

Ep. 85 – Building Confidence with Toni Purry – 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 to believe in yourself and enjoy your own journey a little more. I'm Leah Glover Hayes, your host and CEO of Her Story of Success Women's Business Collective.

On today's show, I'm so excited to be speaking with Toni Purry. Toni is an entrepreneur, visibility strategist and speaker who helps women build their confidence and find new ways to show up in the world. She's also the author of *My Hype Book*, which is an amazing motivational journal that helps guide readers on a journey of self-discovery.

Toni has more than 20 years of public relations experience, and she's taken what she learned from national brands to now focus on helping individuals succeed. She's been honored with too many awards to name here, including a PRSA Prism Award and multiple AVA Awards, *and* she was a winner in the Oprah Magazine and Chase Bank "Stay A Step Ahead" program. Toni has also helped her clients land placements with *The Today Show*, Food Network, *USA Today*, the *LA Times*, *O Magazine* and more.

I met Toni through SheEO and was so inspired by her story, so I'm excited for you to hear it today, too.

So welcome Toni. We were so excited to chat with you today!

Toni: Thank you so much! I'm excited to be here. I'm such a fan of your podcast, so this is a real honor.

Leah: Yeah. Thank you. And you and I met through SheEO, which is an organization that we're both massively passionate about. And so I think anyone that listens to this podcast knows about SheEO, but it's an organization that supports women working on the world's to-do list, and they are radically generous women that are changing the world. So if you don't already know about it, go Google SheEO, it's amazing with Vicki Saunders. And I interviewed her, the founder and her story of creating that is incredible.

Toni: Oh that's awesome!

Leah: Well, thank you, Toni. We met on a SheEO call, and I was just impressed with what you were talking about with your hype book, and that's something that we're going to dive into. And so who is Toni Purri today? And what are we going to be talking about with this beautiful hype book?

Toni: Okay. So today I now work as a positioning and visibility strategist. So I really spend a lot of time helping individuals, mostly women, find the most confident, compelling, and creative ways to show up, to raise their brand profile, to generate awareness about what they're doing and to position themselves as the authority in the space that they're working in. I've been doing that for about two-and-a-half years now, ever since I closed my PR agency three years ago, after I wrote my book. And I have absolutely been finding the work so fulfilling and so exciting. It's great for a few reasons. One, I'm doing the work that I was doing for really big brands. My agency represented, we were a generalist agency, but the lion's share of our clients were in luxury hospitality and in lifestyle. So we represented luxury brands for Hyatt, Hilton, Intercontinental, Marriott, all of them. So what I was doing for those big brands in helping to build brand confidence and helping to generate exposure, I now get to do that on a micro level with individuals, mostly entrepreneurs, some professionals. And it's really exciting because I get to sort of go on the journey with a lot of these women. And that is something that I had not imagined doing before, but I'm loving it now.

Leah: I love that. And so you are doing this for individuals now, you had it for large businesses before. I don't usually do this, but let's go back to how you grew up. Like, how did you even get in to PR? Because to me being PR is being someone's hype person, right? Being someone's cheerleader, helping them, you know, get their name out there. So how did that come to be?

Toni: I love this question so much and I'm not asked it very often, but I was always that kid that loved to spread the good news.

Like if there was a new ice cream shop, I wanted everybody to know about it and everybody to go. You know, if there was a new song out, I wanted everybody to hear about it. So I've always been this person that really gets a kick out of sharing things

that excite me and that I feel like will be exciting to them as well. I actually went to college for broadcast journalism, and it was really interesting. I loved all the classes except for the news writing class. And we'd have to go to one of our assignments or frequent assignment was to go to the city council meeting and to report on that. And if you've ever been to a city council meeting, they are hardly exciting news, and it was like torture. And so every time we'd have to do that, I'd go to the department chair who I'd come to know really well, and I'd tell him, "Can I write a paper? Can I do a special project? Can I do anything? Please don't make me go back to these, you know, to the council meetings. They're so boring and I get really sleepy and you don't want me falling asleep in a city council meeting representing the school." You know, I'd just lay a guilt trip on him. And he would always be like "Toni, oh my goodness. You have to do the assignments. Okay. Okay. Okay. You have to do a project." And he'd try to make it really hard, but I love doing projects. So I'd do that, and that was my conversation with him on a very frequent basis. And then finally he called me to his office and he said, "Miss Johnson," which was my maiden name, "We need to sit down and have a conversation." He's like, "I don't think you're cut out for journalism." And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "Everything that you cover as a journalist is not going to be things that you're really excited about it and are really fun and interesting. I think you're better suited for public relations." And I thought, no, I want to be a broadcast journalist. I want to be that news reporter sitting behind the desk, the anchor. And he said, "Knowing you, you'll find a creative way to get there, and you don't have to major in broadcast journalism to do that. But I think you should focus on something that's going to really keep your attention and really make this process exciting for you, because you've got, you know, a little ways to go." So I changed majors and got into public relations and stayed there, fell in love with it, and it has been my entire career. So thanks to him for encouraging me to change directions, because I did not want to have to have the discipline to sit through city council meetings.

