

believing-becoming-the-journey-of-a-business-savvy-black-wom...

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SPEAKERS

Ashlee Ammons, Jennifer Malcolm

- J** Jennifer Malcolm 00:10
Calling all women who are curious and called to be women warriors are rising in this day and age to heal and grow together. I'm your host Jennifer Malcolm, self made entrepreneur, women advocate and life balance expert. Welcome to the next episode of the Jennasis Speaks podcast The Transformative Power of Women's Stories where every woman has a story and every story matters. And yes, that means you ladies, if you're listening, that means you. Today I'm excited because I have a fellow alum, Bob Wallace University yellow jackets for life. Ashlee Ammons, and with me today, so welcome, Ashlee,
- A** Ashlee Ammons 00:44
Thank you so much. I'm so glad to be here and also yellow jacket for life.
- J** Jennifer Malcolm 00:48
Yes. We've had so many bw people on our team and in our internship and as clients and on the podcast. It's fun just to unite in that simple way. Very much. So I was like, I'm excited to be here today. Good, good, good. So I am going to read a short bio about you and then we're going to jump into your amazing story and career path of entrepreneurship and just resonate with you today. rock'n'roll

A Ashlee Ammons 01:15
sounds good. Alright,

J Jennifer Malcolm 01:16
so Ashley is co founder of this tros the innovative event software startup she launched with her mother Carrie Schrader ministros draws an Ashley's experience as an event producer for ALS clients. Think Oprah Winfrey and brands such as Coca Cola, Ashley and Carrie had early success. They're the 38 and 39th black women to receive more than 1 million in pre seed funding this past November as she was selected among the 100 black female entrepreneurs and innovators to receive funding and 100 days of resources from American Express, and iphon women of color as part of the 100 400 program. In 2019, Entrepreneur magazine also named Ashley and her mom to the magazine's inaugural powerful women list. I love that story. I love hearing the success stories of individuals like yourself that come from small communities like Vaughn Wallace, and then just thrive and impact the world. So excited to have you here today.

A Ashlee Ammons 02:19
Yeah, I'm excited to be here. I'm excited to be here specifically because a lot of people think that that kind of stuff isn't possible if you're not from like New York or LA or anywhere else. And I'm like it is

J Jennifer Malcolm 02:31
Really are you originally from Ohio area or did you transplant into BW?

A Ashlee Ammons 02:35
I am so I'm originally from Lorain, Ohio, which for anyone who is from Ohio understands that that is Northeast Ohio, up there by Sandusky and Cedar Point and all of that. Yep.

J Jennifer Malcolm 02:45
That's also and I grew up my early age in Grafton. So it was in Lorain County. Yes. No. So Lorraine malaria. Grafton. I grew up in Podunk Grafton. So you had a glamorous, I'm gonna say most people are gonna say you've had a glamorous and sexy career. In one of your first job post bw graduation was interning for the notorious LeBron James, do you want to start just talking about that simple experience, and then we're going to go into

the rock star that you are.

A

Ashlee Ammons 03:12

So here's the thing, I think this is kind of a misconception about my career path. The things that were happening were sexy and glamorous, and all of that kind of thing. The job that I had was work, like it was real work. And frankly, I was always of the mindset. Like, if you're out here, like having so much fun, you're probably not doing a good job because you're focused on the wrong things. And so that's why I honestly think I was successful, because I never got, like, caught up in the glamour of it. You know what I mean? I always knew that I was there as a part of a team to complete a job. So did it expose me to cool things? Yes. Was it like an easy job where it was just kind of fluffy? And I was walking down red carpets? No. So you know, with LeBron, what an extraordinary experience to have while you are, you know, 19 issues when I started with them working in Cleveland, like obviously, at the time, if you live like anywhere in Ohio, like what Brian is like, the biggest thing that's happening and so much brighter than that, like, he is something that he has someone that's known globally, he keeps like Madonna, you only need one name. You don't have to say LeBron James, you say LeBron, and people know who you're talking about. And so it was pretty extraordinary at such a young age to see what that was, like, see what that looked like kind of get that grooming that I needed to go do what I was going to do once I got to New York City, which I think was helpful because there's not many people who are touching his star power. So anybody that came underneath that I was just kind of like, okay, but I mean, the internship that they hired me for, you know, LeBron, it takes a kingdom to run the king, literally. And so back in 2007, he had a marketing company that was located in Cleveland, and And it was called LR Mr. Marketing. And so this was he and his friends LeBron and infamously, at a certain point, he fired all of his agents, or all the professional agents that he had. And he hired his friends because he didn't feel like those agents had his best interests at heart. And he felt like his friends didn't. So his friends kind of built the plane as they were flying it. I mean, it's helpful to be on the Browns plane, but they built the plane as they were flying it. And they were, you know, instrumental and getting deals done, you know, between Coca Cola and Nike and whomever else were his brand partners at the time. And then things that he was thinking about doing in future like now he has Spring Hill entertainment. Now he has a charter school, like all these different things, like that core team, that's where they started. So that's where I worked. And when I first started, I was an intern. And when I left, I was something of an office manager, let's call it but all of those jobs that fit into being an office manager, so like, I remember on my first day, like, I walked into a space with white walls and no furniture, and they were like, Okay, well, I think we need office supplies. Like you need to figure that out. I was like, No, all right. So, you know, a lot of common sense, like on the job, just like, you know, figuring it out. And, you know, it grew into answering fan mail, it grew into running errands for the

office, getting groceries for the office. And then once I showed them that I was like down for anything, like I was like, hey, whatever task you give me, whether it's filing papers, or going to an event, I'm going to do both of those with the same amount of tenacity. And once they saw that, they started to give me more. And so by the time I left, you know, I was helping plan his marketing summit where these huge people like the top people at Nike basketball, were coming to Akron at the Hilton, because, you know, that was like the nicest hotel at the time. And, you know, we were doing events. And that's kind of what helped me use the internship for what it's supposed to be used for. and discover that although I was graduating with a broadcasting major, Hmm, I really think I have a knack and a love for events and everything that goes into producing a great event or experience. So that's how that internships experience was. And I would be remiss not to mention, I came up under a lot of strong men, you know, Sue, like the whole company, like a lot of men. And I have to say, LeBron is really a good guy. The people he surrounds themselves with are good guys. Like, I don't have any stories. They treated me like a little cousin. I feel like.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 07:26

That's awesome. Was there like sadness as you and I'm sure there's excitement to leave the NASS and go on to the next state of dreams and New York City and all that. But was there some sadness at that chapter of your life closed as well?

