

Seed To Cup

Episode 2: Helen Russell & Brooke McDonnell

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Speaker:

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Jordan Michelman:

Hi, I'm Jordan Michelman, and I'm your host on Seed to Cup a podcast on the Sprudge Podcast Network. Seed to Cup explores founders stories, stories of entrepreneurs from the world of specialty coffee, people who've built brands and companies and done it their own way through the wild narrative and growth of everything that's happened in coffee over the last, oh, let's say 20, 25 years. And on this month's show, it's a founding duo who we've wanted to interview in this style back to the very original idea for this podcast. And gosh, does it live up to it.

Jordan Michelman:

Helen Russell and Brooke McDonnell are the founders of Equator Coffees. Equator Coffees is based in the North Bay of San Francisco, California in a city called San Rafael. And their story is just, it's got kind of everything to it. It was founded in one of these sort of dream 20th century, California garages, sort of the same story of the founding in the California garage that goes back to some other very famous brands in American entrepreneurial history. Brooke and Helen launched in 1995 alongside their first employee, and now a long time partner in the company, Maureen McHugh.

Jordan Michelman:

And they're a fascinating story. They sort of do this really interesting balance that you'll sometimes find in entrepreneurial duos where they've got totally different skill sets. Brooke is an incredibly respected coffee, roaster and green coffee sourcer. Indeed, her work at origin beginning with travel in the late nineties to places like Guatemala, this a really important part of how we understand the role of travel to origin and the role of coffee producers and all of the growth that's happened in specialty coffee over the last 20, 25 years. And Helen Russell is a one of a client, talented communicator, advocate for what they do at Equator and really an advocate for coffee itself, for the power of coffee. And I think that really comes through in our interview.

Jordan Michelman:

One of the amazing things about this story is the path of growth for Equator from a California garage to a favorite of really well considered chefs and restaurants, places like the French Laundry and the Wine Country. And work with a bunch of different chefs, Dominic Crenn at LA petite Crenn in San Francisco.

Their growth through becoming B Corp certified in 2011, moving from just being a wholesale business to opening up their own line of cafes, and ultimately in 2016, being named by the Obama administration as the National Small Business of the Year, it's an award given out each year by the SBA, the Small Business Administration here in the United States.

Jordan Michelman:

They were the first LGBTQ owned business to win this award. And indeed, although it's not as well known as maybe other parts of the story, behind the scenes, Brooke and Helen's story of Equator is also a love story and about how they compliment each other as partners in business and life and sort of how they've come to connect those things together over a life they've built together with this company through coffee and through the love that they have for each other, which is right there in every conversation that they have in this show. So we're thrilled to get to share this interview with you, and you will hear lots more about their story, all of these different kinds of details along the way. This goes back to the very beginning idea we had for this show, and I really think it delivers. So listen in and yeah, thanks so much for being with us on this month's episode of Seed to Cup. My guests are Brooke McDonnell and Helen Russell, the co-founders of Equator Coffees.

Jordan Michelman:

Well, all right. So I'm here today with our guests on Seed to Cup it's Helen Russell and Brooke McDonald, the founders of Equator Estate Coffees and Teas, or at least that's what it was called in 1995 when you founded the company in a garage in Marin County, California. We're going to get to the garage, but first at the start of this conversation, I think it's kind of the thing that is dominating everything everybody's talking about right now. And I wanted to just sort of put it out there and ask how you are doing with the COVID-19 stuff? How you're reacting as business owners? Let's talk about it for a couple of minutes, and then we're going to get to the garage.

Helen Russell:

Yeah. Well thank you for inviting us, Jordan, it's really exciting to be on sort of the newness of this podcast and what an interesting time for both Brooke and I to come to you with COVID amongst our midst, so thank you very much for inviting us. So yeah, we're doing what everyone else is doing is trying to figure it out. So I think the good news for us, because we are 25 year old business and we're an Omni channel business, although like everybody else in the specialty coffee industry and all our other fellow hospitality folks, everything fell off a cliff probably right around March 12th or so right before sort of St. Patrick's day when it sort of dawned on us, Brooke and I and Equator what was going down and how big of a deal this solve was. So we had closed all eight stores.

Helen Russell:

Obviously we have wholesale, which traded coffee to Google, Twitter, and Slack and folks like that. And the work from home order came and then we saw a spike in our digital and thankfully we had a lot of grocery already out in the world. So our grocery business spiked. But to go from 100% revenue down to 20% revenue overnight is it's devastating for sure. So we are sort of moving through this thing and as Winston Churchill said, "We're at the end at the beginning." But by no means, do we know sort of what the future holds, but we're doing the best that we can on a day to day basis, for sure.

Brooke McDonnell:

Yes, and I would only add that it was a strange, surreal moment to start dismantling aspects of our business too, in the interest of self preservation. Shuttering stores, the loss of 80% and again, I know this is a shared experience in the office space, but it is 25 years in, it's hard gained ground, when you have to shutter stores, the act of opening for retail stores is not only an expensive proposition, it's also an emotional journey because you get very invested in each store. They're your children and their community represents a lot to you and in the pride in community. Financially and emotionally, it's wow, I think we're all reeling, those of us that are in the process of having to contract before we can even think of growing.

Jordan Michelman:

Well, it makes it in some ways kind of a strange time, but I think in some ways, a really valuable time be able to talk to business owners like yourselves. Not just about where we're at now and what comes next, but to be able to talk to you a little bit about the journey to get to here. And that's sort of what this show's focus is all about. At the same time, maybe some of this stuff feels a little bittersweet because of everything else that's going on. Ultimately episodes like this are going to be a time capsule. It's us talking when we were able to talk in the middle of everything that was happening and there's an imperfection to that, but it's human too.

Jordan Michelman:

And so I appreciate you sharing with me and with our listeners, some of the stuff that you've been going through over the last couple of weeks. And of course, folks can drink your coffee, order online. It's wonderful that you're seeing web sales surging, and grocery too. I want to know for the two of you to take me back to the beginning, not '95, although we'll get there, but back before then. When did you both first fall in love with coffee? When did you realize coffee was cool or it was something that you wanted to do or it became part of your life?

Brooke McDonnell:

Well, I'll take you back, actually I'll take you first to 1995 because that's really where the interest in becoming a coffee roaster began. Helen and I, in probably 1992, became part of the early wave before Starbucks of mobile espresso bars. And we had visited Portland in the early nineties and we saw a kiosk and thought this could really work in San Francisco. And we found a space in Oakland, near Lake Merit, the Lake Merit towers and we invested in an espresso cart. Let me say these carts were quite expensive because they have to be plumbed, you're dealing with having, being able to keep milk cold, but they're mobile. And so they're like investing in small mobile stores. And we also opened one in Mission in Howard in front of the Wells Fargo building in San Francisco.

Brooke McDonnell:

And actually it wasn't Mission, Howard, excuse me, it was way down in Mission near Stewart. And it was not too far from the Ferry building, but those that was in the early nineties and we got our feet wet and it was a very exciting time to be part of this. There weren't many of us out there, and I think we were doing something that we just didn't see others like ourselves. There was a handful, there was the group of sort of outdoor or to go kiosks that were called, I think on the go espresso. And it was Pasqua's. That was about it, maybe one or two small players, but that boy, we learn a lot. And I felt that the coffee part of the story in the early nineties, we were part of the Specialty Coffee Association, but there wasn't a lot of information out there and it made it in some ways more interesting because you had to become a professional student.