Leah: I'm so glad you that. And I was in a meeting earlier today with, a couple of ladies, and we got in that conversation of empowerment and how sometimes that I know that women, we have our own power, but sometimes it takes someone else to see something in us, to tell us where we have power, where we have ability, where we have skillset and help guide us into that next step. Like, I'm so glad that you shared

that, because it's such a big deal. Like what if he hadn't have been honest with you? What if he didn't take you aside? What if he didn't care enough to step aside. And to his point, you probably would have found your way to PR anyway, but wow. Now I want to talk about, okay, now, once you changed your major, what doors or what things were opened to you, or what opportunities did you see because you went into PR? And maybe how did that set you up for success versus staying in journalism and figuring out the long way?

Toni: You know, I had actually had a lot of opportunities. We were required to do a couple of internships, but I was that student that I really loved the practical application. I wanted to do the work. So I did my two internships, but then I also signed up for several others. I probably did about six internships over the course of my last two years, because I just wanted to be in the place and understand and do the work, get my hands in there. And then one of my last internships was in Washington DC. I had an opportunity to work with this organization called the Washington Center. They're still around, they're a phenomenal organization. And what they do is place students in the DC area with various companies. And I had an opportunity to work with, it was several really great companies, but I chose to work with Macy's in their regional PR department, because they were a major sponsor for the World Cup. And the Olympics back then exactly was going to be coming to Atlanta, shows how long ago it was. And so I wanted to work for the Olympics. I had dreams of working for the Olympics in PR, so I thought, what better opportunity than to work with another worldwide athletic program?

Leah: Now, where were you living? Where were you at when you decided to go to DC?

Toni: At the time I was living in Alabama, I was going to Alabama State University.

Leah: Oh wow. Okay. So this wasn't down the street. You're in Alabama. And you found out about this internship. That was half a world away.

Toni: Yeah, exactly. And it was my first time being away from home. Because I did go to school in my hometown. And DC was so wonderful for me. I was in a program with a lot of other students. All of us were working at different companies and with different organizations, but we were all housed in this one apartment complex. So we had a little bit of community amongst ourselves, and it was just such an eye-opener

for me. And I will tell you, something that was a really big pivot for me, when I was there doing the internship, I didn't mind doing the grunt work, but I really wanted to learn and understand the public relations process because it was getting close to time for me to graduate. And my job was to write, wrap these little Polo bottles, cologne bottles, wrap them and then put them in gift bags. I had no problem doing that, but after two weeks of doing that, I thought, "There's so much more for me to learn. I really want to do this." So I went back to the Washington Center, and I asked them, "Are there any other internships available? Because I came a long way and I really wanted to learn, but I'm not really learning here."

Leah: Wrapping bottles.

Toni: Yeah. And like, I don't mind wrapping bottles, but I want to also learn other things as well. I wasn't even in the office, they had me working in a conference room, so I wasn't even in the office with the three other people that were working in that department. So they didn't have any other internships, so I just went to the phone book — how long ago that was — and I went to the Kennedy Center, I went to the Ritz Carlton and I went to BET and Planet Hollywood. I went to all four of those places, and I asked if I could meet with the PR director. And I told them my story. I said, "I came to DC to learn and do PR. I'm a student at Alabama State. Would you consider, you know, having me in to be an intern, you know, with you this summer?" And I had, all of them said yes, and offered me a position. And so I went back to Macy's, the PR director at Macy's, and I said, "Hey, so this is going to be my last week here, because I'm going to go do an internship with, I just chose to do it at Planet Hollywood." And she's like, "Wait, what do you mean you're supposed to be here all summer?" And I said, "Well, I just came a long way. And I'm really not learning a lot. And I really want this to be a learning experience for me." And she says, "Don't make any decisions. Take the weekend, come back Monday and let's talk." And so I came back on Monday, but I was like, I'll do that, but I've already kind of made my decision. I came back on Monday and she put me in charge of their big Macy's Giving Day. Where I had to plan this big, huge luncheon for the executive directors for all of these major nonprofits, who many of whom are headquartered in DC. And it became such a big turning point for me. I stayed with her and did that, and it was just so fantastic. And I will say she appreciated that so much. I remember her saying to me several times, "No student has ever done that." And then she offered me a position actually at the

end of that. I didn't take it, but it was one of those turning points for me, where I got a chance to really experience what PR was and how to make it work and all the pieces, and it was really my baby, it was my responsibility. And I felt the full burden of having to pull that big luncheon off, but, but also getting press there and everything. So for me, that was a big turning point.

