

## 100. Choose to Challenge: A Live International Women's Day

### Panel - Transcript

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Welcome to Her Story of Success, a podcast featuring stories of influential women trailblazers and business leaders who have defined and pursued their own versions of success and fulfillment. We hope these stories, lessons learned and celebrations inspire you to believe in yourself and your own journey a little bit more. I'm Leah Glover Hayes, your host and CEO of Her Story of Success women's media and business collective, and I want to welcome you to our 100th episode. I am so excited about today, and I'm honored that you are here having this conversation with me.

I did want to do something special for today, so today's episode is actually a live panel that I hosted for International Women's Day with three of my mentors and heroes. But before I get into that, I wanted to share with you a little bit about this journey and see if you can relate to it. So I want you to think about, I started this little bitty podcast with a vision and a dream a few years ago with my friend Ellen Hoffman. And we were doing it. It was great. We both had full-time jobs. This was, I wouldn't even call it a side hustle. I would call it a side hobby, that we were trying to figure out what we were doing. I knew that I wanted to do something with this podcast, but it was just going to be a part of it. And so when Ellen got pregnant with her second child, she was like, "Hey, I do not have capacity in my life to continue doing this." And I was like, "Hey, that's totally fine. I'm going to keep running with it." And I think that was a very important lesson, that this whole podcast is about. We have seasons in our lives, seasons of success, seasons of stepping back, seasons of hustle and grinding, seasons of rest. There are all kinds of seasons, and on this journey, I think it's important, especially as women, that we're honest with ourselves about where we are, what we can do, what our capacity is. And I would love for this moment, in this 100th episode, wherever you are in your life, maybe you're washing dishes or cooking, or you're on a run or you're in your car, or whatever that you're doing in this moment. I do want you to think about what season are you really in? And what can you feel yourself coming into? Because if you've been with me for this whole time, I'm pretty confident that you are not in the same place that you were two years ago. And I want to give you permission and also challenge you, and that's what this panel was about, was challenges. I want to challenge you to really get honest with yourself and say, "What have I actually already accomplished? And what is it that I want to accomplish that I haven't yet, that I either don't have confidence in, or maybe I'm a little bit afraid?" Because with this 100th episode, I'll be honest with you, when I started thinking about it, I honestly started to get depressed.

Because I was like, man, there's so much more that I wanted to accomplish by the time we reached our 100th episode. I wanted to be so much bigger, I wanted to be so much more quote, unquote successful, but then someone challenged me, because I have great mentors and this great community, but they really challenged me to say, "Hey, Leah, look at what you've already created. What you have and the people in front of you, is an accomplishment all on its own. The fact that I got to 100 episodes is an achievement in itself. And so I just want to ask you, what is it that you're not giving yourself credit for? And what is it that you've come up to, or you have achieved that you are discounting because you have so much further to go, or so much more you want to do?"

So during this episode, we're going to be talking about challenges, and our panelists are Mignon Francois, the founder and CEO of The Cupcake Collection. She has an incredible story of starting her business with \$5 and a lot of debt, and turning it into a multi-million dollar business with locations in Nashville and New Orleans. She has been named with honors and awards such as "Woman of Legend and Merit" from Tennessee State University, "Emerging Business Leader of the Year," and the "Family Business of the Year Award" from Black Enterprise Magazine. And she was also featured on episode 15 on Her Story of Success.

**Mignon Francois:** Everything you need is already on the inside of you.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Domonique Townsend is the founder of We Optimize Work. You heard her on episode 98, talking about her company where she helps moms and CEOs manage their time and raise a family without compromising their sanity or their goals. She's coached more than 3000 people and continues to give back to the community with serving on boards around Nashville.

**Domonique Townsend:** Throughout the career path, I learned that I shouldn't have to fight every day to be heard and be utilized, but if I have to, let me figure out something so the next person can have these tools, so it won't be as hard as it was for me.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** And we also have, Alexis Isham, Who's the co-founder and co-president of Risera, which used to be Unlocked. It's an ethical jewelry brand that employs and empowers women survivors overcoming homelessness, domestic violence, incarceration, and forced relocation. She just partnered with Thomas Rhett's wife, Laura Atkins on a new jewelry line for them, so we'll have the link to that in the show notes.

**Alexis Isham:** We kind of had no idea what we were doing, honestly, we were like, "Okay, if we're going to like, actually employ people and make money..."

**Leah Glover Hayes:** So as you're listening to all these challenges that these women have faced, what got them through it, what kept them going and how they're continuing to challenge themselves moving forward, I would love for you to put yourself in their shoes or put their challenges into your own life and let it be relevant. Like, what is it that you have faced and overcome? How have you helped other people along your own journey, and how are you challenging yourself to sometimes just give yourself grace for the season that you're in? I think that was one thing that I took away a lot from both Domonique and Mignon and Alexis, that sometimes our greatest challenge is really to give ourselves grace, and to see the value of who we already are and the value of the things that we've already accomplished. And you know what, maybe I'm just talking to myself today, maybe this isn't relevant to you at all, but I hope that it is. And I hope you enjoy this amazing conversation with these three women. And if you didn't get a chance to already check out Collective615, I've talked about them a few times, they're the ones that hosted this amazing panel discussion with these ladies. And I hope that you find value in it as much as I did. So thank you so much for being a part of Her Story of Success over the last few years. Thank you for being a part of today, and I hope to continue to have conversations with you on your own journey of success and fulfillment.

