

82. Her Story of Success in Review: Women in Fashion and Retail – Transcript

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

If you've been listening along with us for the past few months, then you probably know that we've taken time to revisit some of our favorite conversations from past interviews. In this final episode of Her Story of Success in Review, we'll be listening back to three amazing conversations I had with women in the fashion retail space. I'm confident that you will be inspired by their stories of building businesses that helped them pursue their passions while also empowering other women.

If you enjoy this episode, I encourage you to share it with a friend or peer who needs some encouragement in her own life. And whether it's your first time tuning in or you've been with us since the beginning of this podcast, I hope you enjoy this look back at some of the amazing women who have opened their hearts and shared their stories of success with us.

Maggie: I think what really connected us to this idea of doing stores for girls were the voids that existed for all of us, so quality clothing, but more importantly, a space where we could go, we could shop, we could be seen, we could find things that made us feel good. And those items, the products, the clothing, would all be delivered in a really joyful and welcoming environment by girls that all look different, but there was something about all of them that we could connect with. And the interesting thing about these stores for girls is that what I think is making them so successful for this girl, age 6 to 14, is still what I need as a grown woman. I want to go places. I want to be seen. I want to be heard. I want to see people that look like me. I want to find that connection, that sense of community. And that's been the reason I think we've been so successful, is we're fostering so much community for young girls, but also for their moms, for our team.

Leah: That was Maggie Tucker, the owner and founder of Magpies Baby and Magpies Girl. These Nashville-based boutiques provide clothing, gifts and more for babies, young girls and their families in a uniquely joyful and fun environment. Since starting

Magpies, Maggie has been featured in *Southern Living*, *Cottage Living*, and *Gift Shop Magazine*, and she won HGTV's award for top retail merchandising and design, and many local awards for being a great business owner.

Though Magpies has been a huge success, Maggie definitely faced her share of challenges before she decided to start this business. She opened up about the difficult experience of trying to start something with the wrong partner, and I think it's such a powerful reminder to keep working at your dreams even when other people doubt you.

Maggie: So I'd worked for the company for six years, managing their business, just really made it into something unbelievable in our city, super healthy financially. It was thriving. And I left, because I was asked to open up a fitness studio with a business partner. And I pursued that partnership and we did it for four months. Did not work out. I was feeling my integrity being questioned and challenged all the time. And I was kind of feeling like my moral compass was going one way, theirs going another. And yeah. I had a mentor come into my life, Beth. And Beth told me, she was like "A business partnership is like a marriage. You have to line up on every single thing. And you're not, and you need to step out of this." And it was crushing and horrible, and I felt so defeated. My former partner had also told me lots of things that were very untrue, like I did not have what it took to build a community, I did not have what it took to lead a team, I did not have what it took to own a business, operate it, run it. That I was not enough. And when you are 27 years old, you really, you believe those things, because it's a much older person was my partner. So you have this much older person with years of success, of experience in a business, telling you these things, and you really believe them. But then I also had my angel Beth, and Beth is telling me "No, like, get out of this. Like you are too good for this. Like we're getting away from this, and we will start your own business. What do you want to do?" So that was fall of 2013. And Beth is just so present in my life, and she and I started meeting pretty regularly, and she really encourages me to write a business plan for something. She's like "Anything, like, I believe in you and your work ethic and who you are as a person. And I know you have what it takes to do this. What do you want to do?" And I was like, "I've always wanted to own a baby store." And Beth was like, "Great. Write a plan for a baby store. We're opening a baby store." And I think something happened, and I don't know what it was exactly, but I did not sleep for two days. I stayed up around the clock, and I wrote a very not beautiful, no PowerPoint presentation business plan that was like fronts and backs of notebook paper. And it felt so good and it felt so right

Leah: We often talk on this podcast about the importance of working with people who align with your mission and values. But Maggie brought up another great point about mentors and investors: it's also so important to find people who believe in you and your ability to lead the business.