A

Ashlee Ammons 07:38

So I was actually I was a static, I was ready. So I actually told them, like, I was like, I understand that I could stay here and like, well, that'd be great. Like, I'm ready. Like, I need to see the next thing I had never lived in, like a big, big city before. And that was always the dream for me. Like, I think I always tie it back to the fact that I used to sneak and watch Sex in the City. Like, I wasn't allowed to watch it when I was in high school, but like, I used to watch it. And so I would look at it. And you know, obviously, that's not reality. Okay. Like, I just want to tell everybody, like Sex in the City is way off. But as far as a girl can dream, okay, fine. So that, like, helped me dream in that direction. And that was really always the goal for me. postgrads. So, you know, I started talking to them about it, like, around the time I was graduating, and they, they were, they helped me connect, you know, they had connections. So they helped me connect, and they helped me take that next step, because they were like, she did a great job for us, she'll go do a great job there. So like, you know, there's no, no need to like, clip her wings, like, let her fly. So, you know, I think that that was a really a really great thing. But yeah, it was always like in my mind that I was going to go like forward elsewhere.

J Jennifer Malcolm 08:50

I love that you said to like, as we as an outside perspective, people are like, Oh, that's just a sexy job. I'm sure it was, you know, and you're like, it's hard work. It was really hard work. And you really had to put your drive and energy and organization and passion into it, to make it a successful endeavor, which then really opened up the doors for you. And they're patting you on the back and cheering you on as you go on to the next stage of life.

A Ashlee Ammons 09:13

That's it. I mean, that's, I mean, you want to leave that kind of like when I left jobs, I wanted people to say, like, Oh, you know, that, that actually girl was no joke. There's a reason why when I visit New York, or when we used to travel. When I when I visit New York, like there's a reason why I go see all my colleagues, I go see my old boss, and I walk in there and they're like, Oh, that's Ashley, and people know who I am. And I haven't worked there since 2016. You know, so like, there's a reason why that happens. And it's like, it's because I wasn't planned. And it's because I was, I was a great teammate, you know, and I you know, this is a funny thing, too, because I think women sometimes are like, too modest with one another. Like, I can say that with confidence, like Yeah, I was really good at that job. Yeah. Killed it. No. What's your next question?

J Jennifer Malcolm 10:03

One, it sounds like you also left a piece of legacy behind where you're leaving your fingerprints, the incredible work that you've done, you've killed it, but you're leaving a legacy. So that that those doors are still open, those relationships are still open. And to continue to build off of that into the dreams, which goes into a lot of your success over the last two, three years of going out on your own and entrepreneurship as well.

A Ashlee Ammons 10:26

Yes.

J Jennifer Malcolm 10:28

So tell us a little bit because also in this, as you're going from Cleveland to New York, you are producing events, and you got to do events for Oprah. And for Leonardo DiCaprio. So what were those like?

A

Ashlee Ammons 10:42

So, so, okay, so when I first got to New York, I started off as executive assistant to the CEO. And again, I graduated with the broadcasting degree. So like, my mom, I think, was annoyed because she had just like her, my dad had just paid like all that bw tuition, and they were like, hey, you're gonna go to New York and do what? They were like, Are you insane? So I, but I always told him, I said, Listen, this is like the foot in the door, I understand what I need to do. Like, it's gonna be fine. So I started as an executive assistant, I had, I had soaked up things like a sponge from my previous boss, who kind of was executive assistant to CEO. It's funny, because now she's Chief Operating Officer at lebrons companies. But I had soaked up things like a sponge from her, like the way she went about her business, like the way she was on top of things and all that kind of stuff. And I took that with me into this executive executive assistant job that I have, like no experience for. And I just figure things out as I went. But what I realized is, okay, like, I have a degree, that's awesome. But like, a lot of this is like street smarts, live smarts, being resourceful, not being afraid, afraid to like, go figure out the answer. Ask someone when necessary, but really get from A to Z as best you can on your own. Like I tell people all the time, like, where there is Google, there's really no need to like, keep going back to somebody like, Well, how do you do this? How do you do that? How do you do this? No, no, no, you go on Google and figure that out. I always used to tell my interns Do not ask me a question that's global, I will lose my mind, okay? Because I want you to be that resourceful and figure it out. And so, you know, I was really great at the executive assistant job again, I got very Luckily, lucky, the gentleman I was working for, he was awesome. You know what I mean? Like, we had a really awesome relationship, really, that right hand to the man type deal. And after a while, I started to notice that like, the events team that was working inside of our company, like they would be like planning these big events, and I would kind of be on the periphery, like, a little bit involved, because my boss needed to know things, but really on the periphery, and there will be like, jobs that nobody wanted to do, like work the door. And so I would then be like, Okay, well, I see you guys have budgeted like, \$750 for this person, I will do it for \$500. And you guys can basically work me to death, because I'm salary. And so, you know, I would pick up the jobs that no one wanted to do, I would insert myself in places where like, nobody wants to manage the XYZ, awesome, I'll do that. And that's one thing about events like going to school for events is a hard thing for me to wrap my mind around. Events is something you learn like on the job, because it's a feeling like it's a feeling when you're standing there looking at how people are flowing, looking what's going on on the stage, looking what's going on in the back of house. And it's a feeling being able to be like something's wrong, you know what I mean? Or like, that's not flowing, right? Let me fix that. Or let me have someone fix that. And so that's where I was able to soak up a lot of my like, on the job experience. So after a couple years of doing that, doing both the executive assistant and then kind of growing into like an event assistant, and then like an event coordinator of that manager,

like kind of going through all of those roles. So really, I had two positions, I was doing simultaneously. An opportunity came up where somebody who worked on top of me, she was like, I really don't want to go to London for the Olympics, like, Oh my god, London, so drab at this time of the year, like I'm just like, not training, do it. And I was like looking at her like, Okay, and then also behind the scenes, she wasn't really doing any of the work, like me and my other colleagues are doing all the work anyway. So when she told my boss that my boss was like, Oh, my gosh, how are we going to replace her? What are we going to do? And I was like, Hi, boo, boo, boo, boo, boo. I'm going to do it. I was like, I'm going to do it, because I'm doing all the work anyway, I know all the things anyway. So like, I'll be coming to London. I'll be running point on this. And that's that. And so that's what happened. And that is how I ran my first event, my point on my first event, and it was the two parties that closed out the London Olympics. Amazing, like amazing. And you know, and it was that willingness to just say, I'm going to do it. And here are the reasons why.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 14:58

