

Ep. 74: Letting Fear Fuel You with Kathy Thomas

Leah: Welcome to Her Story of Success, a podcast featuring stories from influential women trailblazers and business leaders who have defined & pursued their own versions of success and fulfillment. We hope these stories, lessons learned, and celebrations inspire you to believe in yourself and enjoy your own journey a little more.

Kathy: You can create a great experience for people and that will trump all of your, your shortcomings. And that helped me go, you know what, I'm going to be scared shitless to do this, but I'm going to figure it out.

Leah: I'm Leah Glover Hayes, your host and CEO of Her Story of Success Women's Business Collective.

Kathy: People are like, 'Oh, you're so confident,' but it's really more like, fear drives me. I might not be the best at it, but like, I'm willing to give it a shot. I live with kind of that motto very heavily.

Leah: On today's show, I have the honor of interviewing my friend Kathy Thomas. Kathy is the owner of Kathy Thomas Photography, a global brand that shoots celebrity and luxury weddings, corporate events and family portraits. But I got to know Kathy because she's also the founder of Collective615, Nashville's first coworking space for women.

Kathy: This reflects me as a woman, and this is, this is who we are. And we are as equally as deserving as the next person to have a space that 100% speaks to us.

Leah: If you follow us on any of the socials you know how much I love Collective615. It is the most beautiful space filled with fellow creative women business owners and an incredible energy that is both 'Get Shit Done' and 'Enjoy the Journey.' It is a place to work that is not your home so you can get things done and have interaction with other women going through the same struggles, that can provide resources, inspiration and collaboration.

Kathy has had an incredible career journey, starting in retail and working her way up to corporate offices of luxury brands like Louis Vuitton. She's an expert at taking calculated risks, from starting her photography business to building a new kind of coworking space when she had no experience in either of those industries. As you listen to our conversation, I encourage you to think of someone who you could share this episode with that needs some inspiration, and maybe a little bit of 'get shit done.'

Welcome Kathy Thomas to Her Story of Success. We are excited to have you today.

Kathy: Thanks for having me on, and thank you to your audience for tuning in.

Leah: Absolutely. So you and I have known each other for only a few months, but it feels like a few years because as soon as I met you, I fell in love with you and just who you are as a person and your hustle and the way that you work. And so for our woman listening, who is Kathy Thomas, cause you have a couple of businesses. So I want to share the vastness of who you are as a business woman.

Kathy: Thank you. Um, wow, vastness. That's a lot of space to fill. Let's see how I can do. I own global photography brand, so it's Kathy Thomas Photography, based out of here in Orlando, Florida. Mainly we do weddings, corporate events — when corporate events were a thing — and a lot of family, kids, you know, kind of the works. We're photographers first and foremost. And then we happened to just specialize in weddings. So, I have that brand with a team of powerful and talented photographers behind me.

And then I opened up Collective615 this year, which is Tennessee and Nashville's first coworking space for women.

Leah: Which is amazing. And that's how I came to know you. Let's talk a little bit about Collective615, because that's where I came into the story. And I want to share with the listener what it is, and I think why it's important. So Collective615 to me is this beautiful, magical place. It's a coworking space for women, but I love that every detail was thought through you have all the things that you need in a coworking space, but it's also this beautiful welcoming environment that you can just feel like safe and at home. And I don't use that word home lightly because I think it's a level of comfortability, but it's also beautiful. and I'm one of those people, like, I like things to be pretty. I have flowers on my desk. I have a candle lit, but, um, just tell us a little bit about, like, why did you create Collective615, and maybe what was the need that you saw that you were fulfilling?

Kathy: Well, I mean, why Collective615, you know what, I left on this, you know, a corporate job with a luxury retail brand. And I thought, 'You know, I'm gonna go work for myself and you know, I'd had a daughter, so some people in my field, would kind of some traditionally go, 'Oh, well I want to work from home so I have more time with my kids.'" By the way that's also delusional, because if you are starting a brand and think you're going to spend more time with your family, you're going to spend a lot more time in your business. So plug into your friends who have done the journey and like learn from them. So I kind of thought that though, too, like, at least if I'm going to work this hard, I'm going to be my own boss. I'm going to be the one who allows me time off. I want to own my time. And I also wanted to leave a legacy for my daughter. I am a workaholic, there's no secret behind that. People know it. So I thought if I work this hard, I want to do it for myself. And I knew that was even going to be more hard,

but I'm, again, a workaholic and I'm not afraid of like, people sometimes think the word hustle is a bad word, but I really feel like we're all hustling in life in one way or another. And it just plays out differently in everyone's story.

So when I went to go work from home, it was amazing at first. You know, I had a pool and I would go eat lunch out by my pool and lay out for a minute. And then like the structure started changing, and I was responsible for my own schedule, and I started losing structure and discipline. And then I started missing that, you know, I don't know if I can really explain that feeling, but I always equate it to this. You know when you're at the gym and you're on the treadmill and you just don't want to be on the treadmill. And you're like, 'Oh, if I have to go one more step,' but then someone gets on the treadmill beside you. And for me, it's always like someone older and more fit.

Leah: Yes!

Kathy: She's like, just got me by a few years. If she's on it, then I'm going to stay. And then you get into their pace and forget why you wanted to get off.

Leah: Yes. And that makes you want to go harder.

Kathy: So when that happened, I started missing community. And I am extrovert, and I realize a lot of photographers are not, they're usually introverts, but I really started missing community. I missed having someone to help pace myself. Does that make sense?

Leah: And like pace yourself against, too.

Kathy: Okay. Yes. But even just a sounding board, someone where I'm like, 'Hey, does this make sense?' You know, like when you're in office, you're like, 'Hey, does this make sense?' 'And you've been sitting on it for about 15 minutes too long and someone goes, 'Absolutely.' And that's all you needed to move on to the next, I really missed that.