Maggie: I think for someone that's either looking for an angel investor or looking for a mentor, if you can find someone, maybe even that's industry specific. Beth's industry was not specific to mine, and Jackie's was retail, but not necessarily clothing gifts. But find someone that has the opportunity to really see your work in action. And they will not only believe in the work that you're able to do, they will believe in you the person. And I think if I had told Beth that I wanted to go develop a company that makes stickers, she would have been like, "Great, we're doing it," because she believed in me, the person. So anyone that's really looking to get started and they are needing funding or investing, really get someone that believes in you. Because also, like, my vision has totally changed. My first business plan was for a baby store, and we're so much more than that. And we're able to be that, not only because Beth believed in the baby store concept, but Beth believed in me the person. And whatever I decided to go after she was on board for.

Leah: Just as Maggie grew her confidence by surrounding herself with people who believed in her, she also works hard to support and invest in her employees.

Maggie: I believe and love every person that works alongside me. So if there's something I feel really, really strong about, I'm going to not try to like own that and run that. I'm going to try to pass it to someone on our team that might be really excited to explore that. We have five core values at our store, and they're printed in our stores. And the first one is gratitude. I made that the core value in like March of 2014, because I was feeling so grateful that those roadblocks had been put in my life, that Beth had come into my life, that I have a husband that I have, and that I was going to have the opportunity to create my own company with my own core values and build my own team. And so Magpies was truly founded on this, just sense of gratitude that I was going to get to do this. And it wasn't going to have to be this perfect store or this perfect product. And I wasn't going to have to show up to work every day and be perfect. I was just going to have this beautiful place that was all mine to show up to. And I had such gratitude in my heart, and I have always wanted our team to feel gratitude for a job and for a place and for an environment where they can work with other women who are kind, who are nice, who are good, who have unbelievable talent. Because honestly, like you're going to work most of your life, most people will. And what a gift to be able to go to work somewhere where you feel

loved and seen and heard, you are developed into a leader, your ideas matter. And that's what Magpies is founded on. And I really stand firm in that to this day, that every single person that comes to work for our store must have gratitude for these places. Because they changed my life. And if you will come in with an open heart, they'll change yours too.

Leah: Maggie also shared some amazing advice for anyone who wants to start their own business but isn't sure if the timing is right.

Maggie: Whenever I meet with people that want to start their own company, usually within like the first few minutes, I try to just get right down to it. And I'm like, "What is holding you back? Like, what are you waiting for?" And really trying to work through that. So I would just tell everyone that's wanting to make a change or make a shift, like ask yourself, are you waiting for the right idea or the right time? Okay. There's not, there's never a right time. There's never a good time. You just gotta do it. Rip the Band-Aid. If you're waiting for the right idea, I would say keep working. Because one thing that's been so cool for me about Magpies, like the idea that was the easiest part of it. Like, I didn't want to be a small business owner, I had an idea that I wanted to be realized, and I think a lot of people want to be owners. There's no glory and glamour in owning a business. It is hard work, it's not gotten easier. I've been doing it for five years and it is still kicking my butt. People say it gets easier, they're liars. It's so freaking hard y'all. I mean, it's so hard, but I believed in my idea so much and I believed in filling this void. And so I think if you're looking for the idea, but you know, you want to own your own business, you've got to go back to the paper and get, you know, there's no glamour in owning your own business. Get real clear on the vision, like create a product, develop something, be innovative, fill a space, you know? Because I wasn't overly excited about owning my own business. I was way more excited about creating something for Nashville that they hadn't experienced before. That's what set my heart on fire.

Leah: Maggie advocated for developing a really clear vision for how you can innovate, and Nicole Wegman is an amazing example of someone who did that well.

Nicole is the founder and CEO of Ring Concierge, a jewelry company that's making luxury accessible to the masses. Ring Concierge is disrupting the traditionally male-dominated jewelry industry with its all-female team and thriving e-commerce business. Nicole started the company out of her own experience of ring shopping and realizing there was a need she could help fill.

Nicole: The diamond industry especially is very male dominated. It always has been, and it continues to be. And after I had gone through the engagement ring process, shopping myself, I realized there was this huge void in the market for a woman-run company and a woman's perspective, as well as someone younger's perspective, a millennial. And that's when I decided to found Ring Concierge, but also to really never lose the fact that it should be run by women. Because at the end of the day, jewelry is consumed by women. So why are we letting men design it and tell us, you know, what we should be buying.