Absolutely want it's fun. I hear you're being assertive you have grit you're being tenacious you have passion in your heart and we've done events with Jennasis my company small events but we've done events and being that coordinator is like being it's a production event or a production it's like going to the theater there's so many moving parts and you have to adjust as you're going you're being that master stage manager that is pivoting and adjusting and something's not working and i love though that you're like alright i got this because A) I'm smart B) I'm assertive and I want to I want the work so that's beautiful.

A

Ashlee Ammons 15:35

And I think what people have to remember earlier in their career i'm talking about you know i started with this company in 2009 so all of 2010 2011 most of 2012 i was learning i was absorbing things like a sponge i was watching i was doing the jobs that nobody else wanted to do and it takes that step first i feel like sometimes people in this and i'm speaking to my brother's generation he's like 10 years my junior like they just want to like jump into that lead role and there's a reason why you don't do that because there's things that you don't know which is going to make it certain that you will hit a pothole like you don't want to hit a pothole when you're out there supposed to be like doing your you know debut like you want to you want things to run smoothly but that takes time and it takes effort and experience and oftentimes it takes doing the things that are not sexy at all and but that's how you get to that next stage that's how you get to the oprah's and the leonardo dicaprio is like i mean after i did that event in 2012 you know my boss was like well this is a thing great and so by the time we got to you know leonardo dicaprio one i had hired i had went to him and said okay like i think i'm done being your assistant like i

was like i i realized that like someone asked me to do something and i just don't care and so that's like a really good indicator i said also i'm really busy and just like don't want to do it and so i told him like i've been in the trenches with you for a long time like literally at this point like i love you but i love myself more so i'm going to hire you someone this year he can report to us and we will make sure that your life is running swimmingly might i just add that person is still working for him today so that's first things first she's awesome i love her um but you know when leonardo dicaprio came about that was like a big it was like a big event because it was like his 39th birthday or something and he was raising money for his all the charities that he does that you know benefit tigers and water and all those things that he's into and you know like by that point it was like i like i knew what was happening i mean yeah like was it cool that i was like sitting down in a restaurant with leonardo dicaprio like listening to him say like what he thought should happen like at his birthday party uh huh but then i also like i had that side thought like wow you've been famous for too long and when and like i'm a girl who grew up in the titanic era so like i really thought like meeting leonardo dicaprio was like gonna rock my socks i was just like this i was like oh my god here's my job boy so i mean and then i look back at like some of the challenges that came up in that event and again you can only keep your nerves because events high events or high stress like people know like event planner is like up there with dentists like in the you know in the stress like it's just like constant stress and so you have to have some experience under you to be able to manage that level of stress and just be able to see the bigger picture like literally somebody who was going to perform at that event and she was walking down some stairs luckily the guests could not see this but myself and another manager could see this she was walking down the stairs and her skirt caught on fire and so it was one of those things where it was like okay well one of a couple things is gonna happen she's either gonna tumble down the stairs and we're gonna go get her or she's gonna figure this out but man this manager were seasoned and so we had to wait and see what was happening and so actually she just kind of like flamingo stomped it out and tied her dress like in a little knot and went and did her thing and i was just like okay well crisis averted no problem.



Jennifer Malcolm 19:29

And it's fun to stay here the stories because there is the stress level it's like air traffic control person like dead and dead out who's coming in with safe there's all sorts of things happening simultaneously that you have to be aware of and that's that's hilarious.



Ashlee Ammons 19:46

You know what it is though it's that have you ever seen like a movie where like somebody is trying to get somewhere fast but like every time they pass a window they start walking

and then they've sprint and then they walk and then they sprint it's really really like that it's like like it's like everything's fine hi good evening oh my gosh like yeah that's what it's like.



Jennifer Malcolm 20:06

And then you also did oprah



Ashlee Ammons 20:08

Yeah so Oprah so Oprah was maybe my favorite event of all time so i used to one of my clients i work with was moët hennessy worked with them for a long time and they did this amazing event at the santa barbara film festival which this was like my favorite time of year one because i got to go to santa barbara for like two weeks and work but Basically I would build a room like from the studs like so like there's a theater in santa barbara it's beautiful historic theater it's called the arlington theater and then there's like a courtyard and so i would build a room on the courtyard so literally like from the studs like laying playing flame floor laying carpet all the stuff and every night at the santa barbara film festival they would like honor someone and so like that year it was like oprah and like robert redford and like you know just like bet like real movie stars like like movie stars like people who are going to be yeah iconic like people who are going to be nominated for oscars like this kind of thing and oprah came through one of those nights and being that i will first of all obviously i'm a black female so one two you know i was i was broadcasting major so like i was one of those kids who like when i was in college like i watched oprah every day after class like that was what my routine was every single day and you know i feel like she just had a profound impact on me understanding like what was possible and so meeting her was extraordinary because there's a reason why oprah is who oprah is and i and i watched it and i took it and when i met her she made a point to say hello and engage with every single person in that room and i mean a busboy i mean the person who was bringing her drink the person who was opening the door like she got in this little space that we had created and she like kicked off her shoes and just was comfortable and it was like well that's why you're oprah because you you've reached that level of icon but you still haven't lost who you are and i think that even that is so important as people go through their career like as you grow in your career you're going to reach new heights and you're going to this and that but like i never want to be someone where it takes someone like 15 calls to get in touch with me not call me directly send me a voice note text me you know whatever like because because it's just too much and i think that loss of reality or loss of where you come from can be just so detrimental to where you ultimately end up going.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 22:40

oh it's so beautiful it sounds like that experience with her is that she she kept her humanity her personality her ability to see people and to appreciate the people in the room and then that's amazing.

