

S02E02: Build a Social Enterprise

Scott Muir 00:08

So tell me a little bit about how you became interested in cultural anthropology and religious studies.

Lauren McCraney 00:14

I would say that it was always an interest. You know, when I first graduated high school, it was something that I was intrigued in pursuing from the perspective of digging into the past with anthropology in order to understand the present. My dad wanted me to go into business. Yeah, what are you gonna do with that, you know? When I went to school when I was 18, 19, it just wasn't resonating with me, you know, going to school for business. So fast forward. I took some time away from school, was married, had children, and just couldn't shake the fact that I wanted a degree in anthropology. So I decided to go back to school when I was 30. And, I mean, that first class, Intro to Anthropology, solidified for me that I had a desire to return back to school. There's a mindset that when you go back to school, in your 30s even, you're supposed to try and find a career that's going to provide, you know, financial security. And I was like, "No, I want to understand. I want to know. I want to ask these questions." Okay. So, you know, we've asked the question, now, what do we do with it? Right? How do we positively impact the world based on the knowledge that we gained?

Scott Muir 01:47

This is *What Are You Going to Do with That?* – a podcast where we explore everyday folks' decisions to study the humanities as undergraduates and their pathways to fulfilling careers. I'm Scott Muir of the National Humanities Alliance, an organization dedicated to promoting the value of the humanities, on campuses and in communities. In this episode, we meet Lauren McCrainey, founder of Woven Women Collective, which seeks to provide economic empowerment to women through artisanal textiles. In a previous clip, we heard Lauren reflect on her decision to return to college and pursue her interests in the humanities. This decision would prove to be pivotal for her life, and many others'. Lauren's experiences in the humanities at Florida SouthWestern State College and Florida Gulf Coast University cultivated the passions and skills that drive her work today. That sense of purpose has created a social enterprise that is improving the lives of women in Guatemala, while preserving their cultural traditions. Let's return to her story now.

Lauren McCraney 02:56

I went to the community college here, SouthWestern. At the time, it was Edison State College. I signed up for classes. My first class was an anthropology class. The professor at the time, her name's Dr. Carol Brown. And she just lit me up. It was beginning to answer these questions that I had in a concise and methodical way that resonated with me, you know? I enjoyed methods and theory, the component of philosophy that's tied into it, and it was my saving grace, right, I was I you know. It was my time outside of being a mom that allowed me to explore who I was at that point in my life as well, right? But I was, you know, a mom with two very active children and returning to school and working. You know, up in the middle of the night, writing my papers, taking tests in the morning after I dropped the kids off for school. I mean, I was fortunate, I think, with being a non traditional student. I really bonded with professors from the humanities department at Florida SouthWestern. And I really, to this day, they're

dear friends, and I hold them close to my heart. Because they really fostered and encouraged my desire to pursue the questions that I had within that perspective of humanities.

Scott Muir 04:35

That's awesome. So tell me how your interests evolved after you transferred to Florida Gulf Coast University.

Lauren McCraney 04:41

At FGCU, I was taking a variety of courses, basically any course that I could take to try and understand a different perspective. You know, from a religious ideology or philosophy. The major was cultural anthropology and the minors were museum studies and religious studies. And there I focused on marketing and communications as well. I was in the midst of every single class, you know, going towards this passion that I had started to develop over the past couple of years of returning back to school. I kind of have switched my focus in religious studies on to looking at the story of the culture through the language of textiles. And wanting to look at revitalization and preservation of culture that tells the story of that culture from a cosmology perspective. And I guess that's kind of how I started to navigate my way and to try and to learn and understand textiles. They have preserved true traditional ways of doing things in Africa and Asia and Europe. Very similar methods just done with the different resources and the different cultural symbolism within those different regions of the world. And gaining an appreciation for that: somebody could look at the exact same thing and depending on the culture that they're coming from see something completely different. I've been building tools that have really been the necessary tools. And the work that I'm doing now, and the work that I'm looking to do in the future is to preserve the stories of the past in order to understand the story of the future.

