick. And we came up here and everything looked great, everything sounded great, everything seemed perfect. The only issue was that we owned a home and I had a job still down there. So we actually drove back with a good feeling about Frederick but deciding to try to open it in Howard County, Anne Arundel, or Montgomery county, and we spent a year trying to make that happen. After a couple of failed attempts, we looked at each other and said, “Remember that good feeling we had about Frederick? Let's go up there again and give it a try.” And we came up here and we sort of had that warm and fuzzy and opening and just a feeling of it being the right place. And that was it, we made the decision before we got in the car to get back to Howard County. And we just started working on opening here in Frederick.

Sandy: I love it. How has this project location impacted your business and the Frederick Community?

Crystal: I can't say enough good things about it. I was admittedly nervous about moving from Howard County. It seems like so far when we're considering selling the house and moving to Frederick, I would think I was just nervous for change. I think I had so much change growing up with the Navy, that I like now just want a product of structure and routine. So I was nervous that just not being asked, am I familiar with Frederick as I was with Howard County, but the more that I got to know the community and talk to people in like ROOT over at the economic development. Everyone was fantastic. But everyone over at the city permitting had just a wealth of knowledge. Everywhere that I turned. And I had questions. Because I had so many questions when starting a business. Everyone was just so willing to help and just wanted to see, you know, another successful business gets up and running in Frederick. And so I don't know any other place that is so business-friendly and I have been, you know, just constantly surprised by people in the industry like lending a helping hand and, or sharing information. It's very supportive in that sense. So that's, that's been fantastic.

Angel: So we had an ulterior motive for why we were trying to other than the fact that we live down there in Howard County and I work down there. We also had for the last nine years we participate. We participate in an organization that hosts events for ex-pats, people that are from the island. So we, through the events that we had hosted mostly in Howard County and in DC and Montgomery County, we knew of people that would be familiar with our moonshine in those areas. So we thought that by locating in that area, we would be closer to our customers. And that's why we try to make it work closer to down there. And eventually, the allure of Frederick was so strong that we were like, no, it's going to work up here because it's going to work because everything feels right. We've noticed that, that we've had those same people that we were expecting to come visit us in our county had we established ourselves, they've been up here, be Pitorro is a spirit that you only can find on the island, so the only other way to get it is to get on an airplane. So we get people that drive from Pennsylvania, from New Jersey, from New York, from New York, from Georgia, they're coming from all over the place. But we've also found that we participate in farmer's markets here in the area, we have a tasting room. And we've noticed that it, you know that and that's not to brag a little bit about it, but Pitorro is something that's been an item for hundreds of years, right? So something that's been done for hundreds of years by millions of people, it's been worked to the point where it's good, right, so we get a lot of people that walk into the tasting room and try it and like it and I can say right now that we probably have more than 50% of our customers or people that that are from Frederick or the vicinity that discovered it by coming to Puerto Rico Distillery and trying it. We always have the people that know of it and will drive distances to get to us, but we are, other than everything that Crystal mentioned about the actual city and our colleagues in the business industry helping us out, the community itself has been very, very receptive. We participate in like I said, farmer's markets, we go to Worman's Mill, they have an advantage that their activity that we participate in, and we've made friends over there. Everybody loves our stuff. So we're very happy to be in Frederick.

Sandy: That's awesome. I love it. And I can imagine a little bit of stress, or some anxiety, some pressure to make it well if you've got people that have only ever tried it in Puerto Rico, and you know, you've got some high standards that you need to live up to

Crystal: That's a question that we get quite often, we do get people that this is their first time experiencing and we're like this the first time hearing the word Pitorro and so it's a whole journey when we introduce it to them, or the people that have experienced Pitorro and know what Pitorro is that's the first question when they come in. They look around the tasting room they, you know, comment this all looks nice. Looks great in here. It's so cool. But is this some this *Pitorro* Pitorro? Is this like the good stuff?

Angel: We've had people call us and say "I'm thinking of getting in my car and driving from New York. Am I going to be disappointed when I get there?" And we tell them "Get your car,

my friend, you're going to be happy when you get here. This is the real thing” Because there's obviously you know, you can name anything, anything, right? So you know a lot of people are a little bit nervous that we're calling it Pitorro, it is very unique. Pitorro is a rum that when you distill it, you let the flavor of the molasses seep into the rum, and it is a rum that is historically designed to be a sipping rum. So for it to be a sipping rum, it has to be good on itself. Right? It's not a rum that's designed to be thrown into a cocktail that then can be disguised. You know, you get the buzz but you know, it's not the same as everything else. So yeah,

Crystal: You get the big flavor right, and almost a little bit of funk to it that some people compared to rum Agricole and other parts of the Caribbean, but there's no mistaking it. I can take a blind smell test and taste test and tell you 100% if something is hitting the mark or not, is it Pitorro or is it or regular rum, nothing wrong with regular rum but we're just hitting a very particular mark. And so when we do get those calls, I have no problem saying it. I have high standards. This hits my standard.

