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Lorin: From your perspective, tell us your story of how you started your business and how you've grown it. Have you struggled through it? Has it been an easy process? What is the essence of your story?

Cynthia: I always tell people that I was an accidental entrepreneur. I didn't set out to be in business. I set out to do a particular thing and to have a particular career.

Lorin: Which was?

Cynthia: I am an attorney by profession and I wanted to contribute to the civic government and life of my community and I wanted to make a very good living doing that. So, as a result, I have spent years as an environmental lawyer. I spent time at an investment bank. I am doing public finance work, which helped the public sector essentially fund projects that would serve a community purpose. Then, one day I looked up and my entire department was eliminated.

Lorin: Oh, wow! A lot of women will relate to that.

Cynthia: I was a mid-career professional, with a JD degree who hadn't practiced law in a number of years.

Lorin: So, the universe sort of threw you a curve ball.

Cynthia: Yes, it did. And I took a little bit of time to think about what I needed to do at that point of my life in order to have the career and the position in my community that I wanted. That meant, from my perspective, the only way to achieve it was to invest in my own potential and my own possibility.

Lorin: What did you do to invest?

Cynthia: I started a company. My options at that point were to find a job. It's very difficult for lawyers to find the kind of job that will allow them to work on large projects,

and that will allow them to sit on important commissions and boards in a city like Los Angeles. If it were a state, my marketplace, L.A. County, would be the ninth largest in the country, and would be the 15th largest country on the planet. So, to play a role in both the business community and the civic fabric of this market, and to be a professional engaged in decision-making who is working on important projects, isn't something that you can do from just any platform. To do that, you need to be working at one of the largest, most prestigious firms in town, and at the point that I was in my career, they weren't going to hire me.

I was too far down the road, too expensive, and just didn't fit in the way that they groomed their senior people. I had to essentially build a business, rely on my own expertise and relationships, and demonstrate that I was valuable and capable of doing the things that I wanted to do. So I started a company.

Lorin: So many people right now in the world are going through exactly what you went through. How many years ago was that?

Cynthia: This was in the mid-to-late 1990's.

Lorin: Do you think that, at this point, you were really thinking "strategy?" Were you using your gut, your intuition? Did you have a vision? It sounds like there was a mindset of, "This is the only way to do what I am really wanting to do."

Cynthia: What I typically do is start from the perspective of, "Who do I want to be? What do I want to be doing?" Then I back up to, "So, what does that mean that I need to be doing now in order to achieve that?"

Lorin: That is so picturesque; it's perfect! And so many people do it backwards, you know, asking, "What can I do now?" They don't think about where it will take them.

Cynthia: No, I start with the end results.

Lorin: You start with the vision.

Cynthia: My vision is as much about who I want to be and the life I want to have, as it is about the details of the work that I am doing. So, in thinking about who I wanted to be and the life I wanted to have, I then took stock of what my skill set was, what my relationships were, and where that intercepted with the road that I needed to be on to be who I wanted to be.

That's how I determined what my practice emphasis was going to be and the kinds of clients that I'd be looking to acquire. The strategies for achieving those clients were all sort of built around what my endgame was and what my assets were at the time.

Lorin: How far apart or how close do you think your vision was from ten plus years ago from what your vision is now?

Cynthia: It's not really different; I achieved it all!

Lorin: So, it matched exactly?

Cynthia: Yes, and it's interesting because one of the things that I have learned in my life is that vision is a double-edged sword. It can both lift you and it can constrain you because you can become very focused on choosing the vision, and not fully appreciating that sometimes your vision just isn't big enough.

Lorin: Exactly, and sometimes people can do so much more than they think they can.

Cynthia: So when you ask, "How well has it lined up?" It's lined up very well, although it's been modified. You know it grows as you go along. There are things that I couldn't have imagined at that particular time and certainly, even as I sit here today, the vision is a little different. I started a company that was really motivated by my own interests and professional ambitions. A few years ago, since I had pretty much achieved much of what I thought I wanted to, it became a little less in satisfying. There wasn't as much of a reason to get up every day. So, at that point, I had to make a decision about whether I would stay in business.

Lorin: Because you had achieved? Was it that you had achieved it perfectly and it was like the challenge was gone?

Cynthia: I had achieved it perfectly and it didn't seem like there was so much to do. I had an option at that point to either stay in business or look to the very same large firms that would not have hired me before. I had built my own platform to a level to where I was now incredibly attractive to them.

I could have just gone and started leveraging off of their platforms. So, my individual ambitions could probably be more lucrative or better achieved if I had all of the benefits of someone else's infrastructure. For me, the question became if it is just about making more money and just about achieving more prominence or success as defined by recognition and dollars, then there is an easier way to do this.

Lorin: So, what did you decide?

Cynthia: Well, I then decided that a more interesting challenge would be to determine whether I could build a platform that could outlive me, whether I could build a business that would transfer. I decided that that was an interesting and worthy and a compelling challenge and have embarked on that road.

Lorin: Is that the new vision?

Cynthia: Yes, that's the new vision.