A

Ashlee Ammons 22:54

Well and i also i wait we have to like even pause here because the children of today and i'm gonna say like people who were born like you know let's call them like gen z like they didn't grow up with oprah on tv every day and i think that's part of the reason why the special that she just did recently with harry and megan like it's like the people who didn't know what oprah like does like i think they were just like oh my god but there are so many things to be said about the craft that she has that she has worked on over decades like decades there's a reason why she pauses when she does there's a reason why she knows when to push for more and when to back off you know there's a reason why when she gives you an expression it draws you in and i'm the perfect example of this i intended to be at my parents house my mom said hey that interview is gonna come on i was like alright let me sit here with her for 30 minutes two hours later i was just like oh my goodness so i mean it again it takes a lifetime of working on your craft to really get there like i think sometimes instant gratification in the society that we live in is like prevalent you know for you even like hosting podcasts or owning a company whatever that's a lifelong stuff that happens so i mean i just i want everybody to understand that it takes time and that is okay because i'm telling you you just learned so much when you're putting that time in.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 24:29

And i love that you're saying that because it is a work of art and i tell when situations come up with my marketing firm and someone gets triggered or they get their their feathers ruffled and i'm pretty calm cool and collective and i said i've been doing this long enough that not much ruffles my feathers anymore because i've grown muscles i've learned words i've learned communication style i've learned how to not react doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt or it's not stressful but i just don't react the way that i did when these these situations came up 10 to 10 years ago or something so that piece of learning the craft learning how to facilitate that and always and my desire is always to be a continual learner so even when i write here is i want to learn and i want to grow and i want to finesse and i want to change and i want to innovate and that piece of eagerness and i think that there was a lot of young you know that instant gratification i want it i want it now i want the results i want the money or the fame but i don't want to do the hard work there's there's that gap there.

A Ashlee Ammons 25:30
Yeah i'm like and that's a big bridge all

J Jennifer Malcolm 25:34
Right big bridge alright so let's transition because you have had so much success in the last couple years you really stepped forward with your mom and some initiatives so how did that dream start happening in your in your world

A Ashlee Ammons 25:47
Yeah so my mom and i back in 2014 so my mom i have to pause on her because she is one of the people that i admire most she's always been like a beacon for me like it really all which one she's always had my back but to she's always been very honest with me like she's a mom that like even though she's my mom she's not afraid to tell me what i'm wrong or afraid to tell me who i think you should have handled that differently and here's why you know she's always been someone who gives me gives me love in all the ways but it's not just like you're wonderful like she's like she's like no that was kind of not cool like you know so i appreciate that in her i appreciate her today not just as my mother for the human that she is because we we now know each other like i would say on like on a different level so in 2014 she had been an hr executive like most of my life and she was like really at the height of her career she had led like a global hr transformation for 100,000 employees she had it her company that she was working for it was based in nashville tennessee at that time and it had just ip owed so she was actually taking a sabbatical so like for the first time she was like at home like being a basketball mom like probably much to my brother's dismay because he was like seriously um so that's what she was doing and then i was still living in working in new york you know like things were going well and then we just we solved the problem that we would ultimately end up solving for so just to break it down i went to a conference and whole point for going to that conference was to make new connections because like i had a lot of connections in my immediate spaces to like nightlife and events and you know hospitality this kind of thing i wanted to make more context and like fashion and beauty and something else and so i went to this conference and when it came time to network the organizer said go up to someone with the same color jot on their name tag is you and i was like that feels very awkward and i don't think that's what i'm gonna do because there was like 1500 people at this thing it was majority women at the thing and the dot that we're talking about was like somebody went through these name tags with a sharpie and was like dot dot dot dot dot you know like it was tiny and i was like what and so i shied away from that experience because it was awkward it was uncomfortable that's how most people find networking it's just like you're in this for situation where you have to make small talk and so i went to lunch by myself and that

was fine because you live in new york you luke used to go into lunch by yourself and when i got home i talked to my mom about that and she had had a similar networking issue and we were both like well we're both pretty extroverted so like what what is this about and we just continued the conversation and so we got on my mom calls it the google so we got on the google and we started looking for just to be aware like what solves this problem you know what what what makes networking with the right people easier when you're already somewhere like there's a lot of software to get you to an event there's a lot of software to help you follow up after an event but what really you know forces the collision when you're somewhere with the right people and we couldn't find it so we built it.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 28:59

Awesome. And i am a high extrovert as well so when i go to networking events i still i shy i find the three people that i know in the room typically and then if they're talking to someone then i will introduce myself to them and insert relationships that way i am not the one that's going to just go up to someone i'm like hi my name is Jennifer Malcolm and you are like that is so and i can talk to anyone.

A

Ashlee Ammons 29:24

Well and i mean that's the thing though so what we have found over time is humans just need a little context like if you give humans context we can do the rest because communication is what we have been doing for the longest and it's so funny that you said what you just said because in fact people do exhibit like one of three behaviors when they go somewhere people go with people that they know already and then that's who they're with people might go to an event alone but we very quickly like look around the room and we're like ah there they are and then we'll go towards those people there's actually a sociological phenomenon as well called homophily so homophobia is the thought that birds of a feather actually do flock together. So that's why, if you've ever walked into a room like when we were gathering, and you've noticed that like, it looks like a bad Sadie Hawkins dance like, like men are one side women on another side, or it's like broken up by race for some reason, or whatever humans naturally do that we're predisposed to do it. And so that's not great either. And then also, you know, in the digital age, if we walk into a room, we can't find somebody, guess what, I'm bust out my smartphone, and I'm going to see what's going on in the news. So all of that present a problem because in fact, when people go to gatherings, they're there for that like spark of serendipity. Like my liberal internship came from randomly being paired up with a classmate of mine at bw, us having a conversation, him saying, Wow, this conversation was valuable. I know someone that needs an intern, would you like me to send an email? Yes, three weeks later, lebrons in

turn, that's it. That's the story.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 30:57

It's amazing. And I love that said the context piece, because my husband and son went golfing yesterday. And it was a gorgeous day here in Cleveland. And we got out and we were golfing. And there was some guy on the on the houses next to us that was just watching. And so like, you know, we finished our putt, and I just went over that a wave. And to me, like the context was, he's watching golf, I'm playing golf, I'll be friendly. And so it's that piece of if it would have been some other situation, on a sidewalk where some guy was staring at us, I'd be like, That's weird. But the context is, he's just enjoying watching a sport, and we're the ones that are coming past his house playing. And that little piece, whether it's bw, that's why I think immediately when I heard you were bw alum, it gives context, it gives relationship, entrepreneurship, you know, female, that's it. So that those piece of connections automatically give you things to talk about things to connect with. And I love that you are you kind of unfold that with your mom as well.