Scott Muir 07:01

While Lauren completed her degree, she looked for opportunities to pursue her emerging passions while improving the lives of others in our community. For her class project, she and her classmates produced a film about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an organization advocating for the rights of migrant farmworkers. This led to another project that culminated in a museum exhibit on the same subject. As Lauren learned more about the abuses suffered by vulnerable migrants, Lauren began volunteering with organizations seeking to address them. Her volunteer work with a small nonprofit supporting victims of human trafficking soon led to a full time job. By combining the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom with her previous work experience, Lauren rapidly rose to lead the organization as its executive director. Let's return to her story, now.

Lauren McCraney 07:51

I got really involved in working as a volunteer with many different nonprofits and working on domestic violence and human trafficking. Social justice issues clearly were things that I was very passionate about and found my way into a position in anti trafficking work. I became the director of an anti-trafficking organization. I ended up creating a trauma informed curriculum, educating about human trafficking through art. I would go into at-risk home centers, foster care centers, Department of Juvenile Justice schools as well. I mean, anywhere I could go and give a presentation, I was going in and giving a presentation. And then we would exhibit the art in the community. So whether it be, you know, a very well-known gallery in Naples, or, you know, a Starbucks, anywhere that I had an opportunity to create

an exhibition that allowed people to learn the story from the artists who were telling it. A majority of them were former trafficking victims. Yeah. And the power of allowing the assimilation of the information for those mostly children, right? And, you know, more than once there are situations where you watch the light go on in the child's eyes as they're making that piece of art recognizing, "This is me." And then asking for help because of it, you know? A topic like human trafficking is very hard for people to grasp. And so being able to use art in a way that made it approachable for people, even though the art sometimes was very dark. But it created a layer that allowed people to walk up to it, and approach it, and be able to have a conversation about it. And that's why I love the art REACH program. It's having them walk up to the painting and look at it instead of looking away from it.

Scott Muir 10:45

Well, yeah, that sounds like amazing work. So you became the director of this incredible project, like that was the first thing you did after you stopped being a full time student?

Lauren McCraney 10:56

It was very...I transitioned from volunteer to program coordinator to executive director in a very short sequence of time, wearing all the hats that a director of small nonprofits wears.

Scott Muir 11:22

So tell me how you decided to shift from the nonprofit anti trafficking work you were doing in Florida to building a social enterprise of women's co-ops in Guatemala.

Lauren McCraney 11:32

You know, I was doing anti trafficking work, I was director of a foster care home for young BOMs, after I was no longer doing the ArtReach program. And I really want to be able to go to the source. I was responding to it here. And what I was doing was powerful and life changing. But I wanted to be able to respond to it at the source. And what I realized was, you know, I was dealing with these children, right, these teenage girls who were being abused and had small babies at age 11. I mean, really, really dark stuff. And their moms were sending them here for a better life, right? So you can't be angry at the mom; the mom's trying to do right by her child. But she doesn't understand that maybe what happened to her in her life wasn't okay, right? Because it's just accepted. With Woven Women, with the social enterprise I'm working on building right now, it's preservation of textiles, right? It's being able to tell the story of the culture and preserve the textiles. But the reason why it's Woven Women Collective is that we're looking at these cooperatives as beacons that you can take what was always the women's language before women were allowed to read, right? Like, we have been preserving that language of textiles around the world, right? And it's using that power of textiles, to provide them trauma-informed care, to provide them awareness of domestic violence. And that's how I think I'll be able to make an impact on human trafficking. It's going to that source and healing it right from the seed. And that's, that's the example of what I see outside of the box that other people maybe don't necessarily see. That is because of the anthropologist in me. And people are like, "Why isn't Woven Women a nonprofit?" And I think that there's good that you can do with business. You know, we are human beings, we like material things. I mean, I'm an anthropologist who has worked in museums and archives and collections. Like I look at material things as beauty. I mean, we identify a symbolism to a rock right and and and there's meaning behind it? So we're always going to want things but there's no reason why we can't invest in impact