Thank you ladies for being here. We're going to have honest, awesome conversation. And Mignon, I want to start with you because you have been in business for like 10 years, right, or a little bit more. There's been some ups and downs that you faced, starting from \$5 and a word from God to having a multi-million dollar business in two states. But we just came off the one-year anniversary of the tornado ripping through your entire community, and we all faced the coronavirus, but I know that you had a unique experience with being devastated by the tornado and then corona days later. Can you share with us, when that happened, when you woke up to the devastation, what did that feel like for yourself and seeing what it did to your business and your community?

**Mignon Francois:** I would say we're still not back together. The construction on our home in Germantown hasn't even begun. Finding people to work, contractors, to work, some of you may have experienced that same challenge, you know, it's been a year of, "Oh, I think I can get it on my schedule." Oh, six weeks later, "You know what,

there's nothing I can do about that." And it's not even that we have this terrible amount of work, but, you know, I was at my home in Hermitage when the storm hit, and I woke up to a bunch of text messages saying, why is The Cupcake Collection standing? And I was like, what, you know is anybody talking about? And we jump up and we try to make it down to Germantown to find our magnolia tree that I have loved in the window of the people across the street. And watching all of the people walk around like zombies who needed coffee, you begin to realize how simple things really matter. And I got on the, an email to some of my friends, and said, "Can somebody bring me a coffee station down here? Because coffee matters right now. And I needed some water and bottles, and that's we need, we needed charges for cell phones." I think 48 hours went by and Xfinity had put us up a remote tower over in Salemtown. My friend Will, who has a bodega over there and just was mobilizing people. And as people would come to me in Germantown to help me, because they saw me, I would send them in further into North Nashville where they could really get their hands dirty and help. One of the biggest things that touched me was a design firm, who, they said, "There's nothing we have more important to do right now than to go help somebody." And they got their brooms and they left the design firm and they came and they swept and they, helped. And my friend Will, who I mentioned earlier, sent over a friend to cut down trees, just to relieve our house of all the trees that were on top of it. And it just showed me that, as people were climbing over the trees to get to my house to say, "Y'all, don't have anything in there?" I started recognizing that it doesn't matter that you've just been hit by a tornado. We started realizing that we held joy for people. And if we thought that we had been trying to communicate that, no other time than ever right then did we realize that we had accomplished it. And so when we don't get it right, it's devastating for me, because I've realized now that a little nine year old does not understand that there was a tornado today. It is just my birthday, and I'm going to need a cake for that.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** I love that.

**Mignon Francois:** And a 27 year old who just went through a really hard day at work, really doesn't care that that tree is in that neighbor's yard, I just need you to go inside and find my cake, so that I can be in control of something today.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** So what did that day one to a week look like? Because one it's one, like there's a magnolia tree down. My physical location has hurt, but you still

have bills. You still have the things, people that you have to pay. Like what did that kind of crisis management mode look like for you?

**Mignon Francois:** Thank you for asking that. I think one of the ways that we won in this particular climate is that we had a positive cash flow. We have been a debt-free business all of the years that we have been in business. So we own our things. We own our opportunities. I have a wonderful team who I couldn't have done it without. We were down 10 days, it matters if our store doesn't open, so we were down 10 days and, one of the girls came in and she cried and I said, "No, no, no, no. So you don't get to die as long as I'm living. And so if I eat, you eat, so let's just clean up this place. So we can get back to eating."

**Leah Glover Hayes:** I love you Mignon, you just inspire me.

**Mignon Francois:** And that's the way we handled it, together. I went to them, when we started hearing all these, this stimulus stuff, and we're going to offer you money to stay home. And I was like, "I can do better than unemployment, stick with me."

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Oh, that's so good.

**Mignon Francois:** And they, they took cuts at first. But we were, we were eventually several weeks later able to give it all back to them and gave them bonuses. And we were able to bonus a team in a pinch

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Selling cupcakes. I love that.

**Mignon Francois:** And that's why I want people to know that everything you need is already on the inside of you.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Mm. What do you call yourself? It makes me so happy.

**Mignon Francois:** Director of Joy.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** I'm like, oh, I love that phrase. Domonique, I'm going to go to you. I know that you took the scary challenge of becoming an entrepreneur and your business is starting to go and you have all of these things planned, and then COVID hits. Can you share with us as a new entrepreneur that, you know, you have this revenue planned and then the world shuts down. What, what happened on the inside of you when that happened to you?

**Domonique Townsend:** Ooh, how do I go after Mignon without crying? Just because I love you so much inside, you know, you forget the questions being asked when you just still you're meditating on those, on the words that you say, love you so much. So for me, taking the leap into entrepreneurship was a divine thing. I've always talked about doing things that have a bigger impact in the world, I saw it in myself since I