Sandy: That's great. I love it. Oh my gosh, I'm so anxious to dive in on this but I think I'm gonna wait until the end as I hold my shot glass in my hand. Diving a little deeper. Obviously, you're from Puerto Rico and a veteran. How has being an underrepresented business owner impacted your entrepreneurial experience here in Frederick County

Angel: So I guess I'm going to keep going back to the theme of being welcomed. One of the things that we enjoyed the most, when we came up here was actually seeing that there were businesses of all types. There's a Cuban restaurant, there's a Spanish Mexican restaurant, there's Italian, there's just a Jamaican spot, we felt that Frederick, even for a smaller city, you might expect to go to a place like, you know, DC, and be able to find everything. Or obviously, if you go to Chicago, New York, you'll find everything, right? But here, it felt like it's this quaint, historic, beautiful town with welcoming people where you can get everything so we looked around, and we didn't see Puerto Rico distillery, sign anywhere. So we figured that we would be able to contribute something that didn't exist. And not only that, by looking around and seeing the signs of all the businesses, of all the flavors, that we would be welcomed, and we were not mistaken at all, by that notion.

Crystal: Yeah. I mean, ultimately, although we're newer to Frederick than some other people or businesses, we do want to, like, fully immerse ourselves in the community, keeping in mind the fact that, you know, we try to be intentional about everything that we're doing. So for example, veterans and educators, we give them a 10% discount, all they have to do is show ID, but you know, we want to show some special love to those people, because Pa was a veteran, and my mom is a retired educator, and my mom and I have a whole family of educators. So, you know, that's kind of how those two populations got picked out for that extra you know, you know, TLC, and I know, even Educator Appreciation Week, we give an extra special those times. Um, so,

you know, certain nonprofits that we may pick, because we also have a “Tasting for Good” program, where, for the \$5, that we charge for a tasting, 100% of that goes to a different nonprofit each month. So, you know, a lot of the nonprofits that we're picking, we have some sort of personal relationship with them, either through the business or through, you know, just our personal lives. But that oftentimes comes into play, you know, highlighting, you know, women of color entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship businesses, you know, different things of that nature are kind of ways that we see, as a way for us to help.

Sponsorship Break: Hi, I'm Sophie Smith from Platinum PR and we are the sponsors of this season's Frederick Factor. Our team provides place-based marketing and communications for communities and destinations across the country. We reimagine places. Find us at www.platinumpr.com - our contact information in the show notes! Happy listening!

Sandy: That's awesome. Yeah, you know, it's so funny, because I always feel slightly awkward asking the question, because of your entrepreneurial experience. It's your experience, you don't have anything else to compare it to, you know, you are you and so I think I love the way you've been able to embrace and support other nonprofits and, you know, support segments of the population that you know, you have a special place in your heart, which is beautiful. So it's nice, thank you for sharing.

Angel: The experience has definitely been crazy, I'll say.

Sandy: That's entrepreneurship! Yeah, that's, that's just crazy to begin with Angel for starters, we had run a nonprofit for a number of years. But that's not a for-profit, right, which has completely different rules. So we never actually had a business even though we've been doing what we are now in the business of for decades. But it's something that we started in the middle of a pandemic, because even though we had been planning it for two years, our opening date was the end of March of last year, and the end of March of last year was when the country was closing down. So we had to almost reinvent our entire first-year plans to fit you know, what was going on to the point where, where the first thing we sold was hand sanitizer, even though our dream was to sell moonshine. So that was interesting. But we felt satisfaction in that right. There was a need for it. It was an important thing for us to do. The federal government asked all distilleries to do it, and we didn't hesitate. And we did that.

Crystal: And it was also an interesting fact that our hand sanitizer smells exactly like rum, just made for an extra plus.

Sandy: Right, just making you thirsty. That's all it's doing, just teasing people now.

Angel: It was just a little sample! They already had a preview.

Sandy: That's awesome. Have you encountered any struggles as an underrepresented business owner here in Frederick? Or in your span, you know, nonprofit, running different things like that?

Crystal: Yeah. It's hard to think of problems that we've encountered, being due to that when everything has just been so COVID heavy lately. I think that we try to focus on the silver lining. And so we may be underrepresented in the veteran or woman or LGBT space. But luckily, I do have a secret weapon with my mom, who has developed a knack for pursuing grants and different situations like that. So she is like a hound dog, sniffing those out and saying, Oh, we qualify for this, we qualify for that. So she's become really good at picking those out and helping us to get additional resources in that sense.