Brooke McDonnell:

You had to really extract information. You had to apprentice with people. I became obsessed with the idea of roasting coffee and buying coffee. And so I apprenticed with a south of market, a small roaster called Cafe Selma back in the day. And I also learned a lot. And then also Universal Cafe roasted its own coffee, and one of the women who co on the cafe allowed me to spend time under probate. And I think it was really a discovery that you can't ween, there's so much information out there now, and because of the digital age and access to information, every coffee professional has now, it's a different landscape in terms of knowledge and where we're at. But I loved that period of where you felt like you were in an early stage industry. It was really starting to take off. [inaudible 00:13:53] the times.

Jordan Michelman:

Were the carts called Equator? What was the brand for the carts?

Helen Russell:

This is Helen speaking now. They were called Uropa, U-R-O-P-A. And just to take a little bit of a further step back, when I first met Brooke, I was living on the East coast, she was out here on the West coast and I came out and I met her and I remember she would take me to the Castro at Cafe Flora, and we would sit outside and have coffee and have an espresso. And then we would go to North Beach and growing up in Boston, I never had that experience of going to cafes. I mean, we would go to Dunkin Donuts, get a jelly doughnut after church and go home. But coming out here, I think with Brooke and sort of experiencing sort of that cafe experience, I really sort of fell in love with that community feeling of being around people, enjoying an amazing cup of coffee.

Helen Russell:

And in North Beach, actually, they had tenors that would be singing opera there. I can remember Brooke telling me about being at the Castro and being across from Harvey Milk while he was drinking coffee. So these were the really, really the early days. And they were the early days as well for Brooke and I, we were in our early thirties. I think a lot of young people, like, "I want to start my own business. I don't know what that business is." And then we went to Portland and Brooke had mentioned, and at that time I was coming out of selling voice and data networks, and to sort of get into a product that you could really taste, that you could smell, that had a story, that really was from shoot to cup.

Brooke McDonnell:

Seed to cup.

Helen Russell:

Seed to cup. But I call it that because now that we've planted coffee plants on our own farm on Finca Sophia, I see those little shoots that come out of the ground. But early on and sort of like, "What would it be like, Brooke?" We're sitting there in pioneer square at Starbucks and Brooke is drinking espresso and telling me about viscosity and the flavor profiles. And I'm drinking a mocha piled high in whipped cream, and she's describing all these things to me. And I'm like, "Oh my God, that's amazing." [inaudible 00:15:55] when it gets more whipped cream, but we wrote a little business plan on the way back to the Bay Area about opening two coffee bars and we called them Uropa, And this is 1992. And starting any business, no matter what it is, you need three components, people, product and process.

Helen Russell:

I've always been the people's side of the business, Brooke has always been the product. I mean, when we started roasting, there were only five women in the country roasting coffee. And then Maureen, joined as the process. Growing up in the Bronx and getting an MBA in sustainability and then Brooke being the product and having all that background in food and chocolate and wine, and me being in the sales piece. The three of us really came together and opened those two coffee bars, Brooke and I, and then sold them. It started Equator at little garage. So it's quite interesting how that American dream of wanting to start your own business, saying you're going to do it for five years, and if not, we'll go and get and jobs. But God who knew at that moment in time falling into specialty coffee and falling into this incredible product that just has such an amazing story around it that you can share. It's just been a remarkable product to journey and life for us in this business for so painful.

Jordan Michelman:

So the garage, we can talk about it now. The California garage kind of has this psychic space in American life. It's come to represent this entrepreneurial thing in American life. And it's all these incredible companies have been founded there, in the garage, in the California garage. Tell me about the garage in Morin, where was it exactly? And talk to me a little bit about your colleague, Maureen McHugh, how she became your first employee. Tell me a little bit more about that steps part of the journey.

Brooke McDonnell:

Well, I was lucky to have been investigating the roasting side after we eventually sold the carts to a colleague who was expanding, we had good locations and we were able to make a change. And I did want to research the roasting piece before I got into it. And I knew that we needed a small space and something that's well overhead, it was not going to be our house garage, but there was a space in [inaudible 00:18:30] Madeira before they did all the development.

Brooke McDonnell:

It was near the freeway, they had a lot of warehouses and this was really a converted garage, 700 square foot, converted garage space and had a big bay door opening. But I thought, "That's the spot." It was quiet, peaceful. We lasted one year there, and that's how fast we grew. Because when it started, I was just the kid in the sandbox with my 2.5 kilo and my small Lebre espresso machine, just sitting in there having the time of my life, exploring coffee, buying it in small quantities. Then Helen came in and said, "Do you want to sell one pound to one person or 100 pounds to one person?"

Brooke McDonnell:

I'd kind of looked at her and thought, "Okay, well it's not a difficult answer." I think we can maybe feed ourselves if we do 100 pounds to one person, because I was thinking conceptually, as a small little mail order catalog where you design your own blend or your own coffee and then I would fill it. It was a lovely idea, but completely impractical because I it was not sustainable. But this brings me to the point of alchemy of people, and I think all great businesses start with a good idea, but it's really about the alchemy of people that make it happen. Helen came in and she has always had such a fabulous business mind. And she always could connect with everybody. She could make conversation and build rapport in ways that myself as an introvert, I never could.

Brooke McDonnell:

And so that was critical alchemy piece number two, and then three Marine, I always say it's because she went to Cardinal Spellman in the Bronx was educated by nuns. I swear every child that was educated by nuns came out incredibly smart, incredibly clever. And she had a great head for math and practicality. She was a real net-net type person, and problem solver bar none. And she was the third piece of the puzzle. And really the alchemy, I was a true creative and it was the three of us, wow, what great alchemy. And then we just built upon that.

Helen Russell:

It's funny, Jordan, but everybody falls into sort of ... we were lucky because the three of us fell into this people, product, and process and to see Brooke with her Petraccini, this is her ordering her five pound green coffee from who was-

Brooke McDonnell:

At the time, it was briefly, I think I probably caused them almost to go bankrupt [inaudible 00:21:48] five pound, they briefly broke bags.

Helen Russell:

This was [inaudible 00:21:52].

Brooke McDonnell:

I think I had two shipments, at that point they were losing money horribly on my purchases, because the five pounds was not scaling [inaudible 00:22:01], but they were very good and they allowed me to really do it in small scale. And then I had a wonderful relationship with Ellis Mason at Loyal, he's famous over there, but he allowed me to buy one bag at a time and came over with this pickup truck and delivered our first couple of bags of coffee. And we all stood outside in wonder and looked at him offload, and we just felt like such adults. We were buying coffee from other lands and in large quantities, I mean 150 pounds.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah.

Brooke McDonnell:

And I think every coffee person I imagined has this, I never tire of seeing the bags of coffee, because they represent terra in some thousands of miles away.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah.

Brooke McDonnell:

That never-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:23:04]

Brooke McDonnell:

Thousands of miles away.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah.