was a little child. When I entered into the career world, I quickly saw that people do not understand a Black engineer, female that has a personality, runs all over the place and still can get the job done and take her job seriously. So I experienced a lot of challenges, even as a mom, down to HR telling me, you know what, I'll take my dog to the grooming house, you know, I don't make it interfere with my job. So how do you process that when you have children and then she's comparing that to how she cares for her dog, that's how she explained it. So I navigated these challenges to try to figure out, how can I best apply what the strategy, how can I figure this out, so that way, the next person that experiences this, I can be that mad scientist behind them that gives them the tools they need, because I was the one that learned how to accomplish meeting with the most suckiest, racist, sexist, everything you name it I've went through in the form of different bosses. Like I've figured out how to do it. So throughout the career path, I learned that it was something about that. I didn't want to do that. You know, like I shouldn't have to fight every day to be heard or be utilized. And, but if I have to let me figure out something, so the next person can have these tools so it won't be as hard as it was for me. So We Optimize Work is, I do operations and strategy to support working moms and moms CEOs to better navigate how they manage their businesses and change the narrative of how they run their businesses. We often go by the defined, societal, the definition of success, work a hundred hours a week. I believe that, you know, that's not, that doesn't have to be the case if you don't want it to be. In that career world, getting into that and understanding and figuring out like, "Okay, I'm begging for my value, but I'm going to be an entrepreneur one day." I saw the vision to be like that I was being laid off. I cleaned out everything out of my desk. I was telling people goodbye and they thought I was crazy, only black employee in the office out of 1100 employees, so let's keep this Black female employee. There was one Black male employee. We both were on the layoff list. So it didn't make sense to put me on the list if you, if you get what I mean. But for me it made sense. It was like, I saw the vision it's time for me to go. And I'm not saying I was like, I, but I was like, I'm where I need to be. The next day the vision was into fruition. I sat across the table. I cleaned out everything. I was pumping at the time. So the bottles were already packed up. Everything was gone out in the car. Um, I took the key, put it in my, put the key ring in my bra, put my phone in my bra. But like, I put everything in there and I said, "You know what? I'm gonna sit in his office with nothing

in my hands and say, I'm good. I'm okay." Walked out, went to the car, bawled and grieved.

The minute I started owning my value, that's when I started getting traction. People were starting to book me. I was getting more comfortable in being me. I was like, this is what I can do. I got comfortable in spreading my message of how it can help companies basically, better engage their employees through the use of continuous improvement. I know they spoke to the bottom line. I spoke to the numbers, but in a way I was helping out the person that I know is tired of being anxious going into work, tired of being undervalued. So that's what brought me to March. Everything was in place. March 3rd happened, the tornado. And within the same, I did everything in Nashville, so things were canceled starting on March 3rd.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** What you had booked, was it live events? Like what is it?

**Domonique Townsend:** It was in-person training, a lot of in-person assessments of people just going into their companies to like look at their systems and, and figure things out. And when March hit, things were canceled, a hundred percent canceled revenue, I felt like disarray because of my children. There are four children, 11, nine, seven and two, and the oldest three were in virtual school. We had one laptop that was very slow, that I was operating my business from and two phones, and we had to trade out and make it a game. Where one person could be on the laptop and the other people will be on the phone. Because we knew how hard it was for them to navigate virtual school being on the phone. But mommy is at 0% revenue trying to figure this out. And I can't figure out what to do with my business because I want to make sure that they're doing what they need to do. And because of that challenge, as I started to pivot my business, I became my, I turned myself into my own client. I didn't have any clients. The problems that I was experiencing, I just laid everything out and said, and gave myself permission that space to say, where am I at? And so that leads me to reaching out to other working moms, hosting free coworking spaces, virtual co-working hours, but it was really that thing of wanting them to win. Like you shouldn't have to choose, or feel forced to compromise on your career goals because the workplace doesn't prepare you or have the tools or the empathy. So that's where it brought me to that pivot.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** So when that happened, you are trying to figure out with your kids in having that school, when the fear set in, what did the fear look and feel like, of, "Oh my God, I have no revenue now I'm homeschooling my children." Like what, what,

what happened in that moment as a mom, knowing that you need to provide and having no income. What did that feel like?

**Domonique Townsend:** I was frustrated, honestly, I was, I felt short because my children, they were on phones trying to do school. They were missing homework assignments because Mommy could not be there. Mommy was stretched thin and burned out, trying to figure things out, but still kept a smile on it. So it was one of those things where I got tired of the faking, tired of the appearance of what supermoms look like, and redefining that, it was like when I wake up, I should be super just because I woke up today and I, and how that looks doesn't have to be doing, the value is in being and, and the value is just allowing my kids to know like where I was, it was like, "Hey, mommy's frustrated. She doesn't know what to do." We're going to these places to pick up food from food banks. And these are food items that we can't even eat. We don't eat red meat. So we're getting, you know, so it was just down to that, to where the reality was, "Okay. How do we figure this out? But like letting them know like mommy is, like, honestly during that time I was frustrated and lost all because I was trying to fit what other people like they was like, "Get out and do this, do this." And I was just like, "For some reason, I feel like I need to work on me. I need to become my own client." And so that's where it came after that, after three weeks, I was just like, "You know what, let me just, I know everyone's saying do this because this is the perfect time to reach out to other businesses, offer these free services and do this." And I was like, "I need to meet with me."

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Yeah. You need to put your own self in through your own process.

**Domonique Townsend:** That's exactly what I did and, and everything came clear of my passion for working with working moms. I've been doing that for over 11 years with working moms, and operations and strategy, like that married together. And I was like, "This is it. I got to reach out to other working moms. What are you going through?" And so that's when all that frustration of being where I was, I was okay with telling people without the fear of criticism or looking like I'm behind, I was like, "This is me. This is what you get."