So other things that had kind of taken place and I'll kind of be quick with it, but like, you know, I was the person, of course, I set up my office in my dining room, because I had a formal dining room and no one really comes in in. So that was my office and it was in a separate space, which was nice, but between the kitchen and the front door, and I'd go make lunch and I'd leave my stuff for lunch out. Cause I'd be like, 'Oh, I need to get back to an email or I need to get back to a call and I'll do that later. Or I'll do laundry and I'll do that later.' And at the end of the day, I was just doing a lot of housework that I didn't do throughout the day. And things were backpiling. I just felt like I started failing it, like being a mom per se, and like having a home and all this stuff. And I was like, 'well, this is not a good feeling.' Like my daughter was like 'Mom, you're always on the computer.' And I'm like, 'but I'm not.' But if I was making dinner

and I was like, 'Oh, I need to check email real quick.' I'd go check an email. And so I was always constantly attached to that office right next to the room.

So quickly afterwards, I was like, you know, I can't do this. I need to hold myself responsible. And you know, I want to get out of my yoga pants. Like some people love that, but like, I was excited to be like, I want to wear hot pink in my electric green earrings today. Like, I love that sense. I love showing up for yourself. And believe me, I am one who will easily stay in pajamas the entire day, so don't get that wrong, but I just missed showing up, and maybe it's from, cause I came from fashion.

And so I quickly moved into a space with like five other people. So that was my first coworking experience was in a little small house, in a little business district with five people. And I thrived. Not only from business to business referrals, but it was, you know, it was building my business. There's a lot, I didn't know. And I was with other seasoned people that I could ask them questions like, 'Hey, do you pay for this tax? Or do you have a lawyer that I can talk to? Or do you know where I can get this document?' And so I was getting results just like this. Like you can Google it all, but honestly, in a world where there's so much noise, and you could buy \$79.99 workshop templates, everything, sometimes it's so much that you don't really lean into it because you're just overwhelmed. So I did that soon after, um, I was there for about four years. I tried purchasing that place cause I just loved the concept, but that didn't work out.

So I ended up moving into a community space, much like the LNL Marketplace where Collective615 exists. And when that happened, that opened up the doors to a broad spectrum of opportunity, because now I wasn't only amongst five individuals that were in my industry. I was in an entire building with publishers, other photographers, real estate developers, catering companies, restaurants, wine bars, like this whole experience opened up and it was very much a marketplace. But the other thing that made it better for me, from a life standpoint, is my life started to get better personally, too.

Leah: Oh yeah. Because you were able to go somewhere be like, I'm working and then you come home like Stella, your daughter, Stella knows like mom's home and she's hanging out with me or doing dinner.

Kathy: 100% My husband he'd be like, 'Hey, I'm like, I have to work late, but you know what, why don't you meet me here? And we'll go to dinner downstairs and have a date at the end of it.' So I just, it started making me better. If my friends had a birthday, you know, when I started my own business, like I used to be the best gifter of friends. And then it started to be like, I'm in the driveway for the birthday party. And I'm like ordering on Amazon to have something shipped.

Leah: I've done that so many times

Kathy: I hope a lot of people can relate to that. Cause I used to like be so well thought out about gifting and this also changed it. Like I'd be able to walk downstairs and grab a great plant and grab a nice gift and leave for the day. And then show up at an event with something, cause it was in the same building.

Leah: Yeah. And I love where you put LNL because as a woman business owner, we all are also busy and I hate that word busy. But when I think about it, I love that there's a yoga studio. There is a place to get your hair done. There's a place that your nails done across the street is, um, Happily Gray and Living with Landyn and there's Made in Tennessee. And there's this popcorn bar, Five Daughter's Donuts, which I get every time I go, I need to talk about that because it's dangerous. And there's free parking. So I think that, you know, when you think about making someone's life better, and I believe that's what you're doing, I have already, like, as I was working at Collective615 and realized, Oh my gosh, I've got to get a gift. And literally walked across the street, bought a pair of earrings, she wrapped them up, and I had that and I could go and I took donuts. And it's like, wow, it's not just that I have this coworking space in this area. Yeah. But I feel like the whole area is about helping women be better and enjoy it. It's a beautiful space. There's something about this beautiful space. So let's talk a little bit about how you got here, because you, like you said, you started in luxury. So let's talk about what your career looked like before you decided to jump, to pursue your dreams. Cause you went on like a 180.

Kathy: So I had the same career path, so I knew what I was supposed to do. It's not like what I went to school for. It's not what I thought. I, but I started working in retail with the Gap as a like 20 something year old. I loved the flexibility. I loved managing people, I loved the responsibility. I loved obviously being able to buy clothes, a discount, like who doesn't. And I chose it in a time where I thought I was gonna always be in like broadcasting communication.

Leah: Is that what you went to school for?

Kathy: It is. Yeah, but I didn't graduate. This is a big secret that a lot of people don't know. I left my senior year, so I was doing broadcast and communication. And I just had to supplement my income, and I went into retail and I just, I loved it. You know, again, I loved the staff. I loved the training, the development, the talent acquisition. I loved all of it. And so I started with The Gap. I then transitioned from The Gap and went to work for Lucky Brand Jeans. Which was like a dream job because I grew up on like the story brand of Lucky Brand. I just, I loved it. So I went to work for them, and shortly after being with them, they moved me to the Northeast, to Philly to run the mid Atlantic and I was young. I was 25, 26. And so I was running part of the East Coast for them. I loved that role. I loved having different territories, understanding the

different markets, understanding the different employees in those markets, the clientele.

Shortly after that, then they moved me to Manhattan. And I covered the East Coast for them. So I had the stores up and down the East Coast and I loved it again, more, more stores, more responsibility. I loved driving gross margins. Like everything was just really in my wheelhouse, and I truly through working for Lucky Brand became an expert in the field of multi-store retail.

Um, worked for them for a long time and I loved it. Yeah. It's one of those things where you never thought you'd leave and we still joke like those were the good days. Cause we still, even though it was under Liz, Inc. We were opening, Juicy Couture, Kate Spade was opening at the time. We're all in the same, under the same umbrella, which was amazing. And I was in Manhattan, right, the corporate office, like, so there's just so much activity. We still had a strong affiliation with the owners.