Brooke McDonnell:

That never gets old. And I think to every roaster will tell you, they could dip into a bag of Ethiopian coffee, and that compulsive need to handle it, to feel it, let it flow through your fingers, it's a universal coffee roaster trait. You just never tire of it. And I think that holds true to this day. Those first bags were magic, and I still feel a sense of wonder. And I think to Helen's point, coffee's been good to us. And it's been a privilege to be part of an industry that has really been not just dynamic, but it's been in a state of continual change. So you're always [inaudible 00:23:49]. It is continually in change from the agronomy, to the roasting, technology, processes, the new generations of people. It's just... It's a great industry.

Jordan Michelman:

So shortly thereafter as the growth starts, you move out of the garage, you get a little bigger, and then you begin traveling to origin. And I'm curious to ask you about how that feels. I mean, you talk about the sense of wonder, of the coffee bags coming in, in California, but talk to me about that beginning to travel in origin. And I want to ask about Finca Sophia, the farm that you own, but as a start, while we're still here talking about the early part, talk to me about traveling to origin in the late 90s, and how that begins to inform your work.

Brooke McDonnell:

Well, I think the process of entering coffee is, it starts to expand. I think even to this day, people that enter coffee as a professional, especially from the roasting or green coffee purchasing side, your world will expand because you have just become part of a global product. And I think that the people and processes that get that coffee to the door, you become part of that. And I think the logical first step for most people starting a roasting company is too, well, who is my producer? Who is my supplier? I've talked to them on Skype. I've gotten lots of wonderful information, but I think that curiosity, it just propels you.

Brooke McDonnell:

And I think that probably Guatemala, near Lake Atitlan, I was lucky enough to be introduced... A producer and his wife came to our garage in Corte Madera with a couple of small sample bags of green coffee. And said, "Please try our coffee." And the gentlemen said, "I took over my father's farm. And I really want to know your opinion about our coffee." And well, I really liked it. And then the invitation came.

Brooke McDonnell:

That's how it happens in coffee. You start these relationships that are based upon, maybe you have a cup of coffee you like. It really starts off simply, and then it spans from there. I flew to Guatemala, and that was really the first year after the Peace. So it was a pretty crazy moment in the sense of, you saw a lot of young teenage boys carrying guns through the countryside. They were enforcing it.

Brooke McDonnell:

So there was moments of being concerned about, "Well, if this is the Peace, how peaceful is it?" And I observed my host, which [Edgar Laslo 00:00:27:28] and his wife Sylvia, and they drove us from

Guatemala City to Lake Atitlan. And we were stopped a few times, and they said, "Put down the camera. Put down everything." And I could tell, feel their tension. So I was a little bit naive at that point, but I have to say seeing the nervousness of my host, and seeing how he got out of the car to talk and joke with the young men that, okay, he's really trying to disarm them in more ways than one. And that's what his [inaudible 00:28:04] This was by no means that this was a long process. The peace was going to take a generation.

Brooke McDonnell:

But getting to the farm, oh my God. So many coffee professionals, really, if they're lucky, will have that moment, where they connect, they connect in a way, they feel connected to the world in a different way after they visit a farm. Because this is how life goes on from time immemorial, is the farmers around the world in usually quiet country or highland settings, working on the soil, picking, processing, whether it be tea leaves or coffee farms, or any high ground crops, you're part of something that, it feels permanent.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah.

Brooke McDonnell:

That you're just coming into this, you're just coming into this space, and that you will never change it in terms of the general remoteness, and the perpetuity of it.

Brooke McDonnell:

But I felt that. But I also felt... I think coffee people feel that they can add value, and that's where you can change it. So, yeah. I think this is probably pretty common amongst coffee professionals, is that sense of wonder. The way people might look at grapevines up in Napa, and it moves them spiritually and physically. I think for coffee professionals, I just see the coffee trees, young plants, mature plants, and I just find them absolutely, they move me. I mean, I just have a visceral reaction to them.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah. I agree with you that it's a universal sort of a feeling for coffee people. I mean, the thing that I think is important about your story, is that it's happening in 1997. So that's before so much of what we look at now as Third Wave coffee. I mean, it's while a lot of people who are in Third Wave coffee were still in high school. So there's this thing about giving Equator some credit for starting to do this stuff early, before a lot of people.

Jordan Michelman:

And that's one of the things that I think is so interesting about being able to talk to you a little bit about that growth, and the work that you do at origin as it grows. Going there first is interesting, but there's this amazing next decade that happens to Equator, where you acquire a roasting space. You begin growing volume. The company grows and blossoms. And you acquire a farm, which is the Finca Sophia. So talk to me about that a little bit. I'm curious to know, I guess, maybe the brief version of how that came about, and then how is it doing today? And how the farm continues to inform the work that you're doing at Equator here now.

Helen Russell:

So I'll frame it in terms of how it all kind of came about. So you think about, to take a step back, the first 18 years of Equator, we were primarily wholesale. The last seven years, we got into retail. And in the middle of all that, we purchased this amazing piece of land with Willem Boot and his wife Catherine, in Volcan, and in Chiriqui in Panama. And we just felt as if we have built this business, but to really understand what the farmer experiences, wouldn't it be amazing to own our own coffee farm. And then we met this gentleman from Kotowa, down in Panama, and he had purchased this amazing piece of land, that's believed to be the highest farm in Central America. It's at 19 hectares, 15 [inaudible 00:09:24]. It was an unplanted form at the beginning Jordan. So this is what's great about being naive about all these things is, doing things without knowing what you know, until you know. And four hectares at the very top, is part of the national [inaudible 00:00:32:38], where you could actually walk through and get in to Costa Rica.

Helen Russell:

So we fell in love with the land, and then we mentioned it to Willem. And Willem said, "Oh my God, this is amazing. Let's grow the best coffee in the world." And we were struck by that. Could we do that? And I'll let Brooke take it from here in how we sort of decided that from the name Sophia, which is Greek for wisdom, we knew we would need a lot of wisdom to grow coffee. And who are we to go to our friends in Panama, and say, "We're coming down here to do this." It was pretty amazing how they opened their arms to us, whether this be Maria Ruiz or the Peterson's, or Wilford, all these folks we count our blessings that are friends of ours. And we were just, most recently in February, we had an amazing dinner with what we call the Royalty of Coffee in Panama, in Boquete with the Peterson's and their family, and Wilford and his son, and Maria Ruiz.

Helen Russell:

And we sat there with goosebumps when, when Price Peterson stood up and raised his glass to us and said, "You know, when you came to us, I didn't think you could do it, I couldn't believe you had the courage to try. And when we sit with you today as fellow farmers.", And I get goosebumps when I think about that moment. Farming is truly a labor of love. It's not an easy journey and we did it. And we're still doing it. And we're learning a lot.

Helen Russell:

And so it gives you such credibility. When you're sitting down with a Michelin star chef, like a chef Dominique Crenn here in the Bay area, that you actually have dirt on your boots and your hands have been in this dirt, and you've built worker housing. You've taken care of... You know we have 11 people down there right now. I mean, we've had to even cut back down there. We built them worker housing. To have this experience, literally all along the supply chain, talk about from seed to cup. That's why I call it shoot to cup, because [inaudible 00:35:05] 11 years ago, and asking him if we could buy some seedlings. I mean, who are we to ask Price Peterson if we can buy some seedling.

Jordan Michelman:

Shoot to cup is pretty good. I actually maybe like that better.