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Who has experienced that? Who in this year has like seen other people looking like they're killing it. And you're like, "Oh, my God. Am I the only one that's suffering?" Okay, good. I'm not the only one. And that's what this is about. Like, I think all of us have had hard years and it's so easy to look at that all the things that you're doing and be like, "Oh my God, she's killing it." You know, I have never



understood how you have kept so much joy. I'm going to get into that afterwards is just the two of you and the joy that you exude, the light that you just bring is the most encouraging thing. And I like, I love seeing you, cause it reminds me that, "Oh, yeah. I need to check in with myself when I get frustrated, when I'm," my poor husband is like a saint, because he gets all the brunt. I like, that's what actually, I really want to ask, like, are there times, where do you actually get mad? Do you yell at someone? What does that look like? Cause I'm like, you're just the happiest person.

But Alexis we've just met and you, I'm going to interview her and give her entire story. She had got diagnosed with Lyme disease when she was a sophomore in college and had the medical time off from school, spent some time literally hanging out with homeless people in Nashville to learn about what they needed and then created a company, because you saw the need of, homeless people need work. They need to have a job and have a transitional housing. I love that you created this into a business, and I know that you had a ton of challenges when you got started, but I really want to talk about the casting process of realizing that what you're producing costs you more than what you're selling it for. Has anyone ever done that have you started a business and what you are selling, you realize that costs, you realize, that what you're producing costs you more than what you're selling it for. I have been there, that is a scary effing time.

Disaster.

So I would love for you to just tell us like what that really, what that felt like when you realized, "Oh my God. I am actually going backwards," because I'm sure that was scary.

**Alexis Isham:** Yeah. So I'll give you a little bit of context to just to understand that. So, um, likely it was saying, I was diagnosed with Lyme disease into my sophomore year started, like she said, just honestly, befriending people experiencing homelessness in Nashville. And through that was like, "I want to start this business." One of my friends and I decided we were going to start a business to employ women specifically transitioning out of homelessness, and chose jewelry to be totally frank, just because it was something we thought we could start with pretty low capital. We didn't have any experience in jewelry. We weren't like passionate about jewelry, honestly. Which is not a great thing to say because I now run a jewelry brand. But that's, I mean, that's the reality is that we started it with the mission as the focus and then kind of figured out the revenue generating part. And so the first, we graduated Vanderbilt in 2018

and went full-time, that's when we went full time. And we kind of had no idea what we were doing. Honestly, we were like, working on park benches, making like hammered bangles, I guess, out of wire that we bought at like Home Depot. Like it was just bad, like ugly products. You would not buy them. And pretty quickly we were like, okay, if we're going to like actually employ people and make money, we have to have better products. So fast forward, we were really fortunate to work out of the back of a nonprofit for a while and kind of like grew that way and then had to take like, I guess our second leap of faith, the first being going full-time at all, and the second being, we need to invest in like some pretty expensive equipment to make real jewelry, so to speak, and like actually do this process well enough that people would buy it, even if they didn't know that the mission behind it. And so we moved into our own space in East Nashville and bought a lot of equipment. And the truth is, it's kind of a goofy story, but we were really fortunate to meet with, um, a larger ethical fashion brand, and we talked with them about like, you know, our mission and our story. And basically said, "If you'll sign a promissory note saying that you'll buy our stuff, if we can make it well, we'll take that to a bank and that's how we'll fund everything." And that's exactly what we did. And so then what Leah is referencing is, so we started doing that again, had no idea how to actually do the process yet. We were like, "Well, we already have orders. So we have to figure it out." Nothing to like really get you going like a fire under your ass. And so we started making these pieces and we were selling them for \$8 a piece and making them for \$12. And so we were like, "This is very bad. Like, we, we, you know, we can't keep doing this." This was in January of 2020, so we didn't even know what was actually coming. We were like, "This is the worst part of the year ever."

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Oh. Spoken too soon. Yeah. And so share like, and we can kind of come back around, but like share, so you're in this situation where you're, it's costing you more to make the products and you are to sell them. So when you, when Corona hit, talk about that, how that was a reset a little bit.

**Alexis Isham:** Yeah. So in a way, honestly, COVID was kind of a blessing in disguise, only from the production value, it wasn't like actually a blessing, but, um, we were able to for low everyone for seven weeks and get them on unemployment. And then my co-founder and I basically just put our heads together. He's incredible with like engineering. And so we were like, we have to figure out how to make this process work. And the rough explanation of the process, anyone who actually knows it's

gonna be like, that's a terrible explanation. But the, the main idea is we have 3D printers where we like make custom molds of products and then we'll melt down recycled sterling silver, and like literally pour it into the molds. And it'll cool. And then we'll clip off the little pieces and like polish them. So pretty industrial work, I guess. And so we were trying to figure out how can we polish these way faster, and I'm going to credit Corban entirely with it. Cause I honestly could not have done it, but, but we figured out how to make them profitably during those seven weeks. And so then when we were fortunate enough to bring everyone back to the studio, we were able to actually make everything and earn back all of the losses that we had suffered for the first quarter, which thank goodness, because we were pretty nervous, honestly, that we were going to just have to have stop.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Yeah. I think that one of the things that I love about all of you is that none of you take credit for the success that you have, but obviously you did the work. You have the partner, you started this dream.

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**Leah Glover Hayes:** Mignon, so many people look to you to sustain them. People came to you when your place is demolished there, you are this pillar, since you started, of support of wisdom of guidance, where do you get your support from?