And then I decided, I don't even know, like the crossroads. It was a very hard decision. I think I cried for a week when I left lucky brand and I went for an interim, I did operations for a luxury brand called Intermix. And it was still when it was held by private owners. And I found out that I did not belong behind a desk for 50 hours a week. So I went into operations for North America and I sat behind a desk and I was like, 'Whoa. Yeah, this is not where I'm supposed to be.' And so, um, I made a big jump, and I went to work for Louis Vuitton covering their stores in Manhattan, Saks, Macy's and I loved it.

Leah: What do you think you learned the most from, I mean, you started at 20, 20 something and then before you start your own company, you're working for Louis Vuitton, one of like the most iconic luxury brands there is. When you look at like all of those lessons that you've learned, what are the things that you think were the most important that maybe you took with you into your own business?

Kathy: Oh, that's a good question. I would say from Lucky Brand Jeans, I took the sense of comradery and talent acquisition for sure. Like surround yourself with the best, hire up.

Leah: What do you mean by that? What do you mean when you say, when you say hire up?

Kathy: Hire up would be more along the lines of hire someone that you feel is more qualified than you. So we talk about imposter syndrome a lot, so it's not in that kind of wheelhouse. It's more in like, 'You know what I know where my strengths are. I know where my opportunities are and a lot of our opportunities we can work on it, but you really can't change them.'

Leah: Right.

Kathy: And so for me, it was really like, how do I create a balance and always have a balance in my life, but also have people around me that push me and make me uncomfortable on a regular basis? And it's not always a good thing. I'll be honest, like it's way to live really uncomfortably, but you tend to get really phenomenal results and the reward is the discomfort.

So I did that a lot with Lucky Brand. I was also put in a lot of very challenging positions at a young age where majority of my team was older than me. So I would say that was my biggest one. And then with Louis Vuitton, it was culture. You know, brand integrity and culture was really, really big. And I often joke about smoke and mirrors. Like it can be falling apart in the back of house. It could be putting out fires, burning your computer monitor. But you can have all these things going on, but you know, if you really have the front of house zipped up and the experience is happening for others, like you can handle all of that when the front of house is all pulled together.

Leah: I love that. I feel like I can see where you've done some of those through Collective615 right? Because it's not just about making something beautiful. I feel like you do have such a good foundation, and there's this like confidence when you walk in that area that I don't know, you might be dealing with stuff on the backside, but you don't make anybody that walks in that door feel it. Does that make sense? Like you've done well, taking that through.

Kathy: I wanted to take my interview, do our interview in Collective today, but we'd actually had a pretty full house. And full for us is not, you know, everyone's like over six feet apart and everything like that, but I didn't want to take away from people interrupting, and unless I like hide in a corner and then you wouldn't get the visual aesthetics of it.

Leah: Well, then will be our next interview. Our next interview will be Collective615.

Kathy: Cool. And you and I together, which would be great. So I would say that's the biggest thing I took from them. And then another thing I took from them, which I think was the biggest thing that drove me to leave and start a photography brand, when I was untrained, never been a photographer before never shot really a camera, didn't know all the programs and systems, didn't know about creating a business model. I know how to run a business for someone else and implement their practices and adhere to them and hold them accountable. But I didn't know how to do it myself. One of the things that Louis Vuitton taught me was, you don't have to have it all together to be the best. I mean, and I mean, there's like some shock factors, like when I started with Louis Vuitton in 2006-7, leaning into a recession, they didn't have a clientele program. In 2007. So I rolled out the clientele, like actually physically created

established it, put it together, a clientele book that did not exist. And I only knew that from my previous career. So I also implemented their supply chain. They didn't have a supply chain system. Every manager just ordered from Staple on their own accord. So I implemented a supply chain, one source DDS, shippers supplier, deliver. Yeah, because I love like, I love problem solving. That's my thing. And I always love it going, wait, where's the void and how do we fix that? And hopefully it can save people money, but also make life just better for people. Those were my two longest stints with Lucky Brand Jeans and Louis Vuitton. And that's really what I took. But I think one of the biggest things, what I learned at Louis Vuitton and it's so funny, cause I never really talked about Louis Vuitton, I just live it at, it's just a luxury brand, was that you can create a great experience for people and that will trump all of your, your shortcomings. And that helped me go, you know what, I'm going to be scared shitless to do this, but I'm going to figure it out. You know, I know I want to give an amazing customer service and just, wow my clients at all times, and create a good environment for them. All the rest I can figure out. And so I ran, I mean, believe me, I am very driven by fear. Like. People are like, 'Oh, you're so confident,' but it's really more like, fear drives me. Like, it's kind of like the fuel, the fire for me.

Leah: Let's talk, talk about that a little bit. So when you say that you live in fear or you operate in fear, I think that's what we talked about offline. What does that look like for you? Cause I want the person listening to maybe hear what that looks like from you. And then I might talk a little bit about what it means for me, because it's powerful, right? Because it can stop somebody from doing something or it can propel you forward, or you know, when you move past it there's power in like, overcoming that. So what does that maybe look like as you were starting Kathy Thomas photography, and or what that looks like when you, or starting Collective615? Cause both of them, you didn't have any experience in either one of these before you started those businesses.

Kathy: You're correct. And I did. Like my friends and people in my, in my inner circle always say like, you don't fail at anything. I keep a big safety net though, which people don't see. I have a ginormous safety net, but things where I look at myself and I'm like, okay, I'm healthy. I'm capable. I'm smart. I think I can do that. Like I think I can try that. I might not be the best at it, but like, I'm willing to give it a shot. I live with kind of that motto very heavily.

I also kind of look at people and I say like, 'Leah, you know what? You were in HR, you worked for a corporation. You probably didn't know a lot about podcasts before you started in it. But you had Google, you had a phone, you could call somebody, you can email someone, you followed the trends, you know, you can follow people that are, are, that you feel are crushing it at it from the outside and you figure it out.' Like, I think that's the biggest thing is like, we get so paralyzed by fear and believe me there's times I'm paralyzed by fear. Absolutely. Having a second child, like I was so scared to have a second child, I didn't. And I kind of have a little regret of doing it, but

I was scared to see what kind of mom I would be with two kids. I love who I am with one.