Brooke McDonnell:

It's true. I also think of the royalty of seedlings. I mean, from Wilford, from the... You know Lamastus seedlings, we've got then of course the Peterson seedlings that started the farm. So there is some royalty heritage of seedlings. I think Helen really summarized it well, it is a labor of love. I wouldn't recommend

that anyone purchasing unplanted piece of land at my end telling the vision. One thing I think I love about Willem, the part of me that identifies with him, he thinks in very lofty terms. And actually I was right with him and we were just standing there and we were, just got all starry eyed and romantic with that.

Brooke McDonnell:

And you know, the actuality is, it's farming has to be one of the most humbling professions in the world because you're dealing with the vagaries of nature and you're dealing with a waxing and waning of harvest. You're dealing with one step forward, two steps back; which actually is a good right now, it's a good way of framing where, where we're at with the business.

Brooke McDonnell:

It is very daunting at times because, when there is a drought year or when there is a pestilence, the coffee Roya. Or, whether it be the rust or any type of fungus, it is, when it hits the crops, it's a pandemic to the crops. And farmers, it wiped out farmers, third generation farmers in Guatemala. It happened there. And I thought that Panama because of the high altitude might be immune from it, but they have had their own challenges including us. And we've had right when we were on the precipice of thinking, we were going to have a glorious future of harvest. All of a sudden it was like nothing. It was like, how could that happen?

Brooke McDonnell:

But it's not... Farming is not profitable. I have to be honest. I don't think coffee farming is really profitable for most farmers. I think what our goal has been, really been modest through the years. We view it as an educational journey. We view it as it's connected us to growers. It's, we've learned a lot. We'll be happy if it can cover its cost. That would be a win. So that's being, despite the romantic connection to the Highlands, I would be very happy if we can keep the farm in perpetuity, if it could pay for itself.

Brooke McDonnell:

This might be the best, it could be one of the world's best coffees. But it's so modest to produce good coffee as every grower will tell you. This is not prolific production. It's not about scale. And I think that it, by its very nature, it precludes the ability to make a great profit. People are aghast at some of the prices that the coffees, some of these coffees get. But if they knew how much winnowing has to go in to netting a small yield of fantastic top of the pyramid coffee. It's rare indeed, the production.

Jordan Michelman:

In 2011 Equator became the first coffee roaster in California to become a B Corp. And I was wondering if you could talk to me a little bit about that process. B Corp is something that has become, I think certainly more common than it was 10 years ago in the specialty coffee industry. It's still pretty rare. And I think it's fascinating that you were the first to do it in California. So just talk to me about that a little bit, the B Corp stuff.

Helen Russell:

Yeah. You know, we started the company, it's always very, very important to us to take care of our employees. So right at the beginning we put inside the P and L that we were going to pay for health insurance. That was, that was something that we wanted to offer. We thought it was, you know I grew up as a blue collar kid and my parents worked 35 years each at the phone company, and in the post office,

and they had amazing healthcare. So that was always embedded in my head that, oh my God, we need to have great healthcare. We need provide great benefits, we need to pay people well. So early on, I think it was absolutely in the DNA of both, Brooke, myself and Maureen.

Helen Russell:

And when I read about B Corp I'd asked Maureen, who just got her sustainability degree, I said, oh my God, I just opened up this, this B Corp, which is about people over profits. It's really about stakeholder value and all these things. But I started to do the questionnaire and oh my God there is 200 questions. You got an MBA in sustainability. Can you do it? She was like "Oh my god yes, I'll take this on."

Helen Russell:

So it was really Maureen who drove this and really put us on the map. When we originally, it's a 200 question questionnaire and we scored 81 and I thought, oh my God, I thought we were doing so much better than that you know. Because, paying [inaudible 00:41:14] price and, and taking care of our employees and really doing a lot for the community. So we kind of went back to the drawing board and used it as a template to really improve upon what we were doing. And like any other certification where there's fair trade, or organic, it's one more certification in your quiver when you are in the world sitting across from a chef, or sitting across from the head of global workplace for Google or LinkedIn. There's people in that room, some people are interested in the products, some people are interested in the certifications, some people are interested in the margin.

Helen Russell:

So I think for us, this was never really a strategy it was always just kind of who we are and who we were. And the B Corp is continuing to evolve. So I'll let Brooke talk a little bit more about it when you think about stakeholder value, but it's something we're extremely proud of and our employees are very excited now that they know more about it. But as you know, there's not enough people who know about being certified as a B Corp and what that means. We've got to kind of get the message out on that.

Brooke McDonnell:

Yeah. I think that it's a pretty rigorous audit. I mean it requires, a lot of companies in fairness to, I look around, I'm sure a lot of coffee companies are doing similar good things that could qualify.

Brooke McDonnell:

I think it's just, you have to create transparency. You have to be audited into all your practices. And I think, frankly, it's just a matter of a lot of coffee companies are just... have been... are generally so busy, just managing their business that maybe that time just set aside to get certified, it's just not happened. But I do think as an industry, there's probably a high percentage of operators in the coffee industry that operate with the stakeholder value in mind. And also with best practices in terms of equitable arrangements with their staff and with their producers. So I think the coffee business is an ideal, it's an ideal industry for the B Corp status. I think the eligibility, I mean a lot of new companies are, and some of the bigger companies now, are jumping into it.

Brooke McDonnell:

But I think it's a trend that's really about telegraphing. For us personally it telegraphs, hey, we are a work in progress. Nobody will be, there's no perfect process or perfect solution, but a work in progress means you're striving to have better solutions. And I don't think just because we get audited and accrue for a

Benefit Corp status means we're a perfect company. I think it means that we acknowledge that we have, we're connected to the world at large in so many different ways and that we really have to strive to be conscious about our relationships. And I don't want to put to, I'm starting to migrate into a little grandiosity of terms here, but it's really about each day. It's about small processes and small steps. Being conscious and being, trying to move through.

Brooke McDonnell:

And I think this generation coming up of coffee people, I look around me, I really appreciate the consciousness of people from, I look at [Trish Rothgeb 00:45:16], [Michelle 00:22:17]. There's so many wonderful people that are really looking at the world, through the lens of coffee. And so that's really all it's about. It's about trying to be aware that other people are part of your process.

Helen Russell:

You know there's almost, when I think about that Brooke and Jordan, your listeners right now right, not every coffee company, especially now when we're in this moment, this Black Swan moment with COVID and a lot of our businesses have been decimated, but prior to that, I mean...

Helen Russell:

But prior to that, I mean and not a lot of companies could offer health insurance that want to talk insurance, especially on the restaurant side. What we've done since the very, very beginning, we have built into our P & L statement, health insurance, profit sharing, and we have grown the business with that in mind. And the transparency not only comes from how we source coffee, where we pay for that coffee. We bolt on to providing coffee for 2.50, roasting it is 3, 3.25. What is that overhead number that we hold onto that? And what is baked into that overhead number? And when you're a B corp, what's baked in is health insurance. Having a 401k, paying people, more than our competitors are paying them. But we're only able to do that because we tell a story with our wholesale customers and with our retail customers about why things cost what they cost and why we charge what we charge.