A

Ashlee Ammons 31:54

Absolutely. I mean, absolutely. And I mean, that's, that's really what it that's really what it boils down to. So like our software is the thing that can spark serendipity. Because it tells you where your context is. It's like, Oh, we have this thing in common or even we differ here. But let's talk about that. Because, you know, I think too often we use our eyes too much to figure out who we need to know, because we're looking at what's the person draft? Like, what's the hair? Like? What's the face? Like, you know, it's like, it's like, all these arbitrary things that actually mean nothing. And what you really need to get to is the conversation with that person to figure out, Okay, do I like them? Do I not like them. And that's the thing, you're not going to every person you bump into, you don't have to like, my big thing is people that you meet, like, give them a shot. You know what I mean? Like, try to get away from that bias that we all have. And even me, in the company that I have, like, I have biases where I'm like, oh, but then when I give that person a chance to just chat, like generally magic happens. And it's like, well, dang, I didn't know you were this, this and that, you know, somebody says, Oh, are you the first thing people ask me that? I'm from Cleveland. Oh, are you a Cavs fan? Are you a fan of LeBron, and I go, like I've like, I'm like, I really don't want to like drop that nugget right now. Because it always just turns the conversation because people are like, I don't understand what you're saying. So. So that's Yeah, that's a whole other thing.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 33:21

So I'd like you to go into that piece of how do you go from an idea and your mom and your brainstorming, to then creating software cuz you don't have tech background to getting seed money and kind of going through that process as well? Because I think you sharing that opens up people's hearts like, okay, it is hard work, it isn't just going to turn on the flip the switch, and it's not instant gratification, I have to work at it. And I have to educate myself, I need to explore new new things. But how did that bridge happen for you?

A

Ashlee Ammons 33:55

So I want to tell so everyone who might be thinking of something. So I think there might be people who have felt a pain point. And they understand that that pain point could be solved with technology. The reason why you understand that is because we're living in the third wave of technology, like, technology touches all of our lives everyday specifically, we're living in this pandemic era, like, our lives have shifted so profoundly. So you might have an idea, you might understand that that idea, or the problem that you're thinking about could be solved by technology, but you don't code like that's a conundrum right? And so my mom and I were completely in that place. And you have to remember when we started was 2014. So this is like pre mean to us to Black Lives Matter. My mom would say old people don't matter like, like it was pre all of that. So if you go to our website today, and you Google mixed rose, you know you're going to see like something that looks well presented. You're also going to see like a lot of press on mixtures you're going to see like a lot of fodder and talk about my mom and I and whatever. I want everybody to understand that we came up with the idea in 2014, our first national press piece came out in 2017. So and then, you know, after that more followed, and what people don't understand is like, people come up with an idea. They're at the idea stage, and they're like, oh, if I only got some press, then that would make my business grow. Unless you have a product, like a tangible product, like something that goes on Shark Tank that's like going viral. That's likely not the case. Because the first several years of our business, nobody was really writing about us. You know why? Because we didn't have a story yet. Like we hadn't made it through the story part gets, people want to hear about your journey, they don't want to hear about the idea. Ideas are a dime a dozen. It is the follow through that makes the story and that makes that idea turn into something else. So people should remember that like trust and believe between 2014 and 2017, even 2018. Nobody was checking on mixtures, okay, like, we were like, down in Alabama, or down in Tennessee, nobody was checking on us. emails were very slow. Like, there were there were days when the only emails that I would get were like newsletters I had signed up for so like, talk about that being a sad place to be. So basically, the way that it worked is in 20. So in 2014, we came up with the idea. My mom was first full time on the business because she had to taking that sabbatical. So she became like, our boots on the ground. She was, you know, in

Nashville, just trying to figure out the entrepreneurial scene because we had no ties to it. We, you know, even in our immediate family, like no one owned a restaurant or a store or anything like that. So we really had no one to go to to ask about like, okay, like, how do you actually do this, let alone it being a technology company. And so, you know, we started that process. At the same time, I was still living in working in New York and in 2015, in particular, my job was really high stress, like, the worst event I ever worked on was on seven 720 15 I'll never forget it because it was like being on the Titanic, understanding that there weren't enough lifeboats, but just kind of hanging out drinking wine, so.

J Jennifer Malcolm 37:06
Once you get all go down.

A Ashlee Ammons 37:08
I was and I and I had told my boss about like, a month and a half before I was like, hey, just so you know, and he just kind of said, well, sneak yourself like best and hang on darlin. I was like, Oh, my God. That's awful advice. That's awful advice. Okay, so, um, so over the course of 2015. So the biggest thing I would say in the beginning is you have to take this big vision that you have for the product that's going to solve things. And you have to distill it down to it's more it's like purest form. So my mom and I, we we do be doing research and stuff like that. And so a thing that we kept hearing is a wireframe wireframe is how you communicate what you think this product is going to do to the people that are going to build it. And so I was like, Well, I don't know how to build a wireframe. Like, I don't know, I don't know, what software does this, like, I don't know where to find it. So the easiest way I can think to get it done was I took a stack of post it notes. And I looked at the apps on my phone, and I started drawing the screens that I thought would be needed in mixed roads to get us to where we were trying to go. And then I just put them in order on the back of my bathroom door. I took a picture of that. And when we found developers sent that to them. And I was like, there you go. There's my idea. There's my idea. And they were like, Oh, that makes a lot of sense. And here's the funniest thing about that. Sometimes when you distill things down to the simplest form, it makes a lot of sense, because in fact, I learned later that when Google is thinking of a new application, that's exactly the process they go through. It's called crazy eights.

J Jennifer Malcolm 38:42
I love when you said that you didn't know what wireframe was, I was ready for you to say that you and your mom use the Google to, to find...