Leah: There's a lot of lessons in there. You know, a, you took the opportunity. I don't want to say risk, because when you're that age, what's the really big risk of moving to another city, like you can always come back home. But you did take the opportunity. You said, "You know what? I want to go learn." You went, and then you realized like I'm not fulfilled. I'm not learning anything. And you didn't just like, stand back. You went and you sought out other companies. And you said, I told them my story, right? You told them your story. It wasn't just, "Hey, I'm looking for an internship and here's my resume." It's like, "This is what I'm trying to accomplish." And then going back to the person to be considerate and say, "Hey, I've made this decision. I'm gonna move on because I'm not learning." I don't think enough people are honest about what they want. You have to know what you want. Then you ask for help or ask for what you want. Not always help, like, "Hey, this is what I'm looking for." When I'm mentoring young people, I'm like, you have to know what you want, because people like us now that are in these positions of power or influence, I want to help young girls succeed. Right? Because let's talk about what happened later. She offered you a position. I want to help people succeed, because I want to bring you into my world so that maybe one day I can hire you and you're going to be amazing. Like, I want to find... anyone that hires anyone that's in any leadership position is looking to find people to hire either today or down the road. So I love that concept of this woman's like, "Wow, no one's ever asked. Thank you so much." They're not going to give you power. They're not going to give you responsibility, if you don't prove that you can handle it. You proved you could handle it by saying, "I have already found another job and I'm going to go do that." And then she's like, "Oh, let me give you this and see what you can do." And then obviously you did a good job because she wanted to hire you. I think that's so important. Thank you for sharing that. And so then, okay. You get done with that. You said you didn't take that role. How did you go from student to having your own PR firm?

Toni: After I left DC, I went back to school, and then I was very fortunate. I got hired before I graduated, actually, at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, regional theater in Montgomery, Alabama. And that was such a great career launching position for me, because it meant that I got a chance to work around really creative people for a major theater organization, doing public relations. And I could really glean from my peers. It was a fantastic, fantastic, fantastic opportunity for me. From there, I went to work with the local chamber of commerce in the convention and tourism division. And, now I will say, when I worked at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, my boss was the marketing director, and she would always encourage us to put feelers out. And to get an idea of how our work, our resume fared in the marketplace. I always thought that was interesting that she would do that, because I'm like, "You can lose people that way." And she's like, "Yeah, but you know, it's good to know. It's good to know your value." And I thought that was very generous of her. And so I was then offered, I was on several committees and was with the chamber when I worked at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and they offered me a position. So I went over and worked with them, and I was with them for about a year and a half. And then I remembered her saying, "Send out feelers." And I thought, well, let me just send out some feelers and see what happens. And I did. I found a few jobs, submitted my resume, and I was offered a position with the U.S. Department of Labor in their Office of Job Corps to be a regional director for job development. And I took the position and transitioned over. And that was a really exciting position because there were a team of five of us who were regional directors and we were in charge of a new initiative. And it just gave me a chance to spread my wings in a completely new way as a sort of a liaison between the Office of Job Corps and big corporations that were looking to hire students.

Leah: So was that a PR position still?

Toni: It was definitely a step away. But the interesting thing about it is, I decided to incorporate as much PR as I could. So I worked with a number of Job Corps centers, and because I just had PR in my blood, I would do different types of public relations activities for them. When we had things going on, when we made really big partnerships and we had students doing really well, I'd make sure and get the press talking about it and finding out, you know, a way. So I pulled PR into my position. It's probably one of the reasons why I succeeded so well in that position, because I was able to let the public know about what we had going on. But from there, my husband

and I moved out to the West Coast. I started working with a local Job Corps center here for a little while, and then a really interesting thing happened. One of my close friends worked for Johnny Cochran's law firm, and one of the national partners there had written a book. And there are only four national partners, Johnny and three other guys. And her boss was one of the other guys, and he had written a book and wanted to get some information out. So she called me and said, "Toni, I know you do PR, he's written this book. Can you help me?" And so I said, sure. So I sent her this long email about, you can do this, I mean, like 20 things, and I sent it off and then I thought, "Oh goodness, I hope I didn't overstep. You know, I hope I didn't inundate her with too much information." She calls me back and she said, "You are so good at this. You're such a natural, I'm going to talk to him about bringing you on." And so I thought, are you serious? And she did. And I interviewed with him and he brought me on and it basically is how I started doing freelance PR work. Because I left the Job Corps. I didn't really have my own agency at that point, but I started working independently and then started working for the firm, basically doing all the announcements around their really big cases and different, big things that they had going on. I did that for four years, and then I kept thinking, "I would really like to grow this into an agency," but I'd never done agency work. So I thought, "Okay. I can get a position with an agency and then get a chance to see what agency life is like. And if I like it enough, then I can leave and start my own." So I started applying for really low-level positions at PR agencies. And I actually landed an account executive position with a boutique agency here in Los Angeles. And they worked in the hospitality and tourism space. And I did that for about a year and a half. And then I realized I was ready to do my own thing. And I honestly, I had kind of gotten immersed in the dream of that person's business and sort of lost myself and forgot my own dream. And I had to do my bio for something. And I had my bio, I had this upward trajectory and then it had account executive. No, that didn't look right to me. So I thought, "I need to go to another agency." And I wasn't quite ready to start my own, so I applied for several agencies. I actually got a couple of offers and I went back to the agency where I was working and told them, "You know, I'm gonna go somewhere else. I really have way more years of experience to where I am." And she said, "No, no, no. I have big plans for you here." And I got promoted to a VP position with the agency.