I didn't have any background in the industry, which is quite unlike everybody else in it. Usually it's family run, and you get passed down through the generations. I have a background in fashion. I had worked for Macy's corporate and then Bloomingdale's corporate. So I definitely had an understanding of retail, as well as e-commerce, but I didn't understand the intricacies of the jewelry industry, which is run very differently than the fashion industry. So it did take a long time to learn it and to break in. I took courses online, and I found a mentor, and I just knocked on as many doors as I could until I found trusted partners and really understood how to operate on my own. So there was a big learning curve, but you know, anything is possible, if you're willing to do the legwork.

Leah: Since it started 7 years ago, Ring Concierge has grown into a successful business with a major social media following. But when I interviewed Nicole, it was at the height of COVID-19 shutdowns, and she was adapting her business to allow employees to work from home, which was difficult. Even in the midst of so much uncertainty, I was so impressed by Nicole's ability to lead well and stay calm.

Nicole: I'm used to pivoting a lot. We are still a small company, and we're still relatively new. And we're used to listening to how our Instagram followers react and quickly changing how we handle things. So pivoting is not new to us at all as a company, but I don't let stressful times impact me in that moment. I might later on reflect and have a hard time sleeping and kind of let it hit me after it's all dealt with, but I never panic in that moment, because nothing good is going to come from that. So it was definitely an adrenaline-filled week, and I didn't let myself get upset and instead let the kind of the unknown and the anxiety fuel me to energize me to get it all done with the team. And the other piece of it is, if you let your entire team know that you're worried about something, they feel it as well. And so, you know, as a manager or an owner of a company, it's your responsibility to kind of set the tone.

And I always do this, even during normal times, but especially when things are so unknown.

Yeah. No one wants to see the owner of the company panicking. They definitely want a voice of reason.

Leah: A large reason why Nicole was able to stay successful during the crisis was because her business was already built for e-commerce. Nicole explained how she developed a completely unique approach to jewelry commerce, building a business that's accessible to clients all over the world.

Nicole: I mean, being a smaller company has kind of saved us throughout all of this. You know, I don't have 200 employees to figure out how we communicate with every day. I have 12 people, so that component has been really easy, and it's also easy for everybody to kind of keep in touch with each other. But the other piece of it is we don't have physical retail locations. We do have an office in New York City in which we would see bridal clients by appointment, but we never depended on that only to be the way we sold jewelry, because we also work with clients remotely all the time, we always have. We work globally with clients, even though we're only located in New York City. So that piece really hasn't changed for us. And then e-commerce hasn't changed for us. Because all of the fine jewelry that we sell online is only available online. So most retailers that have physical locations are certainly hurting. And most of the jewelry industry is very much hurting, because they are pretty slow to move over to e-commerce. Luxury was the last piece of retail to really move online. People have a hard time, or had a hard time, pulling the trigger for high price point purchases online, but we've found that there actually isn't as much hesitation as you would think. More than half of our bridal business has always been done remotely, meaning the diamond is selected and the ring is created and the entire process is completed without the customer ever seeing or touching anything until the ring is shipped to their front door. So we do this by sending really high quality videos and photos of the diamonds, also because my team is all women, they're able to throw the rings on their hands, so the client always has a sense of perspective in terms of the size of the diamond and what it will look like in a different setting. And we almost use our own hands as kind of a guide for the couple we're working with. So the women can say, "Oh, okay. Like that does look really big on, or, you know what? I don't like yellow gold now that you've put that on. Maybe I want platinum." So it's just a matter of really having like excellent customer service and having a really, really knowledgeable bridal sales team that can answer every question and make people really, really comfortable pulling that trigger remotely.

Leah: No matter what kind of business you're starting, Nicole thinks the ability to innovate is crucial for success. She shared some great perspective on creating a unique brand and disrupting old patterns in your industry.