A

Ashlee Ammons 38:50

I'm telling you, like it's like I'm like it's so wait. And you know what's really meta about right now. I'm actually going through Google's founder University, like as we speak. So like, it's very meta, like how all this stuff has tie back with one another. So I mean, basically, the year of 2015 was, what the heck is an app? How do you get it built? My mom actually ran into the people who would become our developers at a tech conference. And what's interesting about that is we had gotten quotes from app developers in Nashville, and it was really cost prohibitive, like some people are telling us if it's going to be like, 30 grand a week, or like something crazy like that. And we were like, do we like Did you not hear us say that we're paying for this, like out of our own pocket right now. And, um, you know, we happen to stumble upon these app developers my mom did when she went to a conference and they were with like, as the development team for mixtures. They were with us from like, January February 2015. To like literally just now because we now have technology inside of mixture is so strong, amazing relationship that we were able to develop again through that serendipity that like spark that putting yourself out there. And you know, being willing to have the conversation with Though 2015 was really the What the heck is an app and building the plane as you fly it year. So you know, that was the year that we figured out, like, here's how you build an MVP, like the minimal viable product. So you can get that out to market, see what people do with it, like start to test if your hypotheses are correct. The other thing that because of your audience that I would be remiss not to mention is, at the end of 2015, my mom got diagnosed with breast cancer. And I say that to say, we were very lucky, because she caught it very early, which means she was able to go get surgery and radiation, and she has been cancer free, she actually just stopped taking, like, there's a pill you take for five years, like after you've had cancer like to, you know, like, put down the chance of it coming back. And she just finished the five years of that pill. So like, you know, we're very lucky. And the seat, the note I want to make is one, nothing Trumps your health, like there is nothing like it like the business, other family members, like all that kind of stuff. Because if you're not at your 100%, then how could you ever be at 100% for anyone else. So all the appointments that we have that seemingly have to shift because we got busy or whatever, don't do it, like keep those appointments. So whatever there is to catch, it can be caught as soon as possible. So, you know, I think that that's the big no there. And then that was really the point that's turning point for me, because watching my mom who's awesome, my co founder go through that. And she did it with like such a grace and she was brave, and she'd never lost focus, like, it made me be like, well, there's really no such thing as like a half time founder. So like, either I need to get in or I need to get out. And so that was the point where I decided to get in. And you know, as she was finishing radiation, we had finally found somebody to give us like \$250 to use mixtures and we were like super excited. We're like, Oh my gosh, like this is it. We're about to be rich. Okay, that's false, no. And so but what was extraordinary was this. So the event was on March 5 of 2016. And the reason I know that is because it's my

step, dad's birthday, and we had him working. And we did this event. So the idea behind mixtures is this. So attendees come into a venue, we don't do this virtually. But attendees come into a venue and they take about a minute and 15 seconds go through our software, the big thing that they do is they answer a series of questions. Those questions have been customized by the organizer in advance. And then the organizer weights the questions to basically engineer the serendipity that they know would be valuable among those people. So they can say a question like, you know, for women's events, like a question like my family is mostly babies, my partner teens and tweens, pets, you know, that kind of question, you would never understand how that gives people context? Because if you answer that question, similarly, you are going through similar things at home, because if you have teens at home, what's the thing that women are going to talk about running a school out of their house, that's the first thing that they're going to talk about. But that gives them a tie that binds them together. And then it also makes it so like, they can then get to other things. Oh, so like, what do you do like after they commiserate about how horrible it is running a school out of their house? They can then say, okay, but by the way, What's your job? What do you do for work, and then their relationship can grow. So that is what our software does. We're all about increasing engagement and collecting data. And so the first time it was ever used for pay, the people got in their groupings, once they were grouped, and they stay in these groupings for so long that the venue shut off the lights, like the venue was like, I understand that you're networking, but get out, get out. And we were just like, well, heck, it worked. Like it worked. And we had done some like beta testing in advance of this. And again, this is another example of like distilling things down to its purest form. Beta testing sounds so intense, like, it sounds so intense, but the way that we did it is we would like, like, get on Facebook, like back in the day, and we'd be like, Hey, we're gonna have like food and drink at my mom's house. Come over between the hours of this and this and bring your phone because we need you to try this app.

 Jennifer Malcolm 44:09
Market react right there.

 Ashlee Ammons 44:10
That's it. Like, that's it. And it was so funny, because people would like stay in, they were like getting their little group. And people would stay at my mom's house. It'd be like, one o'clock in the morning. And we'd be like, okay, okay, we're like this, we're like the events over so if you could...

 Jennifer Malcolm 44:25

So good. And I look at your, your, because I am highly relational. I connect easily with people. Some of this reminds me of when I was on match.com, before I got remarried and, and meeting people and seeing like, you were talking about physical features, and maybe you're not attracted. But what I found out was that there was something interesting about each person, it may not be a match, it may not be like that. I'm gonna marry you match. But people are intriguing. And if you can find that point of context, and a point of conversation and a piece of relationship without having to kind of fish for it and and try and your app is already building those bridges. Ship seeds. And then you can go in there and water those seeds and nursing seeds and create those cultivate those relationships and conversations. That's powerful.

A

Ashlee Ammons 45:09

I would definitely say so I mean, it's like, it's like, that's exactly what it is, you know, and there is power there. And it's so funny because it happens in all the places where we gather. So like, if you're looking to date someone, if you are in a professional setting, if you're like, relationships are everywhere, it's like something that we're doing all the time. And it's funny, because with all this technology, we've gotten kind of bad at it, because it's like all this like swiping and all, you know what I mean? Like, it's just, it's made us bad at it, and it's made us forget how to do it, I think it's gonna be very interesting to see what happens when we get back to meeting in person. Like, once people are vaccinated and whatnot, like, I think people are gonna have to go through a course of this is what it's like to be in a room of people. Like without being on a screen, like looking at yourself while you're looking at somebody else. I mean, it's like a whole, it's like, I've read so many articles about the psychology behind all of this and what it's doing to us. So I'm like, that's a whole other thing. But, um, as far as just to give, I like to give people like this timeline of things. So. So for 2015, it was how do you build an app? For 2016? It was, Oh, my gosh, we have an app, like, how do you like get it out to the market? How do you sell it? And the answer is, you're like boots on the ground. And you're tapping your network to see who will you know, purchase it. So you can do that it was a very slow and arduous process. 2017, we were still in the slow and arduous process. I would like to mention to you that at this point, I was 28. I hadn't lived at home since I was like 17 when I went to bw. And to do this, I had to give up New York. So I had to let go, I had to get rid of the apartment, I had to sell some things. And I moved back to my parents home, which was a lovely home. But at the end of the day, it was my parents house. And I was just like, I was like, Oh my gosh, I was like I so did not see, this is where this was going to go. And I will also like to say, I definitely went through a bout of depression, like the summer of 2016. And I know that that was triggered by I was on Instagram. And I promise you in the summer of 2016, everybody went to Greece, everyone I know went to Greece, I was really upset. They were posting the photos of White Houses, blue roofs, the everybody was in Santorini and I was