I really love who I am and with one, but I was scared that two would not make me the mom I wanted to be wow. Like it would push me to get angry and I'm not an angry person. It would make me have a short fuse, I'm not a short fuse person, but there was highlights I've seen in people where I'm like, 'Hmm that's cause you have two.'

Leah: Maybe they're just angry.

Kathy: Plus, I feel like God gave us Stella and she is so perfect for us. I don't know if I want to see what option two looks like and I'm nothing like my sibling, so I figured I got one shot and it was a good one. And I'm going to just keep that, but it was really fear

Leah: That kept you from having another child. Wow. I would've never known that about you. Let's talk a little bit about what that you said, you, you operate with a safety net and I kind of feel the same way. When you started Kathy Thomas Photography. What did the safety net look like? Do you mean just financially or like with your support system? Like what does that look like for you?

Kathy: Um, I think it shows up in a lot of different ways. So my safety net is 'okay, if this fails, I can go back to retail.' You know, I left at the peak of my career. You know, when I left people thought it was not true. They were like, 'no, wait, where are you going?' I was like, 'I'm going to be a photographer.' They're like, 'no, you're not. Who's recruiting you. Where are you going?' I was like, 'no, I'm going to be a photographer.' And they're like, we've never even seen you do it, like, do you even know how to do photography? Like, no, but I'm going to learn. Cause I have this passion and I don't want to live my life going back and going, why didn't I give that a try? Here's the thing. What I realized a little bit later on after being with Lucky Brand Jeans and thinking I would stay with them forever. Until I realized I worked for people, not companies and the people I worked for at Lucky Brand left, and then going to Louis Vuitton. I really thought I would die with Louis Vuitton. And so what I realized was that I didn't know either one of those things when I joined them. So I was like, why can't I train myself to do this? Like, I'm one of those people, if I, if I fail at this, and not saying this is not a job of integrity, but like I can go be a barista at Starbucks. There is nothing in me that is too proud to say, if I have to support my family, and I am the number financial support for my family, my husband obviously has a career. It's just afford our lifestyle still as education. All of that, I am not too proud to say, there's something else I could do right now.

Leah: Yeah. And I think that's really important. One of the people that mentors me, he doesn't know it, but I listen to him. Um, Tim Ferris, it was actually something that affected me and my husband is that, you know, he always talks about 'what is the worst thing that could happen. And take that all the way through,' like when you were leaving Louis Vuitton, like what is the worst thing that happened? Okay, awesome.

You fail at being a photographer. Great. You can go get another job you can go back to. And that's what Josh and I talk about all the time. I mean, I've had Her Story of Success for a couple of years and I'm still like, what if no one, one else ever purchases anything from Her Story of Success. If this completely fails, I have to let go of all of my people and I have to shut down my business. And I was like, oh my gosh, that would be the worst thing. He's like, but what would you actually do? And I was like, I would probably call Insperity and ask if I could have my job back. And he's like, do you think they would hire you? I was like in a second. Right? Like I can go get another job. I know that I am marketable in those things. So when you said that it, I loved that. And I think that's something that, you know, I know people call you all the time asking for mentorship and guidance all the time. And that's one thing that I always say is like, if you're thinking about trying something, truly what is the worst thing that could happen? Play that out and make a decision if you can do that or not. And I love too that you said it's not like you're trying things that you don't think that you'll be good at. That's one thing Richard Branson would always say is like, yes, I look like I'm this super risky person he's like, but I am taking like, calculated risks. This isn't like, I'm not jumping off and seeing if I can actually like build a plane while I fall down. It's you know, and I feel like that's something that, that you do as well. It's like, yeah, you might not have had, you know, anything to do with coworking spaces previously, but you had Google and you saw, you saw some things that you're like, 'Oh, I think that I can do that too.'

So let's talk about starting Collective615, but I want to kinda wanna wrap up on, on Kathy Thomas photography, because I don't think people understand your level yet. And I want you to brag for just a second because you're so cool. Tell us some of the cool places that you have shot, like you said, global, and you just kind of brush past that, but like, but truly like where are some of these places that you with no formal education, self-taught photographer, where have you been hired to go? And if you can tell anybody that's hired you, you might have NDAs. I don't know.

Kathy: To add to that. Cause I think some people don't understand that when I say like, I haven't been taught, I do want to, like, I have a guy, Aaron Ban, amazing food photographer. I have a friend Daniel Kuykendall. They are my lifeline. Like when I say I'm self taught, like, I could never go in and technically teach someone how to operate gear. I know how I want it to operate for me, but I literally have lifelines where like, in a moment, if I hit something wrong on my camera and it takes a lot to do this, but it's happened, I am calling them, 'Oh my goodness. I did something to my camera. This isn't happening. What do I do,' and they're like 'Kathy fix this.' So like, I it's my work around. I could never teach people. People are like, 'you should teach people photography.' Yeah. Like if someone hands me their camera, like if someone hands me a Canon, I look at it and it's literally like someone just asked me to speak German, and I'm like, I don't know what to do with your Canon camera. I shoot Nikon.

And I, and they're like, I know, but cameras are the same. I'm like, they're not. So let's just add that.

But I do have an eye for it. I love architecture. So I play architecture into a lot of my work. Cause I feel like when a client hires me either commercially or for a wedding or for family, and they pick an environment to stage themselves in, that environment is important to them. So I want that environment to play into their imagery, but I don't want it to be the forefront of their imagery. So I think in my style, it has welcomed me into a broad spectrum of clientele because I play into it, but I make them the important factor. I love that. So, I mean, yeah, to brag, some of the amazing places I've been, and I mean, I can't say one's better than the other, but I did get to spend a week in Italy the year before last on Amalfi coast. And so that was incredible. And there's so many reasons behind it, like she found me on Instagram from a post where she wore the Inez DeSanto, runaway finale gown. It's unbelievable. I shot that runaway finale gown going down with Inez standing beside me. So this was very personal to me. So when she posted it was going to be her wedding dress, I was like, 'dear God, please send me a bride that wears a stress and she messaged me and said, your prayers have an answer, please call me.'