Helen Russell:

So if I'm sitting down with someone from LinkedIn or I'm sitting down with one of our retail customers, they're like, "Hey, why is your coffee 25 cents more than Keats or 20 cents more than Peet's?" And I'm like, God, here we are. This tiny little company they're owned by a very large company. Because the joke was always like people would be waiting in line in our downtown Mill Valley store. And they'd say, Helen, Oh my God, the line. Betsy, well everybody has health insurance back there. And they're like, okay, we'll stay in the line.

Helen Russell:

It's sort of really talking about what you're doing so people understand it because customers don't always know. They just don't get it. I was just at our store yesterday in Sausalito and this woman downloaded the app and she said, "Oh, I just realized that I could have got 50% off if I had I put that code in. Can you give me a refund?" I said, "I have a better idea. Why don't you throw that refund into the tip jar?" She said, "That's a great idea." It's just people run along. I don't care what demographic, we run this country. Giving people information about how you run your business and why it's successful. Yeah. We all buy great coffee, roast great coffee, have a great story, but you have to be extremely communicative about why your price is a little bit higher because people appreciate the information about how you do your business and being a B Corp allows us to talk, why did you do that?

Helen Russell:

They have a health insurance. We go to origin. We have educational programs. You go from barista to assistant manager to retail manager. Then if you want to come over and work on the wholesale side, and then if you have the opportunity and want to learn how to roast, we put you over on the roasting side. There's all these different avenues, especially in coffee which is amazing. And we've been fortunate enough that we've been able to grow the business in a way that these things are already baked in to not only our DNA, but the DNA of the business. And that's why I think to maintain and attract people with us like Devorah Freudiger, who's eight years and Ted Stutora as director of coffee has with us. And Maureen been with us since we started. It is now owner Eddie Quaker.

Helen Russell:

Look, we're not perfect. No company is. But stakeholder value is very different than shareholder value. Shareholder value is all about sort of profits over people. And we see it all the time. And stakeholder value is about everybody along the supply chain and raising all boats. So everybody does well. And now, the inequities that there is a spotlight in this moment in time. Whenever we're in April, end of April with COVID amongst us. It's like we don't even know what we're going to be heading into. Is it a recession? Is a depression? Inequities that we're going to see sort of that veil is dropped. The click lights are on. So it's being able to tell that story of why you should come and buy coffee from us or work with us or be a wholesale customer. I'm glad that we have gotten this far and we've been in business for 25 years.

Helen Russell:

So we will come out the other side and what worries me the most and what worries Maureen the most and what worries Brooke the most is like all our coffee colleagues, a lot of them won't come out the other side. And it's not because they don't have a great product, not because they didn't do everything correctly. Because they didn't have enough money on the balance sheet because they didn't get there yet to where I've gotten. To be able to weather a storm like this. So we're all going to have to work together to pull up our sisters and brothers and others as we sort of move forward on it. And because a lot of people are going to be hurting. And so as an industry, we are going to have to take on the responsibility of figuring out how to really take care of each other.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah.

Brooke McDonnell:

All of us are asking, I mean if we're asking the question as a 25 year old business during this ongoing crisis, do we matter? And if we're asking that, that's acknowledging that this is challenging for an established company that feels like we've been sort of had bedrock foundation. If we're feeling this, I can only imagine what companies have only started much more recently are feeling. It's I think that that's a legitimate question that businesses need to address, not just the coffee business right now is like, do you matter to the landscape? What does it mean? And I went to the roastery this morning and I met with some members of the team and two very important roasters that I have, Francisco and Michelle, who are in it and working it. And I said to them, let me know if we've created a space in here that you feel physically safe.

Brooke McDonnell:

I would love to say I know more than you or we have more information, but that's not the case. It's like, if you see something, say something because we are figuring this out as we go along. And I had a moment where I was in there and I looked at the team and it was so reminiscent of 20 years ago where we're standing at the roasters and we're trying to figure it out. And it's collaborative. I realize, I mean I understand that the business needs them, but I needed them today. I needed just their physical strength and solidity and tension. And it was just a strange spot sensation because I felt like I went back into the layers of time and consciousness and I was somewhere back 20 years ago, standing there trying to figure things out.

Jordan Michelman:

I was curious to ask him in doing research for this and there's so many more kinds of questions I could ask kind of about what comes next or whatever. But as we're sort of telling your story, there's this moment that happens in the Equator Coffee's narrative, where in 2013, you open your first cafe. You make the jump. Although, I mean I suppose in your case, you started as cards. Then you were [inaudible 00:54:35] for 18 years as a wholesale roaster in grocery and restaurants and all these kinds of great places.

Jordan Michelman:

But then you made the move to open your own cafe. And this is something in narratives of coffee companies over the last, let's say 25, 30 years, usually you're one thing or the other. Like you're a wholesaler, you don't do cafe. Or you do cafe and maybe a little bit of wholesale, but it's like not really that big part of your business. Most of what you do is direct sales and cafe. What for Equator, what changed in 2013? And how has that transition been for your identity as a company to be like, we're a cafes company now, too. Talk to me about that a little bit.

Helen Russell:

Yeah. I'm going to answer that if I could because it's just remarkable. So when we started, as I mentioned earlier, there weren't a lot of roasters. So we were really wholesale space. That's how we built the company. That's how we were able to buy the roasting building I ran with an SBA loan. That's how we were able to do all the things that we're doing. But then eight years ago, Starbucks went [inaudible 00:00:55:45], which was a [inaudible 00:55:46] for us, it was like \$1.3 million, 15% of revenue. And Devorah Freudiger had joined us. She came over from Gimme and Ritual and wanted to be on the wholesale side. And at that moment, getting that news that Starbucks had just picked off our largest wholesale customer and realizing that retail drives wholesale. When you can come into a retail store and experience the brand and exactly what had happened. So Brooke came to me and said, we got to get into retail. I said, God Brooke, we haven't been in retail for 15 years. I can't get up at 4:30 in the morning again. And we all laugh.

Helen Russell:

So it was Devorah who came to us and said, I will help you and us. And we will do this. So you've got Devorah and Ted on one side, Helena and Brooke on the other side. And then we opened up in this surf shop down in Mill Valley. I spent a year and a half down there telling our story. The first weekend, the head of global work services, food service for LinkedIn came in on his way to Muir beach with his family and called the folks that bought off the management company and said, I just had the best cup of coffee I've ever had. And then they called us and we went down there. Now we're in all the LinkedIns. So it

evolved from being a wholesale business to a retail business, just sort of being, you can stand in the brand and you can imagine it.

Helen Russell:

So everybody that was coming in was like, Oh my God, this is an amazing space. Look at the surf boards. I can smell the ocean. I love the coffee. They're doing everything right. This is so incredible. Look at the owner doing the tables. And I fell in love with the community and I fell in love telling our story. And then we got another opportunity to open up another store. And I was noticing simultaneously the wholesale business was growing. And then the website business was growing. So retail became an important focus as any brand will know. I can remember talking to James at Blue Bottle when he said to me, Oh my God, I got to get into wholesale. I said, Oh my God, I got to get into retail. Because he was comfortable with retail. I was comfortable in wholesale. But in order to compete in the world today and especially now post COVID or during COVID, you have to have an omni-channel business or you will not survive.