Nicole: I think there's so many new companies and new concepts, and it doesn't have to be completely original idea. You don't have to be the first person to ever sell jewelry. You don't have to be the first person to create, you know, a certain product category, but how are you selling it and how are you interacting with customers? And what are you doing that's really different and unique and innovative that allows your brand to stand out? And that's really what I'm looking at when I'm looking at other companies that inspire me or brands that I think are doing a great job. It's not always about revenue, it's not always about profit. Because you know, some of the largest companies in the world are not necessarily the best innovators anymore. So I always look at that uniqueness, innovation and just like really good brand storytelling.

Leah: Just as Nicole recognized a gap in the jewelry industry and created a business to fill it, Jess Ekstrom also built her business around a need she didn't see anyone addressing.

Jess is the Founder and CEO of Headbands of Hope, a social enterprise that donates one headband to a child with cancer for every headband they sell. Since it started in 2012, Headbands of Hope has donated more than half a million headbands to children's hospitals in 16 countries around the world.

Jess: I was seeing a lot of kids that were losing their hair to chemotherapy, and they'd be offered a wig or they'd be given a hat. And a lot of them weren't really concerned with covering up their heads. They just wanted something to feel good about themselves. And so I would see them wearing headbands, but no one was providing that. And so I just had this split moment where I was like, "Why not me? Why can't I be the one to give headbands kids with cancer?" And I think sometimes we overcomplicate entrepreneurship and think about all these fancy words that go around it, investors and funding and business plans, but really at its core is just about creating what you wish existed. And that can be in so many different formats. So this was what I wish existed. And so I started Headbands of Hope on April 25th, 2012. For every headband sold, we donate one to a child with cancer. I would say my first order was from my mom. It was crickets in the beginning.

Leah: Jess was still in college when she started her business, and she ran the business completely on her own at first.

Jess: So for a while I was a one-woman show. And I think sometimes people get embarrassed about that and think like, "Oh, I need to have a team of people in order to be successful." But I would argue I got to learn every corner of my business before I hired people to do it. And so everything that I have people doing now, I once did myself. And so, it's hard to lead from a place of like, I've never done it before, but I'm telling you to do this. And it was funny when I, before I interned it at Make-A-Wish I was interning at Disney World. And one of the practices that I thought was so cool, when they had new management come in, was that they had to spend two weeks in every position that they would be managing. So whether that was taking out the trash, whether that was scooping ice cream, whatever it might be, they had to do it all before they could lead. And so I've tried to take that same approach with Headbands of Hope, but we're still a small team, a team of seven, but it's growing. And that's a great thing about technology is we can do so much with so little. So we've been able to really broaden our reach, but stay lean and really get people who are just invested in the mission of Headbands of Hope.

Leah: In addition to running Headbands of Hope, Jess is also a speaker and author of *Chasing the Bright Side*, a book that teaches women to embrace optimism, activate their purpose and write their own stories. Y'all know I love that. She shared some of the advice she writes about in her book, and it's such an inspiring message for anyone who wants to build something great.

Jess: One of my biggest pet peeves, if I'm being honest, was someone who would talk to me about their, you know, success. "Oh, I have this podcast that's number one on iTunes," or "I started this company and now we're sold in Target everywhere. And one day I just had this idea and the next day, you know, Oprah just keeps calling me and like, I'm on her favorite things list." And you're just like, "That will never happen to me," you know? And so then when you see, when you hear a narrative of success that you feel like, "Well, Oprah's not going to be calling me and I don't have access to Target," then you feel like that can't be you. And so what I felt like with *Chasing the Bright Side* and with my speaking would just my message about starting Headbands of Hope, it's not about making us look good in like what we've done now, it's about humanizing the hustle of how we got there. Like everything from the first order being from my mom, from I lost a loan from a family member, which I'll get into. Our

warehouse has been struck by lightning, not once, twice, fried all of our technology every time. But things that have happened along the way that I want to normalize, like the mess in the middle. And optimism is not about having everything figured out, it's not about doing everything perfectly. It's about a strategy that the future is good and I can be the one to do it, but that doesn't mean that it's going to be a clear or a straight path, but it does mean that I'm going to figure it out. And so it's like more of a confidence that, "Yeah, I believe in this, I'm going to make it happen," than saying, "I know all the steps that I need to take. I have all the contacts right here in my phone." It's more about really believing in better and doing whatever it takes to figure it out. So I think my mission now, you know, beyond serving kids with cancer, is just normalizing the hustle of how we get there, that you're going to mess up. And you're going to get back up and you're going to be okay. And one day you might be sharing it on a podcast.