Leah: You have a trend here, where you go find something and you come back like, no, no, no. But you know what, it's different, because a lot of people that are just completely unhappy, will go and do that and not be honest with the group that you're with. And I love that you do it and it feels good, right? Like, "Hey, I'm ready for my next step, and let me go see what it is." And then when you come back to them, it's not, "You're not doing enough or you're not giving me this." I don't know. It just comes from a place of not lacking, right? Like, "I'm leaving you because I'm lacking something," you're saying "I want to get to that next level. And I'm looking to see what my options are." And then they present you a new option that you didn't even know existed within their firm. I love that you have this theme.

Toni: I know. And it's so funny. Cause I didn't even realize, but it is. That has been the track record. It's been a very genuine interest of what else is out there and then realizing that there's more. And then coming back, ready to go and do something different, and then realizing that there is actually opportunity where I am. So I stayed there for about six or seven more months, and then I got to the place where I realized it was time for me to do my own thing. I was ready. I was nervous though. One of the agencies had come back around again and said, "You know, we've still got this position open. Are you interested?" And that sort of stirred me to thinking, maybe it is time for me to step out and do my own thing, but I just wasn't a hundred percent certain. I did know, I needed to take time to figure out what I was going to do. So I put in my notice and told the agency I was going to be leaving. And somebody that I had worked with from another hotel at that agency, she called me because she found out that I left. It was actually that afternoon, somebody in the office called, somebody else that used to work for the company, and that person called that director of that hotel and said, "You're not going to believe it, but Toni's available now." And she called me, it was December 4th, 2007. She said, "I hear you're a free agent." And I said, "Well, I'm trying to decide whether I should go and take this position that I have open with another agency or doing my own thing." And she said, "Well, I want to talk to you about doing PR for my hotel." And I said, "Okay, you know, that sounds great." She's like, "Well, I'm going to be gone for the month of December." And I said, "Okay, great. Then we'll talk the 1st of January." And I'm thinking that gives me all of December to just relax. And she said, "No, I want you to working while I'm gone." We signed the contract the next day, and that's how my agency started. So my very first

client was Newport Beach Marriott Hotel and Spa. And from there within the first three months, I acquired Hyatt in Huntington Beach and Intercontinental Hotel. And it was pretty amazing and quite a blessing during that time, because you recall, that was the beginning of the big recession in 2007, 8, 9. So we were a company that really sore during a time where a lot of companies were closing and, you know, people were cutting their PR and marketing budgets.

Leah: And I think that's probably a very similar story as of right now, you know? We were talking before we jumped on about, just this message of 2020 has been, you know, we had all these expectations and they were all, you know, it's a new decade and all of these things that we came into this year expectantly, and then obviously, you know, a global pandemic happened and changed everybody's game, but if we're really honest with ourselves, this might not be the worst year we've ever had. We've gone through hard times before. I think every woman that I've interviewed, that's had a company more than a couple of years has said, "Yeah, this is super different. And this is hard, but I've been through recessions before. I've been through hard times. I've been through hard valleys with my company." And it's just learning about, you know, sometimes you're the company that's succeeding through the hard times. And that's, I'm kind of like that right now. My business has kind of taken off during this. So there's that like guilt I'm like, "I don't want to tell anybody I'm doing good, because I feel bad being successful when other people are hurting."

Toni: But it's encouraging though. So I hope you do share that. There is that guilt factor that you feel like, why me? But I think...

Leah: Kind of the survivor's guilt.

Toni: Yeah. But it's, you can be still a light and an encouragement to other people that it is possible and that it can happen. When my agency was doing really well, I will say, I was super naive about what a recession even was, because a lot of people said, "Why would you start your own company it's about to be a recession. You've got a great VP position. You know, why would you do that?" And my thought then was very naively recession-smession, and it'll be fine. You know, I didn't know what a recession was quite honestly. And I think that ignorance worked for me because I behaved like I didn't know what it was and I really didn't. And we soared, you know, in spite of that, but there was a journey because I had the agency for 10 years. There

were ebbs and flows that were really great years. And then there were really hard years when things were back to normal and the economy was thriving. And I think you just sort of learn a kind of resilience as an entrepreneur.

Leah: Ooh let's talk about that.

Toni: You don't realize that you're going to learn being a part of the process of growing and building a business.

Leah: I do want to come back to resiliency because I think it's important for everyone, but I want the person listening to get a little bit of a taste of what you do for women and how you're taking what you learned doing PR, obviously, for 20 years in different scenarios. But how do you help bring that down from a large corporation to an individual? So, why do people come to you and what are they trying to achieve or accomplish, and what is it that you help them fulfill?

Toni: Okay, well, here's a good example. There was a client that I had that I worked with last year, who was just wonderful. She was a County Commissioner, and she ran for an open Senate seat, and she lost. And she'd never lost any races or anything in life, you know, she'd always been one of these people that succeeded at everything she put her hands to, and it really did a number on her confidence. And so a mutual friend actually referred her to me. She knew in that instant that she didn't want all of her identity to be wrapped up in politics. She wanted to write, she wanted to speak, she wanted to build a brand about herself that existed beyond what she did in that space. And she also needed to find that confidence again, because the public loss just did a number on her.