Leah: Oh my gosh.

Kathy: And she's actually the reason I'll be back in Italy next year, um, with a referral from her doing a wedding Amalfi coast. So that was amazing. One, a girlfriend I grew up with, we weren't really friendly in high school or middle school, but we've known each other that long that she hired me in our adult life to shoot her wedding on houseboats in the Grand Canyon. And so we had a hike up to the top of things. Yeah. So really cool stories. Her second marriage, she had battled breast cancer, like just really, really cool things.

I mean, Jamaica, we go to Golden Eye, which is where Ian Fleming wrote the 007 series. I love that I love shooting in his garden. I think there's just so much history and story in his bedroom with the windows, like his desk, where he actually drafted and typed and wrote on is where I usually shoot the couples like details. There's just a lot of history that's great to that. And Chris Blackwell owns it now, which is like, you know, Amy Winehouse's agent and everything, and Bob Marley and stuff. So that's really intriguing to me. I have been to Ireland and shot in a destructed castle, which is really, really amazing. And I actually got shoot both of those sisters' weddings one was in their dad's backyard. And then the next year I got to go to Ireland with their entire family and they invited my husband to come.

Leah: That's amazing.

Kathy: Yeah. So I've been to some great places and I've been lucky enough to shoot people like Katherine McVey, Kristen Chenoweth, John Legend.

Leah: I love Kristin Chenoweth!

Kathy: I do too. She was a really, really incredible person. We've got to shoot Martha Stewart, Josh Groban, Rascal Flatts,

Leah: are these all weddings or just different things?

Kathy: These are all like either a private concert series, Dirks Bentley, which is kind of cool. Our kids, go to school together, who else?

And then I have like a lot of just really majority of my clients are everybody like me and you, like, they're not, I'm fortunate enough to have some celebrity or professional athletes. I have, you know, some of my proudest moments are having professional athletes that hire me two to three times a year, Ricky Weeks' family hires me a couple of times a year and has for the last four years, I love that they trust me to come into their home and they trust me with their family. I don't share a lot of it because I feel like they're so in the public eye, that that is their privilege and their right to share. I don't have non-disclosures, but I just respect that.

So stuff like that. And I just have a lot of respect for like, I believe I don't need to show that work to gain work. And sometimes I'm really excited to share it because I'm just genuinely starstruck, excited, but I feel like there's also a respect level, so thank you. But I just, I love what I do. Um, and so I think some people are confused, so that is my full time career and I'm full time at it today and I run Collective, but as a solo owner.

Leah: Right? So that's interesting. So Kathy Thomas Photography is how you make your money and Collective615 is maybe where you want to leave

Kathy: It's where I fill my heart up.

Leah: Where you fill your heart up and where you want to leave your legacy. But I love that. Like you, you love your full time job, it is your own thing, and you started your own side hustle while doing your own job. So I just, I think sometimes what gets women stuck that come to me and, and talk to me is just that there's so much unsurity and like doubt of themselves. And I love what you've done is you started your own company. And then you saw another void in the marketplace and said, this is something that I'm personally passionate about, so I want to do something about it. So talk to me about, um, starting Collective615. So you've already got Kathy Thomas Photography, obviously doing very well for yourself. Like you said, you sustain your lifestyle. And, you know, that includes sending your daughter to private school, but what made you decide to take a larger risk and self-funding and starting, Collective615, a beautiful coworking space for women.

Kathy: I mean, if we want to talk about like the sleepless nights and the throwing up from my nerves or some more exciting parts and me being like, how am I going to pay for this and finding Pinnacle Bank who literally let me borrow against everything I own. So, when I moved to Nashville, I honestly, I was blown away by the number of solopreneurs that were here. Like people really like, so many private businesses. Like, I mean, if there's a reason for you to shop at a mega brand, I would be shocked because there's so many local businesses here that provide everything. Yeah. And I don't know, I just, I found that really fascinating. So I obviously I started like, kind of looking into like, tell me more about this. And at that time, you know, Nashville is obviously the largest growing city in North America. Then there's also that we are one of the top cities for female entrepreneurs. I mean, like when I moved here, we were like top 10. Now I think we're top three or like roughly in that top 10. And so I had moved into a coworking space, it wasn't right for my brand, but it was a great address. You know, a Hillsboro Village area. It was a great address. It wasn't right for my brand. I slowly was like, 'okay, this place isn't reflective of me. I got it for the zip code area code. I will not lie because I was like, I'm new to the market, but it looks like I have a place here and it was cheap and everything.' Then I moved into a creative space and I'm not one to move. In the entire time I was in Florida, I had two offices. I moved into a creative space, which was amazing. And I met some of the most beautiful individuals who are running businesses and hustling and had beautiful businesses plans. But again, it was so creative, it definitely didn't reflect my clientele or my brand. And I was like, 'something's got to give,' so I moved into like your typical big box mega coworking spaces. And I loved it. I was like, 'this is brilliant.' Like talk about having a Mecca of talent and drive and peer groups and energy around you. But over time I started seeing loopholes in it, and a lot was I thought it's not cheap. First of all, parking and all these big mega brands is expensive, especially in a city where parking is like \$180 per person. I'm a team of two, the community space is like \$400 a month. So that's not even including an office, which we were always on wait for an office because there was such a waiting list, but I love the energy and I loved the model. And as I worked in these for a year, here in Nashville, they were dominated by men.

Leah: Yes.