Angel: That was a skill set that we were able to transfer over from the nonprofit. Yeah, because nonprofits tend to live off applying for grants. So that was something we were able to leverage right? I wouldn't say that we have had any struggles associated with being part of a minority group, I think we're having the same struggles everybody else is having, I think we very purposefully structured the business in order to make sure that we were representing ourselves, and if nothing else, right, even to the point where you know, we named it Puerto Rico Distilleries. Everybody knows what the distillery is, and everybody knows what Puerto Rico is. So when you put it together, you, when you walk in, you kind of know what you're walking into, right. So we've never had anybody walk into the distillery and say, I'm leaving because this is not what I thought I was going to be seeing when I walk in here. We try to pride ourselves on producing a good run, but also trying to the best of our ability to represent where we come from with pride, with integrity, and with the beauty that it deserves, right? Ever, I think everybody from wherever they come from, there's negative aspects. But you know, we're not going to focus on any of that, we're gonna just focus on the positive aspects of it. And if you know, if you follow us on our Instagram, you'll see that we, we constantly are posting things that have to do with those positive aspects of the place where this problem comes from, in order to give people a more well-rounded understanding of who we are.

Crystal: Yeah, I completely second that. And I think probably the only comments or opinion I may have encountered is, you know, somebody that just doesn't drink rum. And so when I say that we expect are exclusively working in this particular medium, and they are disappointed, well, we do what we do. So I don't think you would want me to be doing anything else besides this particular thing.

Sandy: send them to a different distillery, you know, down the street, there are plenty of other options.

Crystal: There's so many other great businesses that you know, that you can just pop over to, I don't want to be everyone's cup of tea. I want to do the one thing really well.

Sandy: Yes, it resonates with me quite a bit. I tend to very much, like, live in the moment and try to think positively. So if you were to ask me, you know, the best or the worst thing that happened yesterday, I don't know, I could probably come up with the best thing. But you know, as long as it was yesterday, not a week ago, I don't remember! So really try to live in the moment and, you know, have a positive outlook. So I get it, your words resonate. I hear it. Is there anything that Frederick County that you'd like to see that could help, you know, boost the growth of your business, aside from coming out of a pandemic sooner rather than later?

Crystal: That would be amazing, like Frederick, you know, pandemic notwithstanding, has a lot of great community events, so I'm just really looking forward to, you know, getting past this because once this is back to normal or whatever normal looks like in the future, I know that there's a lot of great activities that I definitely see Puerto Rico Distillery participating in so I just you know, I'm wishing the community organizers a lot of good vibes and good love and energy that they can put together, whatever the event looks like in the future, as close to before as possible while being safe.

Angel: Absolutely. Remember that first-year plan that we were never able to execute? It really involved a lot of things that we had come up here, as visitors. You know, it took us two years to set up the business, the first one was the “wasted down” - the year, we didn't really make too much progress outside of Frederick, then there was the year that we decided, and then we made a lot of progress to the point where we opened. And during that year, knowing that we were going to be here, we were learning about all these different things that Frederick does, in order to support all businesses, you know, and we were really looking forward to doing that. So I know they're gonna get back to that whenever things are safe. And that's the one thing that they're, you know, we really are looking forward to.

Sandy: Yeah, I don't know, if we're going to get listeners that will then be approaching your mother and wife to say, “*Oh, my gosh, I need a grant writer, oh my gosh, I need somebody to help us with this,*” you know, all of these other nonprofits that are trying to, you know, survive and thrive and you know, get out of this pandemic so they can host these fun events. So they can, you know, can continue getting back to the Frederick that we all know and love. But you know, so just might get calls. But yeah, and actually, she was the first ambassador of Puerto Rico Distillery that I met, I met her at a farmers market. Talk about a fan! Oh, my golly, I probably do speak that highly of my daughter, but wowzers as you've got one proud mama bear.

Crystal: For sure, yeah, the whole family is incredibly close. So I'm incredibly blessed that I get to work with all my favorite people. So my dad is a saint, that's why they called him Angel. And he's holding down his, you know, well-paid day job. And I am working PRD full time. So I actually get to work with mom, more than I do with dad right now. But I get to work with both of them. My sister's in Puerto Rico right now. But when she's not in Puerto Rico, she is oftentimes also working at farmer's markets, or a Worman's Mill. And, you know, definitely representing Puerto Rico distillery, and she's representing us from over there right now as we speak. So, yes, we have a great crew.

Sandy: That's great. So to wrap up our time together, which I have loved immensely, I would love to ask you my closing question, which is, what is your Frederick Factor? You want to go first?