So my work with her involved going through the practices in my hype book, and really helping her to realize her strengths, her talents, her gifts, her wins. That she had so much to offer. Because we forget that. We tend to ruminate over our mistakes and our failures. And when we achieve things, we're kind of onto the next and onto the next, and we don't spend time. So it sort of clouds how we see ourselves. And she was a little bit caught up in that. Our work together also helped her build and establish a personal brand for herself, to create a really beautiful online footprint for her, so that when you looked her up and you saw her, you saw the image that she wanted to be seen for. We also looked for opportunities for her to get coverage exposure in

publications and podcast interviews and different things like that. But I think one of the biggest things that we did was, how do we want you to show up? You know, what's the best way for you? Is it for you to write a book? Is it for you to start a podcast? Is it for you to launch a blog? What's the best way that you are going to be able to insert yourself in the dialogue of the industry that you specialize in, so that people recognize you as an authority in that space? And that's in a nutshell, how I help a lot of the women and individuals that I work with.

Leah: Let's talk about that a little bit. So how do you help someone decide that? Because you're right, there's so many things. There's podcasts, there's books, there's blogs, there's different social media platforms, there's becoming a speaker. There's all of these things. How do you help someone decide where to get started, or which ones to focus on first that can grow into something else? Because you can't do everything at one time.

Toni: you can't do everything, and you don't want to spread yourself that thin. We build a roadmap at the very beginning of, what's going to be the best trajectory for you to get where you ultimately want to be? If it's for you to become a really big speaker, what are those things that are going to help build that roadmap for you? If it is for you to build a particular type of business, just building a business isn't enough now. You have to really have that personal brand. I used to be so annoyed by the word personal brand, but now I realize that it's bigger than the individual, but it's about creating and making your mark so that you get the attention. Because we live in a world with social media, where really the sweet squeaky wheel gets the attention. And so how do you create your own squeak? How do you create your own noise in a way that feels authentic and comfortable to you, but it doesn't feel salesy and loud and obnoxious, but feels right in line with who you are, what your personality is and how you want to show up. We look at all of the platforms. I think podcasts are phenomenal, and I'm the first one to tune in to them. You know, I discovered yours a couple of years ago. And what I think is, I know podcasting is also not easy, and I know everybody can't do it because you have to be a really good listener, and it's not just about asking questions. It really is a conversation process. And so I've got to see that in somebody before I say that's a window for you. Or we break down, what is your messaging? What's your why? What is it that is important for you to get across? And then we look at that and determine, what are going to be the

best avenues and where are those audiences that want to hear your message in those places? So we pull that, unpack that information as well before we even line up where the possibilities are for you. Is it a podcast? Is it speaking? Is it a book? A lot of people have really, really good books in them, but they don't know how to go about that or how to even frame that. So it is a process of exploring all of that so that you show up the way you want to in the best way that you can, but also so that the audience in the market you're targeting wants to lean in and listen.

Leah: That's a really good point. So kind of what I heard you say is, one you really need to start with, what's your ultimate goal? Like what, where do you want to be? For me, like I ultimately, I don't think it's a secret, like I ultimately want to have a television show. And so I think podcasts for me is, is part of that to develop my own voice, to develop my own brand. And I love that you said what's authentic to you. Cause everyone was like, you need to start a blog, you need to start a blog, you need to start a blog. I don't write, I speak. Like a blog is not, it's not authentic to me. I don't want to sit and write for a long time. So I think just being able to understand, what platforms do you like? What platforms do you use? What's the message that you like to hear? So, okay, so it's have your big goal.

Toni: What's your why, why do you want to do it? What's the message that you want to tell? We craft that message so that it's really clear, so that you can articulate that with ease. A lot of times we have all of these thoughts and ideas and they're all of the things that we want to do and say. Okay, how do we drill it down so it really is clear, so that when you say that to somebody it relates and it resonates with the person that you want it to resonate with. And what I love about you and the way you do your podcast, you're a great listener. And you're asking really curious questions. You ask the questions that the listener is also thinking, "I wonder..." And then you ask that question. And I also love what you said too, because part of what I say is if your ultimate goal is to be a speaker or if your ultimate goal is to have a show, you can have this podcast and it is a valuable medium, and you're creating a great resource for a lot of people to listen to, but you're also using it as a tool to practice and get, you know, yourself prepared for that. And I love, too, we were talking earlier about how you give yourself grace. You don't feel like you have to show up perfectly in this medium before you can, although it feels pretty flawless to me

Leah: Thank you. That's huge. And to your point with a hype book, all I see are my flaws. So I just, you have completely filled my cup today, you know, saying what you love about my podcast. But you know what I'd like is for the woman listening to hear, when she's ready to engage with someone like you. Because there's different people that do different types of PR. Like you can hire someone, a PR person to help you get nominated for awards like 40 Under 40, or, you know, whatever, like awards you have in your local community, or they can help you get in publications. You can help write things for people to get in pieces, but it sounds like you kind of do a really holistic approach, which I really appreciate. So for the woman listening, if she's curious and was like, "Maybe I should contact Toni to help me." When is someone ready to engage with you?