so upset. And what I will say there is comparison is the thief of joy. You cannot compare yourself to anybody else's journey because you have no idea outside of the beautiful pictures that you're seeing what actually is going on behind there. And so I learned that the hard way and then you know, sought therapy and got myself better. I'm still in therapy. Today, I am a big believer in therapy specifically during times like this. I mean, you need somebody to offload things to. And so my person, her name is Jill, and I'm telling you, she is like my MVP. So um, so all of those things. And then 2017 we were like still the little engine that wouldn't die. We were still like living and working in Broadway in Nashville. But the tide started to turn for us in 2017. So we went to a conference and my mom and I ended up wearing these t shirts that said, black female founder fund me got seed. And the reason we wore these t shirts, which were like a \$12 marketing situation is because we will go to these tech conferences and again, I said, you know, this is before Me too. And all these movements. And people would literally like they would go up to my mom and ask her like, Oh, can you permit gin and tonic, or Oh, and I would be like, Oh my gosh, I was like, Oh my gosh, she gonna kill you. I was like, Oh my god, you don't even understand you don't get you. And so we just decided, like, let's be very authentically ourselves. And let's just let people know what we're doing there. And so that caused a stir. That was actually the thing that led to our first piece of national press. And it was in Forbes. We also make connection to some other organizations. But the most critical one was to an organization that was in Birmingham, Alabama. It was a technology accelerator. So basically getting what is that, like an executive MBA for your business, that kind of thing. And as we were running out of funding, because we had raised around a friends and family funding from my basically from my mom's friends in our shared family. And we were running out of that because we had 250k stretch over like three years, which is like nothing for a technology company. And so we were almost at the point where it was like, ah, is it time to like, roll this up? Or should we keep pressing forward because at that point, nobody in our household had a job. My stepdad retired, my mom was our primary breadwinner and I had quit my job. So I mean, it was just like, Okay, what, what are we doing here? And so, at the end of 2017, we got invited to apply for the accelerator that was in Birmingham, Alabama, which that's a whole other thing. And we applied for it. We got in and they invested 50k into our company and then it was like Really from that point in 2018, we were off to the races. And what I say about that is, honestly, our journey got started like with mixtures as a business in 2018. Everything that came before it was like us learning, it was like junior high to high school or something, you know, or like Junior College, so like going to a four year university. And so it just takes time, like, sometimes it just takes time. But what I will say is in that in that time, like same as being an executive assistant going to director of events, you learn a lot in that time when you're spent doing the work that nobody else wants to do. Because since joining that accelerator, we want to pitch competition that was hosted by the CEO, the co founder of AOL, like I hope people listening to this, remember what AOL is, like, you've got me all that thing. You know, we

went on to raise \$900,000, an additional \$900,000 and change. That's what made us that 37 and 38, to raise a million dollars in funding, you know, over the course of 2019, we were able to deploy that capital start to put process behind hustle 2020 was a crazy year, because on this date, we are we're on March, today's March 11. So March, this was like D day, in 2020. Like, this was the day that the who was like, if a pandemic. And so, you know, it was at that point that we were like, Oh my gosh, our entire market is about to disappear. And it did like, basically overnight. And you know, we were like, Okay, well, one, we already know how to be broke. So let's like do some auditing and figure out like, where we can make cuts, we did that, you know, and then it was, let's figure out how to get a virtual feature out because obviously, that's what people are going to be doing. And so we did that we make quick pivots, we fail fast, we pivoted again, and we were able to stay alive in 2020. And that's what I keep telling people who are in business, like if you survive in 2020. Exactly, guess what you're winning. And like, you know, and even today, like, you know, I think people thought when we crossed over from 2020 to 2021, it was just going to be like, and all that's over. And it's like that's not what's happened. Like, you know, we're still, we're still trying to figure out what this new normal is and whatnot. And so I wish people would just give themselves some little bit of grace because again, like if you made it with all the things that are going on in the world, personal professional, all of that you again, you're winning. So it has been a long and arduous journey. But the thing that I'm most proud of is that we're still here.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 52:33

So good. And I have a very similar story, because we had all of our financial projections and goals, you know, this time last year, and then the pandemic hit. And you know, we really trying to pivot fast. And by May 1, I was like, Alright, our goal is to survive our job, our goal is to survive 2020 I don't care what the numbers look like, if we survive 2020 then we're good 2021 hits, and you do you feel like Alright, let's go rock and roll. And then it's not been much easier, like there has been some momentum. But I love that. He said, like, if you if you've survived, even if it's a snail pace, you're you're barely, you're barely keeping your one foot in front of the other, you still survived. And now to put that energy and joy and life back into it and keep going.

A

Ashlee Ammons 53:17

That's it. And I feel like that's where we all are, you know, I think it's it's almost strange that, like, this is one of the things like I think over the course of many of our lives that have has been like the great equalizer, because it's the one thing that is touched us all, you know, whether you've had it or not, you know, someone that has, you've seen it, whatever, you know, we have all been affected by this. And so it's just such an interesting time. I'm

like, man, 10 years from now, we're gonna be like, do you remember the great pandemic? Like, you know, I mean, it's crazy to think about, but, you know, it's like, if you're listening to this, if you're still here, you're winning.

J

Jennifer Malcolm 53:54

Exactly. Exactly. All right. So as we wrap up, what are some words of encouragement or parting words that you want to leave with our listeners?

