

Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 035 - 035 - Crowdfunding Beanie Babies with Girls' Night In
CEO Alisha Ramos

Guests: Alisha Ramos, Katie Doherty, Brittney Riley

Summary: Sonia delivers a weekend debrief on ALPFA's fundraising gala. We hear from Female Founder School Co-Founders Katie Doherty and Brittney Riley about their work to empower early stage founders with the skills and community to build successful companies. Colleen interviews Alisha Ramos, the Founder and CEO of Girls' Night In, a community of women who'd rather stay in tonight. Our hosts wrap up with a conversation about Michelle Obama's book tour comments on the strategy of leaning in.

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(Music.)

ALISHA RAMOS (VOICEOVER): I think it was always there. I was always really curious and I taught myself how to code in HTML tables and all of this stuff, but never really considered it as a career because I just didn't have role models in my life to show me that, "Hey, you can create things for the Internet for a living and it's really cool."

(Music.)

VOICEOVER: You are listening to the *Women in Business and Technology* podcast from Microsoft. In each episode, you will hear from women in amazing technology and business roles as well as male allies who are helping make the industry more inclusive, and bringing you tips on how to build a successful career in a supportive community. Welcome to *Women in Business and Technology*.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Welcome to Episode 35 of *Women in Business and Technology*. I'm Colleen O'Brien.

SONIA DARA: And I'm Sonia Dara.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: We're kicking off this show in our Community Connect segment with a conversation that I had with Katie Doherty and Brittney Riley, two of the three cofounders of Female Founder School -- a program designed to provide early stage founders with the skills and community they need to build successful companies.

I knew Katie from our college days at Harvard and it was great to reconnect with her and hear all about her startup experience in the Bay Area.

SONIA DARA: So, speaking of Harvard women all-stars, we'll then hear from Alisha Ramos, the founder and CEO of Girls' Night In -- a club of women who'd rather stay in tonight. I subscribe to the Girls' Night In weekly newsletter, so I feel like I'm keeping up with Alisha every Friday, reading about how she plans to chill that weekend.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Finally, we'll wrap things up in our Cutting Edge segment with a conversation about Michelle Obama's recent book tour perspectives on having it all and leaning in.

But before we get there, Sonia, I need a weekend debrief from you. How was the ALPFA Gala?

SONIA DARA: The ALPFA Gala, it was amazing. Our loyal listeners may know that we featured ALPFA in our Community Connect segment in the previous episode, in Episode 34, that's the Association of Latino Professionals for America -- ALPFA.

We had the opportunity to attend their annual gala in downtown Seattle and it was amazing. It was a couple of presenters from the local chapter, they had their president from their New York office come in and speak, they honored a couple students who are going into the professional business more in finance, and then there's a keynote speaker from Amazon and she talked about curiosity and how it will basically be our fuel for growth.

So, I had a great evening, got all dressed up. In Seattle, that's not super common. It was nice to put on a nice dress. (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: That's great. Yeah, Carlos Ruiz, who's the leader of the Seattle chapter of ALPFA, has been such an amazing ally for us here on the show and I'm really glad that you were able to attend. It sounds like it was an awesome way for the organization to wrap up their year and really celebrate all of the work that they're doing here in the community.

SONIA DARA: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Carlos.

(Music.)

VOICEOVER: Community Connect. Get involved and stay connected.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I'm thrilled to welcome to the studio Katie Doherty and Brittney Riley, the cofounders of Female Founder School. Welcome to the show, you two.

PARTICIPANT: Thank you for having us!

PARTICIPANT: Woo-hoo! We're proud to be here, thanks so much, Colleen.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Excellent. So, I'd love you to answer this softball question: What is Female Founder School?

KATIE DOHERTY: This is Katie, and I'll take that one. Female Founder School is a three-month-long program for aspiring and recent founders to provide them with the skills, the community, and the validation to start companies and build the right foundation.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Awesome. Yeah, we talk so much about community on this show. I know it's a really important part of doing something big and scary. It's nice to have people that you can rely on who have maybe already done it before.

And what is the origin story for Female Founder School? How did you decide to kick things off here?

KATIE DOHERTY: Brittney, Enhao, and I -- who are all the cofounders of Female Founder School -- come from backgrounds either advising, working with, or starting our own companies. And so we're all quite familiar with the very apparent gap in the technology industry.

For me, I came to the incubator where I currently work about four years ago. And when I first came, it was about 97 percent men. And so when I wanted to take a break, get some quiet time, go meditate, I'd actually go to the restroom. (Laughter.)