Toni: Well, I think it's so interesting. I find people at very different stages. Some already know where they want to be and where they want to go. And so you have this vision, but you just don't know, how am I going to get there and how do I build a name for myself and the process to get there? So that's one that I help. Then there are some that are just feeling kind of stuck. And their confidence is kind of, you know, not where it needs to be. And they're like, "I need a cheerleader. I need a hype woman. And I also need somebody that can help navigate me in the process. And I need to figure out what are my options? What's best for me?" One of my clients, I love her, she's like "Toni, you're a vision holder. And you can see the potential in people sometimes when they can't see it in themselves." And I do realize I have that ability about myself, and I'm really proud of that ability because, like we talked about earlier, sometimes you need somebody else to kind of push you along and say, "Hey, what about this? Why don't you try this? This is what I see. Let's explore that. Let's unpack that." So there are women that are in different places. There are women who are pivoting from one career to the next, and they're trying to figure out, you know, "How do I show up in this new space?" Which was my case, because when I decided to close my agency, I didn't know what was next for me. I just knew I didn't want agency life anymore. As well as we were doing, as phenomenal clients as we had, I had rockstar employees, I was just over it, and I didn't want to do that anymore, but I had no clue what I wanted to do next.

Leah: Let's pause right there. Because I want people to hear what you just said. You were successful. You had great clients, you had good employees, nothing was

broken. And that's okay to get to the place where nothing is broken and you want a change. I so often see so many women feel guilty or shame being in that position that you were in, and they're like, "Well, who am I to want something else? I've built this beautiful thing." So before you went forward, I wanted to just stop and pause and say, that's okay. It's okay to say, "This is good, but I do want something different." And listen, I'm not the same woman I was five years ago. Hopefully I'm not going to be the same woman in five years that I am today. And it's okay, even if it is your company, to say, "I don't want this anymore." And for no reason, other than I don't want this anymore. And it doesn't mean you're a failure. I love that. Thank you, keep going.

Toni: I struggled so much with giving myself permission to pivot. And I felt shame. I felt all the shame. I wouldn't tell anybody, but I suffered in silence for two years. So it was really around year eight, I was like, "I can't take this." I described it recently, I said, "It's like when you're dating somebody, and they're really nice and everything about them is fine, but when they blink, you want to sock them in the face."

Leah: We've all been there. Well, I don't know all, but I have.

Toni: And then I felt so much guilt. I didn't want that anymore, but here's the thing is when you don't respond to that, the last couple of years at the agency was really strange because I wasn't putting the love into it. And anybody that's been an entrepreneur for any amount of time, you have to put love into it for it to reciprocate. And it doesn't always reciprocate, even when you're putting all the love into it. And I got to that place where I just, I was like, I can't do this anymore. And my biggest struggle was I had no idea what I wanted to do next. It's one thing to say, "I'm not doing this anymore because I'm going to do this." But when you are saying, "I'm not doing, I don't want to do this. And I have no clue what I want to do." That's what caused me to stay in that space of discomfort for those two years. And then I finally got to that place where I realized I've got to scale back. So I moved out of our beautiful creative office space, and I'm at home, my husband is watching a documentary about Muhammad Ali, and I am captivated by his confidence. Because at this point I have none. I'm like, "I have no confidence. I've just given up my company." I transitioned my employees to contract only had a handful of clients at that point. I was in a pretty miserable place asking myself, "Why did you do that?" And also feeling a little relieved that I had done it, but also beating myself up

because I didn't know what I wanted to do next, totally second-guessing. And on the documentary I saw right before Ali was going into a fight and his hype man was in his face, ardently yelling, reminding him of his knockouts, his wins, that he was the greatest and he was the champ. And my thought was, "If we all had a hype man reminding us of our wins, we'd feel that kind of confidence all the time as well." So for two days I sat on my living room floor, writing out my wins. Those things that I had done with my agency, those things that I had done personally, like running the LA Marathon, pro bono work that we had done, winning big accounts. There was this ascension of confidence that rose up in me because I was now seeing myself through my success lens. And it gave me permission to close that chapter and to be patient about what the next chapter was, which ended up being my hype book, and now working with individuals, doing a piece of what I did as a PR person. And now I'm also encouraging them and helping them to navigate, to find out where they want to ultimately be planted.