**Mignon Francois:** Oh, well, if you look around the room, some of them are already in here. There are people who you could be transparent with, and there's people who, you know, that are going through stuff that if you lived one day in their shoes, you wouldn't make it. And so that keeps you going. So when you ask the audience who is looking at everybody else and realizing that, you know, they're doing it well, and I'm not doing anything, well, I raised my hand too, because there are so many people who I see is when you, when you start getting, becoming successful at this thing that you created, you start realizing that the problems just get bigger. So I'm not any different, you know, from everybody else, but it's the, it's the people who are sitting in this room who come and they stand in that line. And I know that what I'm doing matters.

We had this wonderful thing happened to us about two weeks ago where, y'all know what #WomenCrushWednesday is? So I had the privilege of being somebody's Woman Crush Wednesday about two weeks ago. Did y'all see, did y'all see it? It was, it was, it was, I'm still speechless. I was on Instagram and I saw somebody say, "Oh, you know, I love Mignon Francois." You know, those, these literally are the things that keep me going. And so I wanted to go over and say, thank you and see what she was talking about. And so I saw that the, this big name at the time, and I was like, "Oh, that can't be Viola Davis." Wow. That's 7.1 million followers.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Yeah, you deserve it.

**Mignon Francois:** So I sent her an inbox. She's not going to answer it, Y'all, she answered it! But she had said the most beautiful thing to me. And she said, what is the purpose of having this platform if you don't share it with anybody? And it was, I just was like sobbing, because I had been working on that very same concept of, if you're presented with a platform, you're supposed to bring somebody on stage and it has been, you know, all of, you know, you guys who way raised your hand, that you already had an experience with me. And so many of you that I know personally and have had experiences with that, keep me going, that I know that you're watching. Are you going to stand in that line? And she changed her LinkTree, her URL at the top of her page, where it would lead you to her site and led it to my site.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Wow.

**Mignon Francois:** And we woke up the next morning to more shipping orders than we've ever done in life, on one day.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Wow.

**Mignon Francois:** And that was about two weeks ago. So then leading behind that, people are standing in line and we can't keep up, and they're like "When are my cupcakes coming," and I'm like "I don't know!" And then *Southern Living* comes out and I get a spread in *Southern Living* in March. And so, so then we get this and then people are standing in line saying "I have loved you for this long. And I'm so excited. And like, it came in my mailbox and Oh my gosh. And they came in and said it." So I'm just saying it was one thing after another, after another thing of people. And then Anthony O'Neil, who has a gazillion followers, you know, had me come and do a Black History Month panel with him. So all these things are just happening all at once, but I'm saying that all to say, it's been the same people standing in the line and saying, "You got to go and you got to hear. And oh my gosh, that was me." And then flooding our inbox and all that kind of stuff that made all these things happen. And so it is you, it's, you all along. And you don't think that you have a purpose or that you matter to somebody, but it's you that gets me up because I know that somebody told somebody that I was going to be amazing. So let me go ahead and put my amazing cape on. You know? Because, I always say this, I was New Orleans raised, but I was Nashville made. And I, that is not lost on me. The people in this community that have said, "We love you and your family Mignon. We love what you're doing." They'll come and try anything that I come up with. And it makes me want to get up every day and be better at it all the time. So it's, it's this group, it's these people.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Thank you. Well, you have been that to so many people, and I think that's why I was excited to have you on this panel because you give so much to this community. And I just, as a woman business owner in Nashville, I'm grateful for all that you do to give back to us. So thank you. I appreciate it.

Domonique, gosh, you have had so many challenges, and I know that you became your own client. And so I did an interview with her, it was episode 98, and I have a business partner and she doesn't usually call me in the morning because she has a full-time job. So I'm like getting ready, I'm stressed out about something and she calls me and like in tears, and she said, "Leah, I just listened to Domonique's episode and I need her." And she called her and she booked her and she worked with her and she's already helped her with some major issues. She's the VP of finance for a global company. And so I just want to say, like, it's so important the work that you're doing and Momlennials, Dawn from Nashville Mom is here. So I just love that you are

supporting women out of a need that you had for yourself and the way that you're giving back. But what is it, if you, if all these people were going to line up and be your client, what is it that you're helping them do? And why is it that you're able to do that?

**Domonique Townsend:** Wow. Yeah, that touches me to know that somebody, cause I just do it because I love it. And I know the more I do things that I love, somebody else can do more of what they love. And then the next person doesn't have to go through the ish that I went through because of the false beliefs that I had, because it was set by society that, you know, if you don't do these things, then you're not defined as success. And that means a lot to, even when I was speaking to her about her challenges, it was just more of, I love when people trust me enough to be vulnerable. So with clients, how I can help them is giving them the space to be vulnerable, no matter what that looks like. I want to get your mess, the messier the better. When you talked about processes and the \$8 and 12, I was going to my head until you said you had a friend. And so, but I just love meeting people where they are and, and not giving them this cookie cutter thing. Of course, it's a framework, the defined steps that I walk people through, but it's where are you at? And then we can apply it according to where you are at. And I think that many people, when you see people, when you look at social media, when you look at all of these resources out there in the world for help, they're going from where they are, but they don't, they're not necessarily meeting with where you are, so sometimes you feel like you're falling short because you're, you don't see how they can work a thousand hours a week, and you, you know, you only have 20 hours a week, so you already are beating yourself up. So I meet them where they are. Oh, if you have 20 hours a week to do this, let's see, let's figure this out. And what goes outside of that, it gives the person permission to ask for things. Cause it's hard to ask for help. And I think the key to ask for help is starting with your capacity and only you know your capacity. What does that capacity look like? But if you say, "Honestly Domonique, I want a million dollar business, but I only have 30 hours a week." Okay, now, if you look at the free resources out in the world, that's not possible. "Oh yeah. I want to raise a family and run this million dollar business and only work 30 hours a week." "Uh, I don't know, Domonique. That's not gonna happen. That's gonna be real slow." "Okay. Well, whose timeline are you operating by?" You know, so then we, I go and see where's this person at, what is your ultimate goal? What does that look like for you and seeking and seeking help? When you do your capacity, when you look at your capacity, that's when it's easier to