Lorin: So, along the way, over the past twelve years, like anyone, I imagine that you've had stumbling blocks. What did you do to get over those hurdles?

Cynthia: I have always believed that there is a path around most issues, so it's not really a function of whether I can or I can't do something, but really a function of whether I know how. So, if something proves to be a persistent or a significant stumbling block in my mind, then that just means that there is an information gap or a knowledge gap. At that juncture, I would typically stop and try to determine or

discern not only what it is that I don't know, but also who knows it? There's someone out there that is doing this right!

So, let me go figure out or find out what it is that they are doing to solve the problem. And that's been my management or my operating principle. If there is a problem, there's a way to solve it, so the goal is not to focus on the problem, but really to figure out where the solution to the problem is. That often means going out and finding resources or people who have walked the road before, which has been frankly one of the reasons that I've been such a committed member of NAWBO (National Association of Women Business Owners). That is a significant resource in that regard.

Lorin: Because they fill in the cracks.

Cynthia: Yes, a lot of women have been there and they've done that. I just look up, and I look for someone who I suspect has been there and done that and I go talk to them about it.

Lorin: So, you don't hesitate to ask for help.

Cynthia: No, not at all.

Lorin: Has that ever been a challenge for you?

Cynthia: Not that kind of help. If it's information, I have no issue. If it's a favor or something that feels like it's a boost, then it's a little more difficult. I tend to have this strict "you've got to earn it all" ethic. (Laughing) So, I'm working on that!

I have no difficulty doing favors for others, though. In my mind, I don't even think about them. I have many people in my life that years later will tell me about something that I did, and I have no present recollection of it. Because I think, in many ways, when I say that you have to earn it, I *do* believe you have to earn it, but I also believe that I have been privileged and am privileged to be in a position to be able to try to earn it. As a result, I am happy to pay the universe back by being as helpful to others as I can.

Lorin: You've had such great success over the past twelve years. So, as you have accomplished your goals, have you been a workaholic, or have you been able to achieve a balance?

Cynthia: (Laughing) I don't know about that work-life balance thing! I don't know what that looks like. I've not achieved a work-life balance in the classic way that sometimes I think people talk about it. There is a lack of order in my life, but I do get everything done that I need to and want to get done, so I make decisions and I have been able to make it work. I have two kids and a husband who is also a busy working professional but we've had the same housekeeper for twenty years! And when I think of what it takes to raise our families... she's got two children now, too, and there's a lot of interdependence. We take care of each other and it works for us.

Lorin: In other words, the person that cleans your house you take care of, too.

Cynthia: Yes, my housekeeper was hired as a babysitter. She's been with us for twenty years and she continues to be an important part of our family and I am very committed to her two children, too. They are younger than my kids. When people talk about work-life balance, I think, "Well, gee, there are lots of things that have to get taken care of every day, no day looks like the day before, and you have the things that are important to you. Are you achieving and doing and performing as you wish, with respect to these things? If the answer is yes, then how you get it done is how you get it done.

Lorin: It sounds like you've built a little team around the place that you work!

Cynthia: Yes, I have a whole network of people and we know if we've gotten it done or not. My daughter was a standout athlete in high school and I don't think I missed a single track meet. She traveled a great deal because she was one of the best in the nation and her dad and I traveled with her. One of us was always on the trip. Now, that may have meant that we worked more. Who knows? If I am gone Friday and Saturday traveling with my daughter, it might mean that I worked a

whole lot more on Sunday and Monday, but that's just the way that we achieve balance.

Lorin: I love what you said, that no two days are the same. I have learned, and let me know if this is true for you, that I can't look at one day to see if there is balance. It's more like look at the week and ask if there has been balance.

Cynthia: Yes.

Lorin: Such as...did I get my workout in? Did I eat well all week? I may not have eaten well today, but if I look at the whole week, I did well.

Cynthia: Right. So, for me, it's like kind of looking at the entirety of what you are trying to achieve. Did you check the kids' homework? I mean, my kids faxed their homework to me when I was on the road! (Laughing) But we definitely dealt with homework and they traveled with us. My son is now nineteen and my daughter is twenty-three and I don't recall our ever going on vacation without our kids. So, for us, that was one of the ways in which we achieved balance. We worked like crazy, but we also would take a week or two and go skiing with the kids, because, gee, they didn't need to be in the first grade class. What were they going to learn? So, for us it was our own way of figuring it out. So, yes, yes, there is balance – but not in a classic, organized fashion, but in a way that worked for us.

I have been fascinated by Michelle Obama. I've been fascinated in particular of her assertion that she's going to be the Mom-In-Chief, and she seems to be a lot more structured. She seems to be pretty adamant about structuring this whole work-life balance thing. So, I just want to see what that looks like. It didn't exactly look that way when I was raising my kids. It will be interesting to see.

Lorin: That *is* interesting. I haven't gotten a sense that it is that structured, but I think that there is a huge commitment.

Cynthia: There is a huge commitment and a kind of pushback. I mean, she puts it out front in ways that I never would have. It just wasn't the kind of thing that I have spent a

lot of time talking about; it was just part of what we would do. But it's interesting, because she seems to be kind of drawing lines.