Leah: I love it. I want to just read a couple things from the book. One of the quotes is "Every step taken is worth celebrating, because it is one step closer to achieving your goal." And you know, when we talk about taking one step at a time. And then you have, "Endeavor to be astonished by your achievements." One of the things that you're really big on, and so am I, is like you say, like leave your modesty, like at the door. I don't know if that's actually what you say those words. But kind of your thing is, when you come to this place, leave your modesty at the door. We, as women are always told to be modest, be modest, don't brag, be humble. And while that's good kind of in life, so you don't get judgmental or high horse on people, it also can be detrimental to our next level of success, right? When you think about like, what do you want to teach your daughter or your children? You want them to be so confident in their future that they believe that they can do anything. Why do we not do that for ourselves? And so I love that this is halfway through, I'm not there yet, don't judge me, I'm getting there, but it says, you know, "What is your life adventure?" I love that you asked that question, you know, "Why is this life adventure worthy of being declared an accomplishment? What's the story behind this life adventure, beginning with your inspiration to do it?" And I love that this is the moment that I get to encourage the woman listening to say, "Hey, get this hype book," this is good for anyone. I mean, if anyone doesn't struggle with confidence, please call me and tell me your secrets. But

for those of us that do, you just have so many different aspects of doing good charitable deeds. What's the thing that you accomplished in your life? What are the major milestones that you went through? You know, and you have reflection time. So I just really think that this book is powerful in a lot of ways, and share with us why you put all of this in here, and what's a good way if someone buys this, how to go through it so that they don't get overwhelmed.

Toni: Well, okay. So the book is not designed to do it all at one time. Although I did have one guy who did it, his wife was out of town, and he had a whole weekend and he was in a place, you know, at a transition place, he was leaving a really big position and about to start his own thing. And he sat and did the book. He said, "I did the whole thing in one weekend," and I couldn't believe he did that, but he said he needed to do that. So you can do it. I don't encourage it, because it really is about tapping into your gifts, your talents, your strengths, taking time to process and think about what those things are. And then it's divided into six categories where you journal: Major milestones, significant victories, health and wellness achievements, good and charitable deeds, and one really big one is life lessons. Because everything doesn't always go the way we want them to. But how do you extrapolate the really good from that? What you learned, what you're wiser, smarter, better of as a result of going through that experience. And then that gives you the upper hand on that, as opposed to you feeling victim to what may have happened to you.

Leah: I love it.

Toni: Yeah. It's a really different way to look at it. And also, I agree with you earlier. We are for some reason taught to be really modest. And don't talk about your success, and don't brag and don't boast. And I don't think it's appropriate to brag and boast in an obnoxious way, but there's a line in the book that really helped a lot of people get it, that says, "The presence of humility should not mean the absence of personal accolade."

Leah: Ooh, wait, we say that one more time.

Toni: "The presence of humility should not mean the absence of personal accolade." It is okay to celebrate yourself. It's okay to pat yourself on the back. It's okay to say, "I did that. I'm so proud of it." It's okay to really ponder on that and think about that. You

think about if you have kids and your child does really good at school. When you know dad or mom comes home, the one parent says, "Tell them what you did today." And you want them to brag. You want them to say, "I got a gold star. I made an A, you know, I hit a home run." So what is it about when we get older that we changed that, that is not okay to do that? I think if we get in the habit of doing that, I mean, women certainly struggle with it. I think men are a little bit easier, you know, to pat themselves on the back. But statistically women, a man will apply for a job with 60% of the qualifications, and a woman will only apply for the job if she checks all the boxes and is over a hundred percent qualified for a position. I think if we start looking at ourselves and start celebrating ourselves and start saying what we did and what we have achieved and not being afraid to talk about it, we see ourselves differently, other people see us differently, and we show up very differently as well.

Leah: I love that. And the other thing, I'm sure that you realize this, I think the power of doing something like this, like the hype book or really going through that, also helps you see the skills that you have that are transferable. I work with so many moms that had a big or good job before she had kids. And then maybe she took a couple of years away, and she immediately was like, "Ooh, well, I just was a stay at home mom." And I'm like, "Okay. But let's talk about the things you actually did during that time. Did you organize PTA meetings? Did you organize things for your kids?" Like I have a girlfriend that the birthday parties she throws for her children are better than half the weddings I've been to in my life. I'm like, that doesn't feel like a big deal to her, but I'm like, "Okay, but take that lesson. You're a great project manager. You're a great time manager." And it doesn't have to be a stay at home mom, but like, I did have a girlfriend that she was in project management and then she got a job in sales, and she thought, "Oh my gosh, I have no experience in sales. I'm not going to be very good." But I'm like, okay. "But let's talk about the transferable skills, the things that you learned, because you know, being a project manager, you have to work with a lot of different people. Well guess what you do in sales? Work with a lot of different people, and you get to learn the whole different personalities."

So I think when you look at the hype book, there are couple of things that it will do. One, getting your confidence is huge. Especially anybody going through a transition or trying to move up or take that next step. You've got to have a foundation of confidence. Two, it's good to remember the things that you've forgotten. So often

when we think about like, “Maybe I’m thinking about the role that I’m in right now, what are my accomplishments in this role?” But you forgot about the things that you did for jobs go when you were like 20. And it’s so good to be like, “Wow, I have a whole plethora of skills, talents, and things that I can look at for what I’m doing going forward.” And then the other thing is the transferable skills. And also I love that you put the charitable deeds in there. So often we think we can either give time or money, but there’s so many things that we can do to give back that have to do with skills that we have that we maybe have totally forgotten about. So I love that. Well we are almost at a time, and I have a couple more questions, but I could talk to you all day. Maybe we should just do this again. Maybe part two, I don’t know. But what are you most proud of in your life?