ask for help and really get clear and identifying, what is it that you need and are the things that you're focusing on, what needs to be removed? We often gather these things that become our comforts in how we operate our business, how we operate our day-to-day life, but we never look at, does it need to be removed? Um, I talked about efficiency recently where people are like, I just need to do things faster because I don't have enough time. Well, let's look at the things you are doing, what needs to be removed, and then what's left what can be done faster and if not, what can be delegated or automated, but it's according to your timeline and your expectations. So if you're giving other people the expectations that you're going to work around the clock or push through, people are going to assume that you're okay with that. And that's when we start taking it personally, because no one's helping us, but it's only because we're setting this expectation of what, how everyone is supposed to uphold us to. And I think that's the thing that I talk with clients for. It's just meeting them where are you at? And if you want to work a hundred hour work week, whatever you, whatever you want to do, if you have, if it was a person that had two hours and they just wanted to do something for themselves. And so that's the thing that we look at too, of just like meeting the person where they are. And then developing the process that goes, according to that.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** One of the themes that I keep hearing is the permission and giving yourself permission. And, you know, one of the things that I've personally dealt with, I don't know what it's called, but I think it's survivor guilt. Like I, my husband and I don't have children. I don't even have a dog. Right. And you know, when Coronavirus hit everybody, I felt like the things that I was dealing with weren't as important as someone that had children. My sister has three kids, her and her husband both work. And the challenges that she faced are so much bigger, and to me, more important than mine, because I don't have that same challenge. And so then I would go in this downward spiral of, "Gosh, I don't have these same challenges. Why am I not able to get done the things I need to get done?" And then I would just be like, "I'm more of a loser because I'm like over here complaining about not being able to..." Does that make sense? Like I just go on this downward spiral, because I didn't lose as much as other people. And so that's one of the things I was so inspired by was just the way that you allow people permission to feel what they feel and to be able to start from where they are, no matter where that is or what that looks like. So I just appreciate your work and what you do, cause you've, you've helped me.

So Alexis, I would love for you to share, um, part of your cool story is the first investor into your company. So I love that kind of, some of the full circle stuff that she went through. Y'all when there is a movie made about her, this story, you're going to see it and be like, that's, that's not real. That's not true. So I think that's so funny. So tell us a little bit about your, um, your first investor. I'm doing it in air quotes.

**Alexis Isham:** I was going to say investors is kind of a liberal use word here, but, so like I said, I was out of school wandering downtown. That's where we last left me. So here I am. And so I, at the time was honestly like very sick. That was my main, you know, like now it's an easy story to tell, but at the time, like it was actually just me being sick for the most part. But I really started connecting with some of the people that I was talking with and just forming real friendships like that I still have to this day. And so through some of those conversations, I was like, I really, I feel like there's an opportunity for a business that would employ people coming out of homelessness while simultaneously helping address some of the barriers they're facing, because those who are from Nashville or even are in Nashville for a few minutes, probably know, we have amazing resources here. So all sorts of non-profits, there's a lot of social enterprises in the area. It's a really good area for something like this, but I didn't see a lot that was aimed specifically at employment for people coming out of homelessness. And so that was something I wanted to kind of like merge a bunch of different resources that exist anyway. So the real way that I met my co-founder was that, um, I was visiting Vandy just to see friends. I was still out of school and I got locked out of my car, which is not abnormal for me. I now have a car that has an automatic one. Thank God. So I'm, I'm really on the up and up, but, but yeah, so I was locked out of my car and sitting on the side of the road, just like waiting on my mom to come like, "Oh, here I am." And this guy that I had known freshman year walked by and was like, "Hey, like I heard you're out of school, tell me what's going on." And so I'm like telling about how I'm Lyme disease and I'm like meeting all these people on the road, whatever. And he was like, "That's really interesting." And so we basically end the 30 minutes it took me to get spare keys, decided like, "We're going to start this business. We'll figure out what it looks like." So I get well enough to go back to school the next semester. And we start meeting once a week, going over what it'll look like. Fast forward, the end of our junior year was when, you know, like your grandma will start calling and being like, "What are you going to do after you graduate?" And so my original answer was like, "Oh, like go into finance, like everyone