Angel: So for me, my Frederick Factor is that I am from a small town, up in the mountains of Puerto Rico. That's where I learned my moonshining. It is a town where when you walk around, people are smiling. Everybody knows and helps each other. And when I came to Frederick, it felt like a sister city, a twin city up here in Frederick, right. I think they're probably about the same age of my hometown of Comerío or up in the mountains, and Frederick. So this feels like I came to my home hereafter bouncing around as Crystal mentioned all over the world from being in the Navy. And when we say Puerto Rican born, Maryland made, my Frederick factor is that I'm in love with Frederick because it reminds me so much of my hometown.

Crystal: I think similarly, or maybe adjacently. For me, my Frederick factor is, is finding a sense of home here. I grew up a Navy brat. So bouncing around. A lot of times I was talking with my wife the other day and it came up in conversation that I don't have an answer when people ask me what my hometown is, I can say where I was born. And I can say where I live, or where I have lived, but I haven't necessarily felt rooted or that like I've lived anywhere for long enough to call it my hometown, but the longer that I'm hearing Frederick, the more that I feel that and the more that I am so happy that this is a place not only that I get to grow my business, but that I get to grow my family and to look forward to spending many more years. And I want to be involved as much as possible and not in a transient way. And I feel like it's more possible here than it has been before.

Sandy: That's awesome. I love it. Thank you. Thank you both for sharing. It's been so much fun. And now it's time for me to take a little sip. Right? Okay.

Angel: So I see that you're brave because you actually went with the classic. So only the hardcore folks drink it the way you're drinking it. Most most. There's a tradition on the island of infusing flavor into the moonshine. So most moonshiners buy it from the moonshiners the way you're drinking it, but they don't drink it until they actually infuse a flavor into it.

Sandy: So what should I be infusing? What should I be infusing it with? What do you recommend?

Angel: We would probably need a couple of hours. That so I can we can share that when we opened we opened only producing what you had because the infusing takes time. And one of the things that we did, in order to not only share the culture, the tradition, and everything that's associated with the moonshine, was that we actually did some videos and posted them on our YouTube channel that we have, and gave workshops on how to infuse flavor into the moonshine with either fruits extracts or concentrates, a combination of flavors, specifically making it with the flavor of coffee, and just about a variety of different ways that you can infuse flavor into the rum. Because again, it was something else that was associated with the rum from the tradition and the culture that we want. It would be amazing if all of a sudden we had people here and we do by the way, and we do have people that are from the island that knew how to do it. So they came and got the classic one that you have. We have people that never did on the island, but now we'll learn through us and we actually have people that have never been to the island that have taken the workshops and have actually infused flavor into the moonshine and have come back and gave us samples to show us how good it was.

Crystal: So I often talk about the evolution of the total and generational senses so my great grandfather's generation would have drank it how you're drinking it, clear, they would have been working in the fields had a hard day at work, want to get straight to the point. So they're going to drink a straight. Abuelo's generation would have had, you know, this is actually Abuelo's recipe of raisins, prunes, and cranberries. The traditional is our best seller. And so it makes for a smooth sipping rum. I'm not a smoker, but some people say it pairs well with the cigar, I'll take their word for it, but it's really smooth, and like deep, complex flavors. And then Pa's generation would have taken it and started doing other unique flavors. So like Kiwi or mango, like different things like that my generation is playing with cocktails.

Sandy: Of course, that all makes sense, that transition, you totally had me there. So, Angel, I have been making kombucha, which is also a fermented tea. So I'm thinking like I'm one step away from you, and being able to infuse this or something else.

Angel: So we have a coconut chai that we basically infused with the tea that that that we had, and it's also very good. This is artisanal. So really, it's your imagination is the limit to where you can actually infuse it, the videos that we have for the people that want some ideas to get started. So if you wanted to you can go and watch those, but you really don't have to. There's only really three things that are needed. You need obviously the moonshine rum, the clear one that you have the classic, you need something to add flavor to it, you need something to sweeten it up a little bit, and then you need time for it to age after you've added the first three ingredients to whatever

flavor you add it to blend into the rum for the bite to go away and for the flavors to really, you know, marinate.

Sandy: You just described kombucha. I'm one step away! If you are hiring, I think I could, you know, come and be part of your, you know, artisanal team over there.

Angel: We're always looking for great ideas!

Sandy: Awesome. Awesome. Cool! Well, thank you so much for joining me on the Frederick Factor podcast. I could not be more excited. This absolutely exceeded all expectations. Thank you so much. And we'll include a link to your website and social media and all of that in the show notes so that people can check out some of those fun videos and learn where to come and find you - traveling near and far! Coming to Frederick to purchase from a Puerto Rico distillery. This has been great. Thank you guys so much.

Angel: Thank you so much for having us.

Sandy: Thank you.

Sandy: **You've been listening to the Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community and what makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at www.FrederickFactor.com. You can also connect with us on Facebook and Instagram. 'Til next time!**