Toni: I will say, what I’m most proud of, I’ve had some really big accomplishments in my life, and I was one of those people that always was very modest and, you know, just let my work speak for me, I don’t have to talk about it. But when I was in my twenties, I did something really big. I had never been exposed to pageants or anything like that, but I decided I wanted to go back to school, and to pay for school, I thought pageants was a way to do it because I thought, how hard can it be? You put on a swimsuit, you answer a question and you get scholarships. I know. So naive. But when I went to the school pageant to find out about it, I found out it was actually a preliminary to Miss Alabama, which then went on to Miss America. And I found out there had never been an African-American Miss Alabama. And at that point it had been about 70, over 70 years. So it became my fierce determination to level that playing field. And it took me 18 months and 13 tries, but I became the first African-American to earn a Miss Alabama title.

Leah: Oh my gosh. That’s amazing. I love that you were first.

Toni: I’m so proud of that. It was a big accomplishment for me. And I think part of the reason I don’t talk about it a lot, because I’m just not the pageant girl. I didn’t know about pageants before, and I really haven’t followed them since breaking that glass ceiling, but it was important for me to do that, because I wanted to level the playing field. I wanted to create opportunity where I felt like there wasn’t. And a lot of people during that time told me, Alabama was not going to have a Black winner, and that I needed to focus on my education and things that were attainable. And the

interesting thing about it is they weren't dream killers. They were people that were realists, and they wanted me to focus on the attainable and not what they felt like couldn't happen. But, after all of those tries, I was actually, you know, able to break that glass ceiling and create opportunity for other young women to see the possibility and for Alabama to shift, you know, where it had been there. And there's now a project in the works for a movie around that. So we'll see where that goes. So I'm super excited about that, but that's something that I'm really proud of. It's just taken me much later in life to really own the pride that I have about that and the significance about what it meant to pioneer and to keep my determination and my confidence throughout that whole journey. But I'm super proud of that.

Leah: Did you face a lot of racism during that time? Did you have overt, like in your face, or was it...

Toni: It wasn't really overt, it was pretty subtle, but it was obvious. So I won the pageant at my school. I went to Miss Alabama, and I made the top 10. And so to go back again, you have to compete in other local preliminaries. It took me eight preliminaries. And of all eight of those, I was first runner-up most of those times. So I competed in the first one, I was first runner-up and I would be the only black girl amongst about 20 to 25 other white girls.

Leah: Oh wow.

Toni: And so I was first runner-up. Then the next one first runner-up, the next one first runner-up. And then I think one, I was second runner-up and then another one, I was first runner-up, first runner-up. So it was that kind of very subtle, but obvious that, "She's good enough, but we're not going to let her, you know, win." And with everybody telling me that it wasn't going to happen, it was just like, God just had this little shield around my heart that their doubts did not penetrate my belief and faith in the possibility that this could happen. I was on a very, very, very determined journey. I mean, I've always believed in, my mom really drilled in us about Habakkuk 2:2, write the vision, that scripture about write the vision. So all over my apartment had little postcards that said Tony Johnson, Miss Alabama. It was on the microwave. It was on the nightstand. It was on the thermostat. It was at the door, it was everywhere. So I had the vision inside me. And I could see it. And I was just so determined. And then it finally came to fruition 18 months later. And I went on to the actual Miss USA pageant,

because I ended up competing the last one that competed, it was a Miss Alabama USA pageant. And so that's something that I feel like is very significant. And it taught me also, to answer your question, it was awakening to how I can be discriminated against because of the color of my skin. I've been very fortunate to grow up in a family where we have diverse circle of friends. Our church was mixed. The school that I went to was always, you know, mixed the neighborhoods we lived in. So I was really not aware of how I could be and would be discriminated against because of the color of my skin. And that was a big awakening for me during that time, but it didn't stop me from pushing forward. So that I will say is something that I'm really proud of.

Leah: Thank you so much for sharing. I'm glad that you're starting to talk about that a little bit more now. And then, how do you define success for yourself today?

Toni: Success for me today is having the freedom, with my time, with the kind of clients that I work with, with where I spend my time, how I spend my time with my family, that is success to me, which is very, very different. How I spend time with my friends and my community, my network, my tribe. Success before when I had my agency was the next big account. You know, the next big award. It was all of those things. It was, how do we make more money? It's very different now. It is about community. It is about fellowship. It's about who I work with and who I'm surrounding. Quality of life to me is where success lies for me now. And I absolutely love that.

Leah: For those of you listening on the podcast, I had praise hands while she was talking, and I had a huge smile on my face, because of all the answers that I've heard, that's definitely one of my favorite. Thank you for being even more than I had hoped for. You're an amazing woman, and I'm honored to have shared this and I can't wait. Oh my gosh. If that documentary movie happens, we're totally going to have a celebration.

Toni: I'll let you know.

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