Helen Russell:

So retail, wholesale, direct consumer web orders, CPG, whether you've got RTD or 12 ounce bags of grocery, you have to have all of it now in your quiver because as you continue to move along, not only with competition, but you have to have different levers to prove, to pull. So retail to us is so important. It's so part of our community. I mean, when we sat down and worked on our mission statement to champion human connection and kindness through the portal of coffee, whether you're that portal is crossing the gate into a farm where you're down at origin and the coffee lands, or you're crossing over our threshold and you're being embraced by the people that are there. So it's like retail is so important to us and we've got eight stores now. We don't want to have 800 stores.

Helen Russell:

We don't want to have 20 stores. We don't want to have 15 stores. Well, we want to have another eight to 10 to 12 stores in different markets that allow us to continue to grow also because it's really about experiencing the brand now. If you're at Google or if you're at Twitter, if you're at LinkedIn, I mean keeping those folks happy and engaged, it's like, Oh my God, when I get out of Fort Mason in San Francisco, Equator's there and I can have it here in my office as well. So it's like, it's all sort of tied together. And I'll never forget that first day, Jordan, right before we open, Deborah and Ted said to Brooke and I, we're only going to feature a single origins on batch brew. And I said, no, if you can afford to live in Mill Valley, you grew up on Peet's.

Helen Russell:

The first big fight, Deborah got all teary eyed and ran into the parking lot. I had to chase after her and I came to her and I said, look. I said, how about this? How about we do the Equator blend, which Brooke put together for me 10 years previous to go up against Major Dickinson. When we put that on batch brew, plus a seasonal single origin, and then we'll have Deborah over bar to pull her back in. And Brooke and I and Ted and Deborah, we're standing there in the middle of the cafe. We're going to be opening the next day. So she agreed.

Helen Russell:

So this is such a funny story. So the first day we opened, it's a Saturday. The first guy who comes in gets off of his bike. He's probably 50 years old. He walks in. Deborah's on the iPad and she says, Oh, hi, how are you? And he's like, what do you have for coffee? She said oh, we have the seasonal single origin. He

says, I just want a dark brew. He looked at me and she was like darn. So she gives him the Equator blend. And then there was two young men get off their bikes next. They came up from the Mission and they walked in and they say, what single origins do you have? She looked at me and she smiled. And I said, that's who we are as a grant. That's who we are as a people. And that's who we are as a company, because we're like a Katy Perry concert when you come into a store. Whether you're a [inaudible 01:01:06] you feel good in here.

Jordan Michelman:

That's good.

Helen Russell:

And so we were able to do that, but that story, Deborah calls it our first fight.

Brooke McDonnell:

The one thing about business, it doesn't matter if you're our age or if you're in your twenties, we all are 10 at times. We have our moments.

Helen Russell:

We all had a moment then. It was great, but since then we've curated an amazing product and a multigenerational business of really honoring the farmer and honoring our employees and our customers. And we've been successful in this space up until the end of February.

Brooke McDonnell:

Yeah what's really nice of this is the backward glance Jordan because we're posting on the afterglow of the last 25 years. And we're riding that little wave right now. And then we're like oh, that was then.

Helen Russell:

It's really something else if you think about it.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah. Well I think another thing that's worth thinking back to sort of better times, in a lot of ways in 2016, in the last year of the Obama administration, you became the first LGBTQ owned business to win the national small business of the year award. And I remember when that happened, it was really very exciting. Something we read about on Sprudge, but thinking about it in the context of this interview, it kind of got me thinking like the degree to which... This is something I don't know if everybody knows, but that Equator, your story is also a love story. Like y'all are together as the owners of the company.

Jordan Michelman:

And I just was just curious to know, like talk to me about what that was like in 1995 versus now. How has it changed? How has that relationship informed your work together as business partners, in addition to being life partners? I always think stories like this in business are so fascinating and yours is kind of a especially interesting one I think. So talk to me about that a little bit.

Helen Russell:

Yeah. We'll probably have two very different perspectives.

Jordan Michelman:

Like every good couple should.

Helen Russell:

But there's always the dream I think of every couple that oh, let's work together. And I think that was exactly what it was in the early thirties. Because you just want to be together every moment. And when you get into business together, there's so many other pressures that are on you when you're in business. And we always used to joke that Maureen would wear like a black and white striped sweater as the referee and send us to our corners, yelling in the middle of the roastery is unbelievable and the stress of it. And my mother used to say, when money goes out the window, love's right behind it. And I was like, God mom, that's all you have to say? And she said, well I think one of you should have a job. And I said, we're a coffee company. She said, Oh sure. She was like, okay.

Helen Russell:

So there were times where it was not easy at all. And as we look back, one of the things that was really on my mind at that time is we need to grow this thing. We need to grow quickly because the more we grow this, the more the room that we'll have to sort of expand as people. And I can really focus on being VP of sales and cofounder. And Brooke can focus on being the product. And Maureen can focus on being the COO of the company. And if we grow this thing, there'll be plenty of people in between us. We'll be successful and we'll still have a relationship when this is all over. So that was kind of my thinking. That I think was part of my economic. Like we got to grow, grow, grow, because I was like, Oh my God, we got to protect this relationship. Because it's been so important.

Helen Russell:

And now as we look back, as I look back personally, and we're so fortunate because you've worked so hard in life, just in general. You work really, really hard. And when you can work with your partner or your best friend, the most important person in the world. I'm the luckiest person in the world. I have worked with my partner and my best friend. And when you work that hard together to have spent this much time together is today is something that I love thinking about because if I was on another track and doing a different type of business, we never would have had the time together that we've had. So not everybody has the success that we've had in terms of our relationship, but it's ups and downs over and around. You're a different person in the early morning of your life than you are in the early evening. So you got to navigate all those different types of day because you change.

Brooke McDonnell:

What's good about this stage of our lives, we forget what the argument was about, whereas in our [inaudible 01:06:00] we remembered. We held onto it. But I do remember, and I think it really sort of summarizes how I feel to this day. I remember there were moments where when we had a disagreement, I had such a mad on, I was going to go into my corner and I wasn't going to talk to her for God knows how long. And then the situation would come up where someone would be visiting our roastery and Helen would walk into the room. And her energy was such that I still felt like my heart left and I couldn't sustain my anger. There was something about Helen's energy that always lifted my heart, despite how mad I might have been or whatever.

Brooke McDonnell:

And to this day, whether it could be like an airport or that's the past tense. Whether it was a [inaudible 01:06:57] or a restaurant or out in the world, I think there's certain people that have a certain type of energy. And I was just really drawn towards it. So to this day, I still have that again, a very deep rooted response. It's a lift upward. It's a very inward kind of feeling of lifting up that and I felt that then even during the difficult moments. And I think that also as in life, you have to manage.

Brooke McDonnell:

Everybody's responsible for their own happiness and energy, and you have to do what it takes to create that little space for yourself. That really is what you need. And I think if couples, especially going into business together, could carve that out, that's an important piece because whether it be geographical separation of the moments or no, it's a thrill. We're different people. We're opposites. I think I'm introverted. I crave quiet and peace. And Helen is extroverted and loves the stimulus of the world in life and how.

Jordan Michelman:

Give me more. Good partnerships have that kind of bifurcation and the diversification in them. Give me more stuff like this. What's stuff one of you is really good at versus the thing the other one's really good at. Tell me more stuff like this. That's good.