Kathy: And I was like, this is so interesting. And I, I've never been like, like I'm not a man hater. My husband is my biggest cheerleader. It was more that I thought, wow, these are really beautiful spaces. They're very masculine. And like, they're very heavy male makeup, but the small things started getting to me. So it was like the expensive parking. And then like coming out of the elevator building to eat downtown \$25 for lunch, like all these things I thought, 'wow, this leaves a big void for like the starter business. Or the woman who's working from home and her company's only giving our like \$200 allowance to do her office.' So maybe she's really decorated up a room in our house, but honestly, she's still mixing her workspace in her home space. And I

just think that's wrong. So as I was spending time in this, I was watching people come in and do their tours. Cause I was always in the common space, and I never once had a man come in and do a tour and all my time never once, yet the population of the members was dominated by men. And it hit me one night, we did a big, um, networking event and it was like after hours, they did like wine and beer and we're all standing around. And there was 56 of us cause we had to play a game and six were women.

Leah: And you saw all those women coming for tours, but people not signing up.

Kathy: Yes. And then I thought, okay, I, as a woman, I see all the things that would turn them off the expensive parking. The no accessibility to food, to fitness, to any, you know what I mean, things that would make their life easier. And I had always kind of dreamed of having a place like Easton Market, which is where my business was in Orlando. And so I was like, you know what? I need to make a space for women who are having this challenge, and I need to make it affordable and I need to make it so great that like, they would feel really proud to run their business out of that space.

Leah: So why start it yourself and take on all that risk and the scary part and the hard part? Why do it yourself instead of bringing in more people? What was it that you believed in that made you say, 'I want to do this,' when you already had a business, you already had a successful thriving business. What, what was the and instead of the or?

Kathy: I mean, it was tough. We had a lot of investors step up a lot and I want to thank all of you. Cause a lot of them were my friends that were willing to invest in me a hundred percent split it. And they really raised their hand and was like, I want to invest in this. Like I believe in you. And I believe in this model, I think I believed in it, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure it would work and I was not willing to put other people's finances or reputation on the line, if it didn't work. So there's that fear. And that crippled me, like the idea, like, if I fail, I own it. It is me. It will suck, but it is me. And I will figure out a way to get on the other side of it. If it's other people's integrity, belief, finances, I didn't know how I would be able to recover that.

Leah: Wow.

Kathy: So as I was talking to friends and I was like, Oh my goodness, it means so much to me. Like you would, you would front this and you'll do this. And you do that. I just thought I need to do this one on me. There is a day I will obviously make a financial advancement because of it, but it's nowhere in the near future, which I'm completely okay with. Um, this is longterm for me, so that was really hard. And it's still hard today, I will say. Cause I wish like, I think we could grow faster. I think we could grow better. We can have employees and then obviously no one could have known the fate of a global pandemic, and in the pandemic, I reached out to a lot of solo owned, or actually they even had investors too, female owned coworking spaces

across the country. And a lot of them are closing and they're like, I have to close. A lot of them had investors. And they were like, you know, we brought on five employees, we did this, this, this, and we just can't sustain it. And I was like, I will work as much as I have to for that, not to be the case. And I thought I'm so glad I didn't do that, but there will be a day I need to, because I do want to grow them up. Right. It's, it's made to be grown.

So it was scary. I was brave enough, I did crowdfund \$65,000 of the build out, which was great. And then I also, we got sponsorships. So West Business Interiors came in with a huge sponsorship for a furniture. And then National Office Furniture, which is their partner came in and did all custom office furniture for me. So everything is blush pink, crushed velvet, all of it. Fabrics. I wanted it to be really girly, but on a luxury, I wanted it to be almost like a, an office speakeasy. Where it was like rich in color textures, leathers, everything's black, not a touch of wood in the entire space. That was very key to me, except for the ceiling that nothing could be wood. It all had to be so feminine that any woman would be proud to bring their client to it and say, this is my office space. This reflects me as a woman, and this is, this is who we are. And we are as equally as deserving as the next person to have a space that 100% speaks to us.

Leah: I love that.

Kathy: And so the functionality was very big. Like our kitchen is very large. We have nitro brew on tap. Now we have wine, beer coolers. You could store your own stuff. We have a 12 foot Island for catering, telephone booth rooms, a private room for if you have to breast pump, cause I had to do it in an office with a camera above my head for a long time. Breakout rooms that are complimentary, like so that we, if you're starting your business, you can meet with your clients without having to rent a room, big conference rooms that are really beautiful, that you would just be proud to bring an entire team into. So all of those things were really important to kind of give back to women what they deserve. Because already starting your own businesses bold enough. And I just really believe that your business should reflect your brand, and your home is not that.

Leah: I love that. And it's a beautiful space to do branding photos. Just saying, I may have had that done.

Kathy: Yes, it is. I mean, we've been lucky. A lot of celebrities have shot in there for record cover albums. Keeda was in there yesterday. She's running right now for office. So a lot of people come in there because it's so beautiful. And it has that girl power. Yeah. But it's also really elegant.

Leah: I love it.

Kathy: And it's furniture you can't get anywhere else. Like no one else is doing that kind of customer office furniture. So it was important for me to that like lumbar support legs support, like, I want you to feel like in the office, not in your home, in an office building, I want you to feel that empowerment of this is my office.

Leah: I love it. I did notice the last time I was in there, which I don't know why. I just noticed this, that the table, I sit at our whiteboards and you have dry erase markers. And I was like, that's kinda smart. So anyway, I think you just thought of like all the little things. So I want to take a few minutes and talk a little bit about just you as a person, as you've done this. So when I see you as a woman, right, you're a business owner, you're a mom, you're a wife, but you're a woman. What are the things that are important to you? Cause I know one of the things we talked about is like, you know, your hustle. I want to give you a chance to explain like kind of why you work the way that you do and what hustle means to you and what that looks like and unapologetically, right? Like, yes, you are a mom and you love having your daughter, but you really love work. And so I want to give you a chance to talk about, like, what does hustle look like for you in relation to how you also keep a good one marriage and a good relationship with your daughter? Because you can have both, it's not going to look perfect, but you really can, and I wanted to give you a chance to kind of talk about that.