purchase. I've started to work on some products, which is a huge step for me, that we're starting to purchase some products and we're starting to build the branding around. It was starting with ethically sourced products from a woman's co-op there in Guatemala. And you know, the sales of these products will be going back not just from an ethical source and fair wage pay. But programming will be going back into those communities as well through the sales of these products. And we're working, I don't need to recreate the wheel, there are amazing organizations, you know, doing really, really great work, and they need more support. And so Woven Women is support for women's co-ops, but also support for organizations that are doing reproductive health education, domestic violence, education. In this way, we're going to help give them that little boost that they need, because they're the ones on the ground, you know, doing the work. So working with them. You know, there's a great textile museum there in Guatemala City. So also that that cultural preservation component that I'm so passionate about, at the core of who I am. I got to know that I'm not just doing some social justice work, and selling beautiful products, but I'm preserving the history as well. There's got to be a way to not let that go by the wayside. You know and really recognize these women as artists, you know? These are artists. Like when I'm asking this one particular woman, "How do you know where to put the threads?" Like, when you're creating a pattern, and she's like, "I just know, you know, I've been doing this since I was nine years old." It's a good opportunity for reflection for me with you asking me to do this, for me to understand just how far I've come. You know, from being at that moment where I decided to return back to school to then being on this podcast with you. And it really gives me hope and excitement that, like, if I could do that then and be here now that, you know, in another 10 years, what I hope to accomplish with Woven Women, like I'm going to do it, you know? For sure. The research papers that I wrote and the data collection and theories and methods that I learned as an anthropologist, when it came to writing grants, is still to this day, an asset. Because you have to be able to build measureable outcomes, right? So you can create a story, but how are you going to collect data? It's something I'm always thinking about: how can I measure the impact that I'm making? And I know that that that's from my education. Yeah. To think outside the box, you got to see what other people don't see. And that's the researcher in me, right? That's, that's the participant observation. I could have gone to Guatemala to visit and just bought textiles and sold them and said, "Hey, you know, I'm doing good in the world. Don't you want to buy these products?" And instead, I'm immersing myself as heavily as I possibly can right now so that I can ask those hard questions. So that when I implement this going forward, I know I've done my due diligence. And I've put policies and procedures in place that ensure it's not just ethically sourced. It's environmentally sourced. And I can measure the impact that I'm making in the communities that I'm working in. I mean, I think that curiosity is a big part of it. And somebody asked me recently, what's what one word to describe myself? And I would say, a learner, you know? That even with the knowledge that I gain, there's always more to learn and to understand and I think that's kind of the approach that I have when I meet people. And when I travel to new places, making sure that I put my ego away and meet somebody from that perspective. You know, let me learn about you and let me learn about your culture. There's always more layers to pull back. Yeah, there's always more layers, like, I can accept things for what they are in front of me. But I know that there's always more to ask and more to learn, right? Yeah. Well, I know a lot more about fair trade than I did. Because I've been working on it, you know? Like, how much do you really want to look to know the truth? And for me, like, I gotta know. I gotta know the truth. I gotta know that what I'm sourcing and how I'm doing it is really, truly making an impact to make sure that you know, you're answering yourself in an ethical way. And truly, you know, helping change the dynamics of the world that they're living in. So I guess that's where

my communications is coming in, right? I am working on on building that story now, the branding story for Woven Women. And having policies and procedures in place, right? I'm constantly refining it. And I think that the thing is to be humble and to be honest to say, "Man, I am trying. And this is what I learned." And this is how I'm going to make measurable outcomes because of what I learned to try and do better going forward.

Note: This transcript has been edited to make it easier to read.