Helen Russell:

Well, when I think of Brooke and how proud I am to, I mean, people always think that yes, I'm the CEO and yes, I'm the co founder. But Brooke is the product of this company, the pride that I feel. I mean, I can get us in any door. But once I get in that door, I put Brooke in front of anybody. Any chef, whether it be Chef Dominique Crenn or Chef.

Helen Russell:

Anybody, any chef, whether it be Chef Dominique Crenn or Chef Tyler Florence, or Tracy Desjardin, or you name it, and the credibility and the knowledge and the expertise that Brooke has, and the humility as a coffee roaster, and as looking at this product as sort of a culinary product. It's that pride that I feel and how I was driven to get us out in front. And she's the roaster, she's the roaster in 1995. So, before people roasting coffee. I mean, if I had Brooke's talent, everybody would know who Brooke was. Right? I mean, in terms of my personality. Brooke never toots her own horn, but she was [inaudible 01:09:52] and continues to be I think, one of the top roasters not roasting today in the country, but never tooted her own horn. Was never the bro that's going to be on the magazine that they are going to be talking about. Right? Just quietly buying great coffee, roasting great coffee, as our company continued to grow and move along. Brooke being that product.

Helen Russell:

And as I said early on, you need three things to be successful in any business, you need that product. You need that person that's passionate about making coffee, making wine, making chocolate. Then you need that person that's passionate about getting it out the door. Then you need that other person that's operationally passionate about making sure that the backend works.

Helen Russell:

So, having her and having that pride as... I remember when Chef Dominique Crenn came in, all I needed to do was get her in. And everybody said, she's so hard to talk, she'll never sit down. She sat down with

Brooke for 35 minutes at the restaurant and just listened to Brooke. And everybody who left the table said, "I've never seen her sit that long." It was two people that were passionate about a product. That could talk to it in such a way, a culinary way. I can't do that, but I can get you in the chair all day long. And I think the pride I have of what Brooke has given me to give to the world, is just part of what I love so much about her.

Brooke McDonnell:

Well, it moves me to hear Helen talk about me that way. Whereas, I look at it, I'm so thrilled that I don't have to be in front, moving through the role, that I can coast behind Helen where I'm much more happy. I think that's served us both that I probably moved with Helen in front and doing my thing behind the scenes. And that gives me, that meets my needs.

Brooke McDonnell:

I do feel like it doesn't maybe serve the industry well. I know the industry needs more voices of women, and I'm glad that Helen is out in the world, because I feel like I wish I was one of those that grabbed that microphone. I'm seeing other women do it now and I love them for it.

Helen Russell:

Yeah. Eileen and Trish.

Brooke McDonnell:

Yeah. Eileen's great. [crosstalk 01:12:28] They're all such a great generation. I really worry about health. You know, all of us are going to come through this, but they're grabbing the microphone in a way that I have never had the desire to. And that's the only thing I feel maybe a little apologetic about. But because I've been so content with this arrangement. And it's coffee. It's given us an amazing vehicle and platform. And long live coffee, and coffee people, and coffee spaces. And that's what we want, to see them thrive again. We'll all get there. We want to see them thrive.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah, I think you're right. And it's interesting to think about the ways in which the moment that we're in right now, presents new challenges, but also new opportunities in ways in which the world is changing. And maybe in some ways getting better. This is a grand assumption on my part, but I would assume in 1995, being a LGBTQ women owned business, there was probably more shit to have to put up with and fight your way through. Has it gotten better now? Is some of the barriers and prejudices, are they less felt now than they were when you started? Or how do you think about that as part of your journey?

Brooke McDonnell:

Well, I really it's, I've thought a lot about it in the coffee industry. I think what's interesting, I see it as an expanding certainly state side, or where the spaces where coffee is translated into where it's delivered to the consumer, and that part of it involves retail and roasting, the various ways that coffee is pushed out in the world. And I feel that we're lucky in that, I feel like the first group that would be marginal in terms of like for us, the lifestyle. I feel the first wave of acceptance really. I think as LGBTQ, as being part of the community, I feel like that is where the coffee space opened earlier. I mean finally, finally the coffee space is opening up much more to people of color, and from different [inaudible 01:15:17] views. But I feel like that's taken longer. And I think that's still unfolding, that part of it.

Brooke McDonnell:

But I do feel that there are some amusing moments where, for us where we've had as women, I remember a Japanese industrialist came to our roaster about 15 years ago, because we were looking at a piece of brewing, we were working with the development of the brewing single cup brewing mechanism. And he came in and he swept through the space and he turned to Ted and completely, because he was used to only dealing with the men. It was very, it was almost comical. It was like women were literally invisible to him. I mean, it didn't matter, I'm five foot, 10. It's hard to miss me. Okay. But I remember he just walked in and I started to say something, but he turned his head and talked to the guys, because that was his entire conditioning. But I thought, okay, I think I'm just going to step away from this for a moment because I just thought, "Oh, this is a big gulf to bridge here."

Brooke McDonnell:

But there were a few moments. Another where a couple came in that said, why don't we want to sell them our business? Because you know, don't we want to do other things with our life. They can take over and run our business. And we just looked at them. They made a set of assumptions because they were older guys. They'd convinced themselves that they should be running our business, our successful business.

Helen Russell:

Because they saw that we were successful. So they were, "Oh, we can help you."

Jordan Michelman:

When was this?

Helen Russell:

That was probably 15 years ago.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah.

Helen Russell:

Well, when we started out to be honest Jordan, I didn't lead with, "Look Brooke and I are partners. I'm a gay woman, I'm a lesbian." I didn't talk about anything like that. I mean, I think it's just who I am in general. It's like I grew up with brothers. I didn't think of myself... We didn't think of ourselves as women owned, or LGBT. Look, we have an amazing product. We're going to give you an amazing solution. You're going to be successful. This is a symbiotic relationship. Right? And never led with that. I just wouldn't have. If we were straight couple, I wouldn't have led with that. My wife, my husband. That's just not how I roll.

Jordan Michelman:

Sure.

Helen Russell:

I think it's, "Look, what do you need? How can I help you? And how can we work through this together where we both do well?" That's kind of how we grew this thing. But there were moments where yeah absolutely, people coming into the roastery and talking to Ted and not talking to Brooke. And you can imagine 10 minutes later when I entered the room, I set everybody straight, as to who was running the company. Because that's who I am. Right? Hello. I just like... Let's get back to this little point here. But there were times, and if you look at Ellen DeGeneres, if you look at Rosie O'Donnell, right? These people didn't come out until they were successful. Because that fear of being pigeonholed into an LGBTQ roaster, or a woman owned business.

Helen Russell:

So we're, "Look, we're going to be successful. We're going to grow this thing." And then when we got that award as the first LGBT certified acute company in the history of the SBA program. And being up in [inaudible 01:18:49] and sitting at a table, 50 tables, 50 States, and the runner ups were these guys from Texas. And us standing up, and who is the gentleman that received us when we got to the stage?

Brooke McDonnell:

Mark Cuban?

Helen Russell:

Mark Cuban, all I could think to myself, and I heard whispers, "You know they're lesbians. The lesbians won." I was so proud going up there. And I just let it rip, about being an LGBT couple, as if I embraced this whole thing since 1995.

Brooke McDonnell:

We made up for lost time.

Helen Russell:

We made up for lost time. So we're fortunate we're in a very educated area here in California.

Jordan Michelman:

Sure.