A

Ashlee Ammons 54:03

You know, I think for anybody who's like, feels like they're on the cusp of something, the hardest thing is just starting, like, literally, I know that that sounds so simple, but the hardest thing is just starting and understanding that if you're going to start something that doesn't mean that it all happens in a day, it means that you like make a decision to take small steps, especially if you're doing it in the beginning. It's like a side hustle, you're testing things out, which I think is wise, like you like it doesn't just all happen at once. It's not like a waterfall. It's more like drips in a stream. So like you know, you do one thing that will lead you forward and then you do another thing that builds on that one thing that will lead you forward, like not having that overwhelming feeling that everything has to happen in a day like even for me today in the business that I'm in. I look at things in like six weeks sprints because life happens business happens. Like there's no way the things that are like your big goals. You're about to knock those out in a week because if you do that, it's like what was the quality of that work? You know, these Thing is, like, much to people's dismay, like, they just take time. And so just understanding that making that decision to start, that's a big decision. And then every day, taking another step on that decision is also big, you know, and it will eventually get you somewhere. So, you know, I think that I, like I will reiterate that I'm telling you, the thing I live by is that comparison is the thief of joy. Like, I think that we all do a lot of innocent nature of social media, and I'm certainly guilty of it as well. But we all do a lot of looking around. Like, we're all like, ooh, like, if I only had that house, or oh my gosh, like, how did she get those shoes are like, Oh my god, and we never sit and think of one all of the things that we should have gratitude for personally, or what is going on behind the scenes, you know, at that person situation, or maybe that person situation is fantastic. And maybe we should just be like, thumbs up to you. So I mean, I really think it's just that, you know, you have to have a need to like stay in your lane. Understand that your journey is your journey, and not get too tied up with what's going on with other people stuff, like life is all about ups and downs, and ebbs and flows and understanding that all of that is normal, I would then also piggyback that with, if you're someone who feels like you need support, having a mental health, if not, are taking care of your mental health rather, is not taboo. It's not something that should not

be talked about, like if you are comfortable talking about going to the gym, I want to normalize talking about having therapists, because it is the same thing is just working different parts of your body. And you know, I think it's so important specifically, in a year where, you know, specifically to women like women, we have been profoundly affected by all the things that have happened in the last year, a lot of us have lost jobs, a lot of us have taken on extraordinary roles inside of the household, specifically, if you have kids, you know, rebounding from that women who have been out of the workforce and are thinking about, Oh, my gosh, I have to go back to the workforce. Like I've been out of it for a while. What does that look like? so profound stressors that, you know, some of our in, I guess what, I love men, they're great. But like our counterparts aren't having to deal with that it like such great rates. And you know, and I think that that's real. And so taking care of ourselves, doing what we can to make sure that we're not just like bottling things in and leaving ourselves last and all that kind of stuff, I think is just so it's just so very important. And it's funny, if you would ask me that question, like a year ago, I would have been like, you know, hustle, grind? Yeah. Like I'm like, No, like, make sure that the person who's doing all the hustling is well taken care of to the best of your ability.



Jennifer Malcolm 57:37

That's good. And that's a core value of Jennasis Speaks, where is that self care, it is about putting your oxygen mask on. First, I got up this morning, I have 12 hours worth of work. And I looked at my husband and I said I'm going to self care. I'm going to drink my coffee and read a chapter of my book. Because once I turn the switch on for work, it's going to go and we've been walking together, we went out and played golf yesterday. But that piece of self care if I'm not taking care of my soul, my mind. And I love that you said normalizing mental health because it is it's a part of your body. And if something is physically wrong with you, you don't feel guilty about going to a doctor. So why should someone feel guilty or shame or embarrassment to say, you know what, I'm sad, I'm depressed, I'm angry. I'm overwhelmed. And I just need someone who has wisdom and experience to help me through that. And I think that's it.



Ashlee Ammons 58:25

Yeah, that's, I mean, to help you tell you certain, frankly, my mom and I, you know, people, people come at my mom and I sometimes like, Oh my gosh, every day must be like sunshine and roses. Like you guys, like get up and be like, hold hands and you're skipping like, I'm like, No, it's not that if that's not it. Um, and in fact, we have the same therapist. So like, we made the decision to like, we have the same therapist, but we talked to this person separately, which is awesome. Because she she now understands who we both are. And when there's any sort of friction, like it's like, she can kind of help us navigate that,

you know, so I mean, it's just so it's just been like so beneficial. And also like I want to tell people like to like continue to dream for like what you want your life to be because at a certain point like this is going to we're going to close the book on Coronavirus, you know, and in some of it, you know, lives lost and jobs lost businesses lost, like all this kind of stuff, like those are wounds that are going to take time to heal. But at some point, we're going to like close the book on this chapter and things are going to hopefully start to normalize. And so as that's happening, like, don't forget to dream, you know what I mean? Don't forget to dream or set goals, you know, or and not just goals professionally like goals personally, like take that hike to plan for that trip. You know what I mean? See that thing, go do that thing, experience that thing with the people that you love, like I you know, I think that that's been something that's been lost here because we've all been like kind of, you know, cooped up and all of that, but I mean, just not forgetting to frankly live life. You know, actually After we get through this part, but I mean, it's a it's just it's interesting. But again, I think if you're here and you're listening, you have one.

J Jennifer Malcolm 1:00:09

No, thank you. And so we're gonna wrap this up. I, I have laughed so much during this, you are enjoyable, just lean in and your smile and your joy are contagious. I really, really enjoyed interviewing you and hearing your fantastic journey. We will put on our website ways to get ahold of you or your website, things that if people are interested that they can easily find that but I love I love that we've met was our first time face to face via zoom. And I really appreciate your time today.

A Ashlee Ammons 1:00:39

Well, it was a pleasure. Thank you so much and you know, yellow jacket for life.

J Jennifer Malcolm 1:00:43

Exactly. Alright, everyone. Thanks for your time, and I will look forward to seeing you guys next week. All right, bye. Bye. Thank you for listening to the Jennasis Speaks podcast. If you love the show, one of the best things you can do is to share it with a friend. Tell them what you like about it, how it inspires you and invite them to listen. Subscribe to the Jennasis movement to empower women's voices and reclaim the power over your own narrative.