Kathy: And you can, I mean, believe me, like if you start comparing yourself to the people you see in social media and even your friends who are full-time moms, like I have friends who are full-time moms. I have a friend Simone, like she is crushing it as the full-time mom. Like she deserves like a quarter million dollar year salary. I had never seen someone do it as well as she does. And I always look at her and think, 'Wow. I should be really envious that I can't meet that mom, but I instead I'm like, that's her business model. Like that is her role.' And so mine is the juggling game. It is trying to be the best wife I can be. It is being the mom that I have had to settle into that this is the mom I am, and I need to find comfort in that. Like, I am not. A DIY mom, I am not pulling up Pinterest. I am not, you know, I am Amazon Priming it. I am scheduling a 20 minute timer on an Alexa. I mean, like 20 minutes. And I'm like into the Barbies and I'm doing Barbies for 20 minutes. And when that alarm goes off, I'm like, 'I'm out.' I am that mom. You know what I mean? And I can't say I'm always present because of that, but I, you just, I've just had to find a lot of forgiveness in myself and be like, this is my journey. And at night it might not look like other people's and often times I am envious, you know, but I also try to just really look at it and be like, 'well, what a blessing that like, I can choose to be the person that picks my daughter from school every day. And that is a choice.' Sometimes it's hard for me to do it because I can't break away from my business, but it is a choice for me. I love that I can go to every activity at school, and that is a choice for me to be able to be there. And that's how I show up as a parent. You know, it doesn't mean we sit down to dinner every night. Like I will not like, oftentimes it's like reheatable Mac and cheese,

chicken breast from yesterday. Like, there you go. But I do know that I wanted her to be able to see, like, so I had her when I was working for Louis Vuitton, and I thought, I worked a lot then because I loved what I did. And I was so nervous that she would see me working really hard for someone else, and someday I would not be happy with that. And I didn't think that was okay. So I thought, 'At least if she sees me working that hard. There will be something that I love. Like I have a burning, dying passion for, she will see me touching and, or changing other's lives.' And that was important for me, is for my daughter to be able to look at my mom and be like, 'she's a badass and it's, she's playing by her own rule book and she's not perfect, but I'm really proud of her.' So that was really, really important.

Leah: I love that. What do you think is a gift that she gets out of this? Because she is getting to meet a lot of other women, you know, I mean, she's getting to see things that other little girls don't get to see. Do you see that as, as a gift that you're giving her through this lifestyle also?

Kathy: Yes. I don't think that she will grow up ever thinking she has to rely on anyone else for her dreams come true.

Leah: Amen.

Kathy: Yeah. That's like the biggest thing for me. So like opening Collective, she kept on saying, 'Oh, well, is this my floor, mom, I'm going to have kids camps. I'm going to do all this.' And I would have let that come to fruition for her, hence if we hadn't shut down to a global pandemic, But she also, like, I still remember this. She was with me through everything. Like when we were picking out fabrics and majority of the people I was meeting with were men. And she saw me being like, 'No, I want this glass. No, I need you to come back in and redesign my kitchen. No, that's not where I want this.' And she watched Mom boss up at every level. Even if it wasn't in my wheelhouse. With contractors, there's things like I'm going to do like a whole training on this one day of like, I got our buildout contract down by a hundred thousand dollars.

Leah: What?

Kathy: Yeah. I was like, uh, yeah, this won't work for me. You got to adjust this. I want a new fit on this. We're removing this. I'll subcontract this to somebody else. This, this, this, this, and this. I was like, I will not pay these prices.

Leah: Wow. I can't wait to take that class.

Kathy: I mean, I didn't have the money, so I didn't have a choice. Mine was, this has to be different because I don't know, I have a choice. So she saw me through all that. So, which was really great at her school. They did a whole business model program. And

so they had to write a marketing plan, a business plan. They had to run a PNL. They had to run their margins and everything. And then they had to create a name, a logo, whole brand identity. Then they did a market day at school and we came in with fake money and we experienced either buying their goods and, or their service. Theirs was a salon hair and makeup, nails, massage. And you know, it was called Super Extraordinary Salon. But when we went to do it all the day, they all have their own little price list. Someone was the cashier and everyone did their services. And majority of the kids were like 50 cents a dollar. And I was like Stella, your, your lipstick application is 25 bucks. She was like, 'I know.' And I was like, 'Everyone else's services are like a dollar,' and she's like, 'I know, but I have to save, I have to pay taxes. I want an employee. Cause I can't do this alone.' She said this in school during market. And I was like, 'What? Oh, I was like, well, does that allow people to tip you?' She goes, 'Oh yeah, the tipping is going to be for my fun stuff.'

Leah: I love that she has thought that through.

Kathy: So like, I, I can't tell you what she's learned, but that really gave me a clear understanding that she is absorbing more when she hears me talking business with people than I could probably ever sit down and just teach her. Does that make sense?

Leah: Oh, absolutely.

Kathy: I think also like the biggest thing and you know, when I get interviewed a lot, I tap into it and it's, it's a piece of it, but I think it's just, it's growing to be so much more than that. It's like, I have a really talented mom, who was always controlled by my dad. And that kept her just small enough where she didn't get to live out her potential as a creative entrepreneur. I mean, she is today, right? She's building like custom dog houses right now. So she's a carpenter and she's building these ginormous dog houses that sell for like \$3000-5000. They're amazing they like. Replicate your home. Yeah, they're really cool. And they're big. That'd be moved on a trailer. And so I'm seeing her play that out now as a single mom and in her sixties. I think it's just incredible.

Leah: I love that.

Kathy: And she's not done yet. So I kind of feel like it's never too late. You're not done. I mean, unless you're in the grave, then maybe

Leah: I love that. So for our listener, what's maybe one big message that you try to get across to all the women that you mentor that come to you for guidance that are ready to chase their dreams or ready to take that next step in their journey.

Kathy: That's a two part for me. So one is, really know your, why. Because you really have to plug into that. And if your, why is someone else's why, it's not your why. Do

you know what I mean? And I see that a lot now. Well, I see what they have and I want to be like that. That's not your why.