Helen Russell:

The idea that someone would discriminate against us, it's just so unfathomable to me. We have so many of fellow colleagues that that happens too. It's important to lead with what you know as a product. The people buy coffee from us. They don't care for women. They don't care for LGBT. They just care that they have an amazing product that differentiates them at a competitive space. And if they happen to be LGBT and we connect on that level, that's great. But there's ways to connect with so many different ways. But for me now to think that we you could be discriminated against, it's just unfathomable to me.

Helen Russell:

And I don't know, because now I just turned 60 years old. So I can't imagine anybody having any issue with this in 2020 with anyone. It's my naivety of living in California, I guess. But I talked to young folks, and even on our team, I mean we want to be that safe haven for folks that to want to come to us. And if they want to transition while they're with us, how we can help them, how we can protect them. So we

see our roles going forward as a safe place to be, safe place to work, to feel valued and appreciated in a way that you couldn't feel anywhere else because we are women. And we had to work twice as hard, and we happen to be LGBT. So we have to get that out in a different way.

Helen Russell:

But the end of the day we're successful entrepreneurs, that have worked seven days a week, 24 hours a day for the last 25 years. And it's hard work having a great product, having a great story, being together. Maureen, Brooke and Helen built this thing.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah.

Helen Russell:

[inaudible 01:21:18] has to be done. It's just not one person. It's a team. It was a team of women that got it done. And again, we don't even lead with that. It's like when we talked to our marketing people, "Okay, we're women, we're LGBT. We won the Small Business of the Year award, we won the Roaster award. We won best of Panama." And they go, "We should really focus on the women owned." I said, "Why? Just focus on the fact that we've been successful and we've done a lot of things really well. And we've had some good luck. But at the end of the day it's about the product. It's about the coffee, the coffee, the coffee, the coffee. That is where the story lies."

Jordan Michelman:

Well, I appreciate you talking to me about it. And I'm really appreciating to have had the opportunity to interview you both together. This is kind of a personal thing for me. I grew up in a family where my parents were business partners. And in some ways, you're talking about life and how you work together. It reminds me a little bit of my, my parents. So I'm sort of having a sweet little moment in my head with some of this stuff. So I really, really appreciate the opportunity to get to interview you both together. That's really been really, really fun for me. I want to leave our chance to talk today with the opportunity to let you... if you have a message for people listening, or maybe for people who are trying to figure out what comes next for their businesses, or for their coffee lives or coffee work, or just in general here in the moment that we're in.

Jordan Michelman:

I know that there's all this uncertainty and I can really relate to what you're saying of feeling like people are looking at you to know something more, have some kind of inside knowledge. When the reality is, we all just know the same. But part of what comes from having achieved what you two have achieved professionally, is that your leaders, people look to you for messaging. And this is such a strange moment in America, where so much of who we're looking to for leadership, has a lot of problems. And so I thought this was a way to maybe end our conversation today. What's your message for people out there? Is there anything that you want to say?

Helen Russell:

I think I'll just go first on this. You know, the message is for all of the coffee brands that are out there, this is a defining moment, right? And we will be remembered by this moment in terms of how we treated our employees. How we communicated. How transparent we were. That's the most important thing that we can do. Because a lot of us have had to make some very difficult decisions by laying people off, by

furloughs, by cutting people's salaries. By cutting people's time. How you communicate that and how you are perceived by the people who work for you, with you, and how our local community see you as a brand, you will be defined by this moment in time. And it's very important to be transparent, over-communicate. Everybody is feeling extremely vulnerable right now, and it's understandable.

Helen Russell:

And we have to together, move forward on this as a company that's gone from 150 employees, down to 80. And communicating that as we add business back, we will add you back. Because it's difficult times. We've reached out to folks. We've sent emails, we've had calls, we've had texts. We're trying to keep people truly up to date. So again, it's a defining moment for all coffee brands. It's how you communicate, and how your employees feel about you and how they trust you. They trust us to go back into the [inaudible 00:16:27], they trust us to get them behind the coffee bar. They trust us to get behind to behind the [inaudible 01:25:34] to deliver coffee. And they trust us because we communicate with them. We update them, we keep them in the loop. They go to work for us, even though they're afraid because, they trust us.

Helen Russell:

And this is the moment in time that you must really reach out to your people. Not just once or twice, it has to be ongoing. Because as we all know, it's up and down.

Brooke McDonnell:

Yes, I would draw from my experienced today, bringing that was very reminiscent of the history. I felt very much that it was brought back to, this is the process, the brick and mortar. And it's the minute by minute. But the step by step. Because as coffee people, we are about process. And during this period of contraction, that has been really just breathtaking for all of us, I feel that we need to get back to that core.

Brooke McDonnell:

Those of us that want to stay in coffee, and the public has not lost its appetite for coffee, let us not forget that. I would say get back to focusing on the small steps. The incrementalism of it, is what really builds. It's the real brick and mortar. I felt today, we were back. We were back to that, but we were rebuilding.

Brooke McDonnell:

I think just my takeaway from today is really rebuild. Rebuild step by step and learn other aspects. Helen talked about omni-channels if you're a coffee professional, I think one thing is coffee professionals do move around. And coffee is here to stay, learn about buying coffee. There's going to always be demand for process, the coffee processes.

Jordan Michelman:

Right.

Brooke McDonnell:

If you're a barista, learn. Try to glean information from another skill. How to roast, how the digital, the age, all of us in coffee are realizing that we need to get our digital chops together. And many coffee companies have. But boy, if you have a skill that can add value, again, that's a big brick to put in the wall there. I mean, to come to a company with digital chops. So if you have that piece, look at it like a puzzle

and start putting the pieces in place. Coffee is here to stay. And if you're a coffee professional, there will be a place in this industry. And it might be different from where you were heading in February.

Jordan Michelman:

Yeah. Hey, listen, coffee is here to stay. That about says it all. I think you two have really said it all with us today. I really appreciate it. And the opportunity to tell your story, hear your story, and have some words for our listeners. I know everybody listening to the show really appreciates it as well. So thanks so much for joining me today. I really appreciate it.

Helen Russell:

Yeah, it was fun. Thank you so much, what an honor.

Brooke McDonnell:

Thank you Jordan.

Helen Russell:

See you on the other side Jordan.

Jordan Michelman:

Thanks so much.

Jordan Michelman:

And that was Brooke McDonnell and Helen Russell, the co-founders of Equator Coffees. Wow.

Jordan Michelman:

Well, thanks for spending this time with us. I think that you'll join me in saying that this was just a really lovely opportunity to learn more about, two people who have played a really important role in how we drink and understand coffee in America. And that influence has continued to be felt here today. And it just continues. So check out Equator Coffees, they are equatorcoffees.com. And I want to say, thank you so much to Helen Russell and Brooke McDonnell for helping us understand a little bit more about their story. And I want to give a huge shout out, she's mentioned in the interview, but to Devorah Freudiger at Equator Coffees, who helped set all this up and was a really big help along the way for some of the interview prep and research that went into to this months show. So thank you so much to Devorah.

Jordan Michelman:

And thank you for listening. We'll be back again next month with another episode of Seed to Cup. I'm your host, Jordan Michaelman, I'm a co-founder at Sprudge. And wow, this was really a lot of fun. Thanks so much for listening. Bye.