Lorin: What's the driving force for you to reach your vision? Some people would say it's money, some people would say it's the accomplishment, some people would say I made a commitment. So, for you, what would do that?

Cynthia: First and foremost, some of it is wrapped up in my personal story and in a culture that is very common to being African American and being first generation post civil rights and first generation college graduate. It's fully appreciating what that means in terms of opportunities that were denied others in my own family and needing to make good on those opportunities in needing to contribute. So that's what drives the follow-through. I've *got* to make good and I've *got* to contribute and this is how I do it.

Lorin: I appreciate that. It's sort of like you are saying I was given this ability, so I need to follow up. It's like a respect thing, like respecting that you have this freedom to do that!

Cynthia: Yes. It may pass. This may be something that may fade, as we continue to make progress as a country. But for me, I know how very hard my own parents worked. And they could only dream about the life. When I say "the life," it's not money, but it's really the opportunity to be engaged. I have had Michelle Obama at my office for a fundraiser. My mother could never have imagined of meeting a First Lady in her lifetime!

Lorin: Was your mother there?

Cynthia: My mother died when she was fifty-four. She was a really smart, really amazing, really driven person and yet it would have been very difficult for her to be me! So, a lot of what I do really becomes the legacy or kind of the fulfillment of their dreams.

Lorin: What an amazing story. Your mother is probably looking down and so proud of what you are accomplishing.

Cynthia: Most of what I do she saw in some form, so that was really great for me and really important to me. And it's not just my mom, it's a whole generation of people.

Lorin: Exactly. She represents it.

Cynthia: My mother went to a segregated school. It's not lost on me that an entire generation before me went through a great deal of upheaval so that I could attend a school like UCLA with no difficulty. So then it becomes, what do you make that *mean*? How does that translate in terms of what you do with that opportunity and with that example?

When you look at the Barack Obama presidency, he's President in part because he was extraordinary and in part because so many people worked so hard to prove up the worthiness of an entire group of folks. Then that allows someone to be judged just on the basis of how extraordinary they are. That's why I start with who do I want to be and what contribution do I want to make and then, given my circumstances and skill set, what do I need to do to achieve that?

Lorin: Can we talk for a minute about your husband and the role he plays? I feel like there is a huge dynamic happening in our world about how men either support the women in their lives or need to move over...and I don't mean that in a negative way. I actually mean it in a positive way. I am curious how your husband has been with you, with your success, and what has been his role? What's different? Is there something you can capture for us that is unique in the role that he's played in your success?

Cynthia: My husband was very close to his own mother. His own story is somewhat unique for an African American male. His grandfather on his mother's side has a Ph.D. His mother has a Ph.D. from Drake University in Mathematics, and his father was the first African American to get a Ph.D. in Pharmacy from the University of Southern California. My husband is a doctor; his brother is a physicist. They are

descendants of Pritchard Douglas. I think the most significant thing about my husband is he is very close to his mother and has never really had a view that women and their achievements are less important than men in their achievements. He has taken his own career very seriously and been dedicated to pursuing it, but he has never raised an eyebrow about what I do professionally. He's not overly impressed by it and he's not in any way jealous, competitive or concerned about it. At one point when I was with the investment bank and our children were small, I actually moved to New York where I was training. So I was in New York five days a week and only back home on the weekends. My husband is the person who got the kids to school and was literally the frontline parent for six or seven months. There wasn't even a conversation about whether that was something he could do, would do, or should do.

Lorin; Wow! That is just the way that it was.

Cynthia: Yeah, it was just the way that it was. The conversation was really around whether or not we thought we could make it work as a family and making it work as a family meant, "Are the kids going to be okay? Do we have everything in place that will make this be okay?" So, I would say that I have never experienced guilt or regret or pressure associated with failing to fulfill my role as a woman in our household. I don't worry about whether I made dinner or he made dinner or whether we bought dinner.

Lorin: It's whatever it takes to get it done.

Cynthia: Yes, in our house it's just, "Was there dinner?" and that's always the focus in how we manage our lives. What are we trying to achieve, and what is the best, most efficient way to achieve it that's going to work for everybody?

I am aware that some women experience that feeling of being judged by others as to how they are spending their time, which leads to stress and guilt. Not having that as something to work through has been critical. But also having someone who also considers himself equally accountable for the well being of the household,

for the well being of the children, for the well being of the entire family unit, is a critical component of our being able to move forward.

Lorin: So, it's a mutual responsibility.

Cynthia: Yes, equally accountable.

Lorin: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that might be important for others to hear?

Cynthia: The one thing that I reinforce with people is the importance of having their own individual sort of accountability. When I was no longer employed, I had to really be able to move forward based on what people thought about me – on my professional reputation. So often we get caught up in companies or brands, whether they are our own business or someone else's business, and it's very easy to lose sight of what that company or brand translates to.

What it comes down to is, "Do people trust you?" It's all about that relationship. What do people think of you? Are you accountable? Are you reliable? Are you exceptional? If you are willing to be exceptional, everything else will work out.