else. Or, you know, like something like that." But I really started fasting and praying about it and I was like, "Okay, if this is going to be a real company," it was unnamed at the time. But like, if this idea is going to be a real thing, I feel like I need some sort of sign. And so I was just like, you know, in this period of discernment, and then one of my good friends was a guy named Ray, and quick background on Ray, so he had been homeless most of his life. So I had met him prior to Lyme disease prior to all of that. I had been volunteering with homelessness for a lot of time. And so Ray was kind of like my adopted grandpa. We had met years prior and just kind of formed like a fun, like relationship where we would go to Chick-fil-A and eat and hang out. So Ray calls me in this period of discernment and he's like, "Alexis you, you need to come to the hospital, I'm dying." And he had had terminal cancer for a few months then. And so I'd actually been as power of attorney. So I was, I was pretty well aware of what was going on. So I go to the hospital, and we have this amazing conversation about his life and what it had meant to him. And at the end of that, he was like, "Actually, I wanted you to know I have a storage unit. And in that unit I have a duffel bag of money. And whenever I pass, I want you to have it." And in this, I mean, bizarre turn of events, a man who literally didn't even own a mattress, became the primary investor, that's the air quotes, in what would become Unlocked. So it was, it definitely felt like it was meant to be. And so it's hard to question that. So I was like, "Okay, we'll go full time." And had no idea, like I said, no idea what we were doing and just have kind of figured it out since then, but it's been definitely a journey. And I've been blessed with that.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** I love that all of you share a similar, like, faith journey in starting your businesses. All religions, everything is welcome here, these three just happened to share a faith background getting started. But I love the confirmation that each of you received that were so different. Right? I love the cupcake story of like having \$5 and the bake sale from Dave Ramsey. And you like, getting let go, like literally she had a vision in a dream that she was going to get fired, cleared out her office, and then it happened, like it's crazy. And then she, you know, got Lyme's disease and this homeless man that had nothing had a duffel bag of money in a storage unit, like that just does not happen like that. It's just some of those things it's like, if you ever get, and I think God does that sometimes, so that when you are low and that's, the last question I want to ask is like, I would love for you to share when you were at your

lowest and you were like, "I cannot do this." What was that thing that you held onto, that said, "Nope, I got this word from God and I'm going to go forward?"

**Mignon Francois:** I've had a lot of low points. Which one you want me to tell you? No, and I think that's the thing that I want y'all to know that just because you get there doesn't mean you're not going to fall back, you're going to climb out and fall back. And I've seen my life. I had this dream where I was digging myself out of this hole and I get enough strength with all this dirt underneath my fingers to grab onto a tree. And I'm grabbing onto this tree and I'm getting ready to get out of the hole. And somebody is pulling on my foot below me and I look down and realize that she needed me to help her get out. So I needed to hold onto that tree, so that she could use my foot to get out.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Wow.

**Mignon Francois:** And that has been my life that I go through this stuff and I do it transparently and I tell you my business so that you can be about yours. The lowest point I think I had was being married. I met my husband and... but I had been married for 21 years. I was a stay at home mom and my husband asked me for a divorce and it was like, first of all ? And then second of all, y'all know what that, first of all, and second of all, "I've been taking care of your children. What am I supposed to do?" And what many people don't know is that we opened up The Cupcake Collection for me, for something that I could do. And so he was like, "Well, let me help you, you know, get all your things that this thing you've been wanting to do so that you can do that. So you'll be able to have a way to take care of yourself." Um, and we had nothing, we were living in Germantown. We didn't know that was a thing. It wasn't the thing that it is now. You know, because we do take a lot of pride and credit and saying we helped to put it on the map. People told us that no one's ever gonna stand in line for anything in that neighborhood, let alone be it gourmet.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Watch this.

**Mignon Francois:** You know? And so it's just like, Going through that, when we moved into that house, we moved into that house with two rooms and a half bathroom. We're talking 2005, our two rooms had no carpet. This is plywood floors. And our half bathroom was a tub and a toilet. And I have seven children, do y'all know that? So that's a family at that point of eight because we had six at the time. So we needed a second bathroom. Our second bathroom was a Home Depot bucket with a toilet seat

on top of it, in a room where there was a door where you could get privacy. So it becomes like...

**Leah Glover Hayes:** You had people counting on you.

**Mignon Francois:** Hungry people don't stand on the corner with signs only, saying I will work for food. They look like her and her and her, and they're in here right now, and they don't know how they're going to make ends meet. And they don't know what tomorrow looks like, and they don't know what they're going to do next. And they came here because they were hoping that somebody would say something that would give them what the fuel that they needed to get the thing that they need to get started. And that's what I was living across the street from all these affluent people who didn't even know that we didn't have electricity on a regular basis, that water didn't come out of our sink just because we turned it on. And my children would go to school and just be as happy as they can be and not tell anybody that we have to eat at school today because we don't know what we're going to eat when we go home. So we were the living food insecure, which is so prevalent here in Middle Tennessee. And this is what that looks like.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** I love that you do so much to give back and support. And I think that's, that's why it makes it easy not to question that, like, I don't question, like, why do you, because I see that and I love that. So thank you for all that you do.

**Mignon Francois:** Thank you. I hope I answered you in the long run.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** You did. I will never get that image out of my head, now, the reaching for the tree and have someone holding back instead of kicking them, you look down and say, Oh, you need me. And I'm going to get out for both of us. It's beautiful.

**Mignon Francois:** When you're digging and clawing yourself out, somebody still need you. When you're tired of being sick and tired, somebody still needs you. When you don't have enough of your own, somebody still needs you to share what it is, whatever you do have, because you don't know what it is everybody else is going through. And that's what's been my joy.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** I love that. Gosh, Domonique, what was the lowest point of yours and what got you through it?