Leah: Jess also explained how saying "Yes, and" can help you stay open to new opportunities.

Jess: I started doing improv comedy. You know, when I started speaking, I was like, "Maybe this will help me be more loose and relaxed on stage," thinking it would just be for like my speaking delivery to help with. But then as I started taking these classes, I was like, "The principles of this, where you are saying yes to something and then building truth on top of that, is so important when it comes to just life experiences." Because sometimes we feel like we need a checklist in order to say yes to something. It's like, "Well, who's going to be there? What's the ROI for me? Is there going to be, you know, free food? Or whatever it might be that gets us out the door. But sometimes we just have to look at life in the expansiveness of possibilities. We might not know exactly what's going to happen next, but that thing can't happen if we're not there for it. So when we weigh opportunities, instead of saying, "Yeah, but I don't really know who's going to be there. I don't know what's going to happen," then that makes us stay home. But if we say, "Yeah, I don't really have an agenda. I don't know who's going to be there, but I could meet someone who could be a new friend or a new business partner." And so instead of thinking of the things that we engage in as this long checklist of like having to cross it off, instead just say, "I wonder what would happen if I just showed up."

I think that one of the things that I wanted to address in the book is that like, "Oh crap," feeling afterwards. Cause we can say like, "Yes, seize the day, like get up and grind." And then when we get there, there, and all of a sudden everyone has their

people and you're like, "Where do I stand? Where do I pick up my name tag? And you know, how do I even begin?" There is this phase of being super uncomfortable that sometimes we use that feeling as like a flag that I shouldn't have done this. But instead if we know that that like, "Oh, crap" moment is normal. Like anytime we're doing something new or anytime we're engaging in something that we haven't done before, that makes us vulnerable. Like if we know that that part is not a reflection of like, this was a bad choice, but just, "Oh, this actually means that I'm stretching myself. This is a good thing. And it's going to pass," Give ourselves some grace in that period. That's what I want people to know when they read *Chasing the Brightside*. Is this not just about like, "Yes, like seize the day, chase the sunshine, you know, we're going to say yes to things. We're going to show up. We're going to challenge ourselves." It's not going to be such a good feeling, but then we're going to make it better.

Leah: As much as she advocates for saying yes to opportunities, Jess also pointed out that it's important to make sure you're chasing the things that actually matter to you and your mission.

Jess: If the thing that you're chasing right now, if no one knew about it, if you didn't receive any accolades, if it was just like the result of the mission, would it still matter to you? Because sometimes I catch myself chasing things, you know, I talked about in *Chasing the Brightside*, how there was this magazine cover that I was in the running for. And I was like all in about this magazine cover, right? Eat, sleep, breathe, like getting on this cover. And I was putting all this time and energy into this magazine cover. And I realized, like the only reason why I want this is because of how it might look. But then there are other things that I might chase, like the proms that we do at children's hospitals or these like coloring book, you know, initiatives that we do with our headbands at children's hospitals. I'm like, if no one knew about that, if my name wasn't attached to it, it still would mean something. And so I think if we take away, like what would happen if we put this on social media? How many likes did we get? What would people think if I did this? Completely remove any sort of external attention factored into our decision making and say, "If I did this, no one knew about it, it was in the dark, would that still mean something to me?" And I know that this is probably not the best thing to say with my publicist in the room, we're all about making me look good. But I think that sometimes it's important to do that audit, especially in the age that we're living in with everything is shared digital. How can this be perceived? To just take a step back and say like, what is it that I'm chasing? And is this meaningful to me if no one finds out?

Leah: Thank you so much for joining us today. I was so inspired by my conversations with Maggie, Nicole and Jess, and I hope hearing their stories encouraged you to believe in your own potential.

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!