Leah: What's your why?

Kathy: I mean, mine, mine is like a 15 minute talk, but like really deeply is to teach my daughter that no matter what, any woman should be able to stand on their own two feet and not rely on someone else to fulfill their dreams.

Leah: I love that. And she's seeing it.

Kathy: And it's nice to have someone riding shotgun, your spouse, whether wife or husband like to have someone riding shotgun is so powerful. And I hope every woman out there chasing their dreams to start a business has that cheerleader beside them. And if they don't, they should reevaluate that. That's my honest opinion. When you have that person, the journey is so much more grand. The struggles are still there, but it's just so much better to have someone riding shotgun. And it doesn't mean that they have to be in your business. I mean, my husband literally would probably show up and be like, Oh, I didn't know you were going to make this place all pink. Really? I've had swatches all over the house. You know what I mean? Like he's not plugged into my business, but he's back there being my biggest cheerleader. So one is, is really be plugged into your why, and my why is really, truly, I said it, I think since I was like 18 in any interview, if you've heard it, 'I want to leave this earth, and I want to know I made a change on one person's life for the positive.'

So plug into your why. And then I think number two is, entrepreneurship is not for the lazy or the weak at heart. So don't put yourself in ooggles and gobbles a debt. Don't think you have to go up front and buy all the best to make yourself look good. People will actually be attracted to you more if you start out very grassroots and are like, but I'm building. And I think it's too easy for people to get wrapped up into I have to look like that. I have to be that, and that will come. That is part of the journey. But if you put yourself into predicament where you cannot stand on your own two feet, it will be very hard to climb out of there.

So that's the two things is like, not be afraid to grow. Be real with yourself, have a plan. And at some point don't look for perfection, just run after it. Like I'm still figuring stuff out along the way. A girlfriend of mine said this to me the other day and I loved it, she said, Kathy, you're the only person I know that ran a photography business for three years without a website. And it's because every website developer I hired, it wasn't good enough. No, that's not right. That doesn't reflect my brand. No, that's not good enough. I just nitpicked it and refused to have a website until I realized I lost a really big celebrity client. Cause I didn't have a website. And I was like, okay, I need a website. And that's a whole other funny. So I think those are my two biggest things is like really be plugged into your why. And really be steady fast. Yeah. You know, not be afraid of the hustle. And a lot of people hate that term for me, hustle is figuring it out

when you're not equipped with all the tools or the knowhow. That is the hustle, the Google it,

Leah: I can get on that definition.

Kathy: Put yourself out there, ask for help. Do the research. That is the hustle, the hustle isn't about your client. The hustle is about the work you have to put in, whether it's at 3:00 AM, 6:00 AM, at lunch, if you have a full time career and you're doing this on your lunch break, you know, something Gary Vee always says, give yourself two years, two years to really work at like, your friends are gonna forget who you are, prepare yourself, because on the end of those two years, you'll be exactly where you want to be. Don't, don't jump in between and be sporadic with it, hunker down and put your head down and just chase that dream really hard and do that hustle time. You won't regret it, but again, it's, it's not for the weak at heart.

Leah: And it's not for the lazy. I know in our next podcast episode, we're going to talk about delegation. Cause I know that's something that's huge to you, but we didn't get to it today.

Kathy: I'm a big outsourcer. We will do a huge outsource thing.

Leah: Yes, a whole for entrepreneurs on outsourcing. Cause I'm, I'm big on that too, because you just can't do it all. Uh, where can people find you? And then, um, how do you define success today?

Kathy: Let's see, you can find us at two places. So Collective is at Collective615 on all outlets. Kathy Thomas Photography is Kathythomasphoto on Instagram, Kathy Thomas Photography, everyone else, Kathythomas.com.

And then how do I define success? I mean, I talk about this a lot, but I really feel like success is when you're at peace with the person that's looking back at you in the mirror.

Leah: That's beautiful.

Kathy: I've never said that before, but I think there's also a mirror sitting right here. I think that's it. I think that's it. I think when you can look at that person in the mirror and say, I'm trying, I'm putting my all out there. I have a grateful heart. I'm allowing myself grace and pause. I think that's the biggest one. And a lot of forgiveness. You're going to have to learn in your business to forgive yourself a lot. You can't be perfect at everything.

Leah: Do you still have sleepless nights?

Kathy: Absolutely. Yes. I mean, I wake up at 3:00 AM with like heart racing, I can't get back to bed. I love social media, but damn social media at 3:00 AM. Yeah. And it's

just, I want more of me. Like, I want to do this for my members. I want to do this for my members. I want to bring this person in. I want to educate them. I want to train them and I want to do everything and I just have to realize it is not possible. So I have to start to like really weed through. What I can really deliver on. And that's a hard thing as a pleaser and someone who likes to serve others is what can I realistically deliver on? And I still struggle with that every single day. And the saying yes, with intention, a lot of people say, I need to learn how to say no, I'm like a half full cup person. So I'm like, how do I just continue to say yes with intention? And that will get rid of the no, but, um, that's a big one for me. Yes. Lots of sleepless nights.

Leah: Same. Well, I'm so grateful to have met you to work alongside you at your beautiful space. And I look forward to our future things that we're going to do together because I feel like, not I feel like, I know our brands align so much. We've known that since we met each other.

Kathy: Thank you so much Leah, I love what you're doing.

Leah: We will chat soon.

Today's non-profit spotlight is for an organization that I care deeply about, and that's the YWCA. I served on the junior board for the YWCA of Nashville and Middle Tennessee, and I love their mission of eliminating racism, standing up for social justice and empowering women. YWCA is one of the oldest and largest women's organizations in the nation, serving over 2 million women, girls, and their families. You can learn more about how to get involved with your local chapter at YWCA.org.

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The Her Story of Success podcast is produced by women and for women. Our Executive Producer is Claire Bidigare-Curtis, and our Production Coordinator is Bronte Lebo. And I'm your host, Leah Glover Hayes. Talk to you soon!