**Domonique Townsend:** I will say, in taking a leap in entrepreneurship, I had a ton of opportunities that people got to see on the surface, but behind closed doors, I was down the street at a place to sign all this paperwork to keep the electricity on. People

were excited and they were congratulating me, and behind I would say, "Okay, I got to leave because I got to get to this place before three o'clock," only for them to get your ID, ask you all of these questions, just make you feel small. And then you're gonna have to go down the street to go to the food bank, to get food that your kids really can't eat. I would say, it was, I wouldn't say a lowest point, it was a lost point and not understanding, having too much pride to ask for help, having too much pride to say, "Okay, the kids we making it fun. They like ramen noodles." Now, even though your kids are burnt out on their end up liking it, we, we may, they still like it now, but they didn't know, like we made it a party. Like you can do all, any seasonings you want and this not even realizing that, "Okay, Mommy doesn't know what we're going to do with this." My husband, he went back into work and um, cause you know, he was just like, "Well, I believe in you, you know, you're going to make this journey work." I said, "But why do I feel, you know, why do I feel like this? You know, I'm smiling at everyone, but I'm angry that people make you feel like that when you do need help." Not even lost. It was more of that figuring it out. And during that point, I realized where my calling was. It was being honest with people. And so I just started being honest with people like, "Oh, well this is what's happening, or this is what's going on." And the children, they just started selling their I have the power shirts and I was just make, make a joke like, "Oh, you can buy yourself where you want to take yourself out," when they literally are buying their dinner. Because I didn't have the money and we were giving them creative ways with their business to do things.

**Leah Glover Hayes:** Your kids started selling?

**Domonique Townsend:** Yeah, they've been business owners since five and seven. But like just for me, I was in that moment, and I was like "Oh I don't have to experience this like this. There's something about this that I need to do." And then I just started to change the narrative, speaking to people's like, "Okay, we need to figure out what to do here." When businesses are like this, or business owners feel like this is a point where they feel lost, you know, like they're questioning where they not questioning where they are, because when people you look for money, they're like, you need to hit this certain revenue or you need to do this or have this many clients, like all of that just didn't, it wasn't there. It was just, I will smile and do things, but it was for free. And so, I started owning my value. That's the push. And so I was like, "I've got to charge people because there's literally bills that need to get paid." It doesn't matter how savvy I am in speaking. If someone doesn't pay me, it doesn't mean anything for the

legacy I'm seeking to leave. Thank y'all. Bless y'all. And so for my children, I said, "I think I figured out why I'm placed here on earth, because they have these real deep conversations with me." Y'all can have a conversation with them. I joke and say, "We made the most beautiful children," and they always say, "Well, you didn't make us, you and Daddy didn't make us. God did, you know, we chose you." And I was just like, "You know what? You're right." And I figured my purpose in life is to be the generational curse breaker. And I go through the things because I'm just like, "Oh, I'm experiencing this because," we didn't grow up poor. Like it wasn't that. But I always saw the limits that, you know, like my parents, Oh my gosh, my mom, my dad, I saw, but I saw certain things that I was like, "What was that? Like, is it up to me to break that so that when they would be okay to do that, or what was it, you know, you shaped and formed in a certain way?" And so for me, it was like, "Oh, I'm supposed to break that." So all of those moments happened when I was just like being creative and getting them to do their own thing, while you know, me and my husband figured things out, we'd go, you know, he went back into work and we just, as things started picking up, but I was like, "Oh, the legacy that I'm here to leave, it's a value that I'm offering. So I need to treat myself like that. I can't treat myself like, or have the shame around when someone asks you what your fee is, and I'm trying to figure it out. And I'm just, you know, nervous and, and, and all of that," because I think I was hesitant on it because I witnessed things being done for free through my parents. Like they're brilliant. My mom's, my dad's passed, but he's, but he was brilliant and people didn't know that he did, they, a lot of things for free. And for me it was the association for it, but it took me to be in a seat at Salvation Army for someone to question me on my own, like, do I deserve to get my electricity bill covered? And so it, so it was like, "Okay, I got to value myself in this other thing, apply my expertise. I'm getting questioned here to get an electricity bill covered."

**Leah Glover Hayes:** I love that you found your own, not just like found your own voice, I feel like you've always had your voice, but I think that the thing of acknowledging and owning your power is so important.

We've got to wrap up. I just appreciate you and what you're doing and look forward to working with you. She's helped me change my own narrative recently. So thank you for that Domonique. And I'm going to ask you yours when we meet on Her Story of Success. So stay tuned, open up your podcast out, Her Story of Success, and you'll get to hear the rest of Alexis' story.

So I do just want to, I just want to thank you ladies for sharing your heart and your story, please. And thank all of you for coming today. And the last thing that I want to encourage you with is I think that you heard from Kathy, everybody today about just being in community and as we get to continue on, um, I do just want to recognize Kathy and all that she's done. Collective615 is making a way for women and you're putting in your efforts and your action, where your mouth is. And I appreciate that. You've been a pillar for me. I'm an example. Liza Graves with Style Blueprint is celebrating and, um, helping women succeed through her business and supporting women business owners. NFocus Magazine, April from studio bank, Brittany with Legends Bank, Heels Handshakes, Shannon Stewart, if you guys don't know her, raise your hand, Shannon, she has an amazing group for women to help them succeed in events and entertainment industry. So I'm just so proud of all of you. If you're not connected, please get connected. And thank you so much for this, that conversation.

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