

## **Entrepreneur of the Year and Young Business Person of the Year – Rishika Bhalla**

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### **Award submission summary**

Young entrepreneur and Birmingham City University graduate Rishika Bhalla's not-for-profit startup Sole Circle UK has been described as "life changing", "pivotal" and stepping up to help "teenagers and young people who are experiencing real difficulties...taking people away from crime and putting them on to a path to a better life with good opportunities."

Rishika's business, Sole Circle UK, is a community that donates pre-loved trainers and sneakers to those living in shoe poverty, which consists of over four million people without access to adequate footwear.

Since launching, Rishika has received support from Nike to craft her campaign, hosted virtual sneaker cleaning sessions, partnered with an array of prominent retail brands, manufactured shoe donation boxes in leading retail outlets, supported leading charity Shoe Aid and helped promote diversity, inclusion and sustainability.

Working closely with the 300,000+ committed members of the 'sneakerhead' community, Rishika has taken pre-loved trainers – many sitting in boxes in wardrobes or cast aside under beds – and spruced them up, offering them to people experiencing real difficulties so they can feel the boost of boasting a pair of clean kicks.

It is a heart-warming, unique and powerful initiative that has already seen Rishika be named as a finalist in a student/graduate entrepreneurship competition, securing fresh funding and access to state-of-the-art facilities to progress Sole Circle UK further.

### **Background info**

Rishika Bhalla has always been a charitable person. Even as a young child, she was aware of the struggles many families face, the haves and the have nots, the divide between rich and poor.

It's why, aged 13, she raised £500 in one day to buy gifts for children spending Christmas in a sick children's ward. And it's why, more recently, she helped to raise over £1,000 to help keep abandoned cats and kittens safe and healthy over the winter period before they were rehomed.

"I have an innate desire to help people and to make the world a better place and will often jump at any opportunity to do so," she beams.

It's an ethos and mindset that has inspired Rishika's not-for-profit startup, Sole Circle UK, which has taken the Birmingham City University (BCU) graduate's charitable nature and turned it into one of industry's most exciting, unique and generous brands.

It all began with a pair of trainers. Coming from an underprivileged background, Rishika appreciated any gift that she received, but this one felt special. "When I got to choose my first pair of Nikes, I felt truly invincible," she recalls.

This was step one of what would be a fulfilling career.

### **The journey begins...**

Soon after, Rishika became familiar with the world of shoe poverty. Currently, there are over four million people in the UK that do not have access to adequate footwear, negatively impacting individuals and resulting in bullying, low self-esteem and isolation.

Shoe Aid, the leading UK charity for shoe poverty, are all too aware of this issue.

"There are at least 280,000 homeless people that have no shoes or footwear that is falling to pieces," [they state on their website](#). "A young boy cannot join his friends at his local football team as his family cannot afford football boots."

Out of every 10 requests that Shoe Aid receive for footwear, seven of them are specifically requesting trainers.

Meanwhile, the sneaker community – where people are often dubbed 'sneakerheads' – continues to thrive, with over 300,000 people in the UK housing large collections of footwear that they continue to refresh as new models are released.

This is where Rishika formed a new idea – with there being such a large community of fervent footwear fans often piling up trainers in their wardrobes and, conversely, millions of people across the country without access to footwear, what if there was a company that could take these pre-loved pairs of trainers and give them to those living in shoe poverty, so they could experience the same unrivalled buzz Rishika felt all those years ago?

From this, Sole Circle UK was born.

### **Support from world-leading brands**

It began to take shape in January 2021, when well-established retailer Offspring offered budding entrepreneurs the chance to put forward ideas, with the winning entrant getting to work with Nike to turn it into a reality.

[Rishika's idea was chosen and incubated by Nike](#), seeing her work closely with a clutch of talented people to create a campaign to launch Sole Circle UK into the community.

In April 2021, Sole Circle UK hosted a virtual sneaker cleaning session with pioneering shoe care brand Jason Markk, in which 200 sneakerheads attended and gave their pre-loved shoes some much needed TLC. This then resulted in Sole Circle UK making their very first load of sneakers to Shoe Aid.

The following month, Sole Circle UK created its first donation box as well establishing a retail partnership with Offspring, who housed the donation box in their concession within the legendary Selfridges retail store in Oxford Street, London.

October 2021 saw Sole Circle UK officially become a community interest company (CIC) and expand their partnerships even more by [onboarding retailer END Clothing](#).

Rishika also believes that Sole Circle UK has made a positive and influential difference.

“We have enabled a large community of footwear collectors to stop and think about the life-changing impact they could have on someone living in shoe poverty,” she says.

“Plus, we have seen other large brands in the community step up in the name of shoe poverty, such as Crep Project, the largest sneaker-cleaning brand on the market, who are now donating sneakers to Shoe Aid. It warms my heart.”

### **Making a life changing difference**

Sole Circle UK has already received rapturous praise, with Shoe Aid thankful to Rishika for helping them.

“As a footwear charity, this partnership has been pivotal, providing a platform to receive donations of trainers. These are now being used to support young teenagers and young adults who are experiencing real difficulties at home, as well as financially,” says Andy Hughes, Chairman of Shoe Aid.

“The difference these donations make is considerable, almost life changing. It takes people away from crime and puts them onto a path to a better life with good opportunities. The whole Sole Circle UK community has really come together to help Shoe Aid deliver its mission.”

In the summer of 2022, Rishika entered [the inaugural STEAM Hatchery competition](#), an intensive ten-week programme for BCU students and graduates that saw participants have to develop a business plan with the support of leading mentors. The winners would receive funding and a space in [the STEAMhouse Pre-Incubator](#), a space for student and graduate entrepreneurs.

“The STEAM Hatchery gave me an opportunity to look at my business from a clear lens and decide what I wanted it to be. It pushed me to think about areas of business I wouldn’t normally think about and inspired me to grow my vision for the business,” Rishika explains.

“From the programme, I have gained so many skills and become a more well-rounded person.”

The competition saw Rishika have to present Sole Circle UK to a panel of judges, comprised of leading business professionals from some of the UK’s most established businesses, as well as devise a comprehensive and persuasive business plan.

When the competition came to an end, Rishika was chosen as one of the winners.

“Being an ethnic minority individual and coming from an underprivileged background is never an easy starting point, but the determination and grit I displayed when presenting the story of Sole Circle UK to the judges was likely the reason I became a finalist,” she explains.

“Sole Circle UK is at the very beginning of its impact and we are an organisation that will create a circular economy of service through the work that we do.”

2023 will see Rishika focus on the next stage of the company’s growth plan, which will include creating a suite of events and workshops for their community, increase the number of retail partnerships and donation boxes, and continue to support Shoe Aid with donations.

Whatever the outcomes, you can be sure that Rishika will continue to step up to help those in need to feel invincible.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

<https://www.bcu.ac.uk/architecture-and-design/news-and-events/blogs/sneakerheads-clean-up-with-sole-circle-uk>

Instagram - <https://www.instagram.com/thescuk/>