So, we believe that in order to shift the paradigm in the industry, it starts with founding teams, with women establishing the right culture from the inception of their companies. And that led us to addressing two problems: The first is that there aren't enough women starting companies, and the second is that the support at the early stage isn't working for everyone.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's really funny that you talk about meditating in the bathroom. Sonia and I have talked about that experience of being the first woman in the restroom for an entire day and it's 11:00 a.m., like you're the one hitting the lights in the morning. Being the only one on the floor who's using that restroom. And, you know, it shows up at technology conferences or events as well. Like, the men's room line is always really long, and like women can go right in. So, I'm very interested in that, like, politicization of bathrooms in the tech industry. (Laughter.)

Can you give us a peek into the programming that Female Founder School participants would go through if they decided to engage?

BRITTNEY RILEY: Yeah, so, this is Brittney, and I can take that one. So, our programming is based on kind of three core areas that are needed in order to get your

product off the ground and really validate your idea. And we focus these around different sprints.

So, the first sprint is problem. So, really understanding the problematic that you're addressing, getting out and talking to customers and pinpointing and targeting that problem very specifically, then prototyping a solution, how to go about that, getting, you know, your very first version in front of people and learning how to test that every week and continue iterating on how you're building it.

And then, third, is business model. So testing pricing, testing the kind of different components of your model and thinking through the different risks of your model. And we found that if we take founders through these three kind of topic areas, they come away with really a core understanding and the foundation of business and understanding where their risks are and how they need to go about growing.

So, that's kind of the theme of the program. And then our whole program is kind of based around this idea of holding each other accountable, building in a lot of community, giving each other feedback on the tests that we're doing. So, everyone -- kind of the whole program is based around doing that among these three different topic areas.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Katie, you alluded to this, that you know, the gender gap in the technology industry -- in the entrepreneurial sphere -- is so great and there's a lot more awareness, a lot more attention on the issue right now. I know that there's a lot of investment in supporting female founders specifically, how are you differentiating yourself from other accelerators or other programs out there?

BRITTNEY RILEY: Yeah, I can take that one. So, I worked in running accelerators all over the country and the world for years, as Katie has worked on accelerators. And so when we kind of thought about Female Founder School, we tried to strip away all of our kind of preconceived notions of what's needed and think about what we were hearing from the women that we were talking to and what we were hearing from our friends who kept coming to us and saying, "I have an idea, is it good? I want to do it. Should I do it?"

And so we really thought about how to design it for women. Simple things from making a lot of the work online so that if you have a kid, you can still participate. And then we thought about really this huge gap in the market that we kept hearing from women, which is, "I don't even know if I want to do an accelerator. I don't even know if I want to raise venture funding. Maybe I do, but what I really know is that I think I have a good idea and I'm looking for a community and some guidance on how to validate that idea either so I can leave my job or so that I can kind of kickstart my company."

And there isn't really support for founders out there until you basically want to raise money. And at that point, usually, you've spent about two years building out your product, and usually learning things the hard way and making a lot of mistakes.

That's what I've done as a founder. That's what -- when I worked with accelerators, we spent so much time back-pedaling on a lot of mistakes that were made that earlier on could have helped circumvent. Katie, do you want to add something?

KATIE DOHERTY: To add to that, we talked with several of the big accelerators all over the world and we heard from them, "Hey, we really want to work with female founders, but we're not getting that many applications. We're not getting that much deal flow."

As Brittney mentioned, we're really trying to focus on that pipeline. How do we increase the number of women that are starting scalable, high-growth companies? And in thinking about that, we went to many of our friends who are incredible women who we thought would make amazing founders. Many of them had thought about starting companies, but in talking to them we heard some common patterns of why they weren't taking the leap. We heard, "I don't have entrepreneurial experience. I'm not technical. I don't know if my idea is good. I don't know I have the time. This is financially risky."

So, in designing our program, we set it up to help women address those doubts and fill those gaps and skills and experiences to empower them to take that leap so that we could increase how many awesome women were building really strong companies.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It sounds like you did some phenomenal market validation, which I'm sure that you're, you know, bringing your cohort through and figuring out how to differentiate the program and how to make it truly flexible and meaningful for all of your founders.

Because it's differentiated, I'm wondering what results you've seen from the program to date.

BRITTNEY RILEY: Yeah, so, it's still early days, definitely. But we're really excited, one, just about the general response that it's got. It's really resonated with a lot of women. You know, we continually hear, "This is exactly what I need," or "Where have you been?" And so that's really nice as a startup when you start getting that type of response.

We worked with, already, 53 women from five different states and we're really proud of the diversity of that group. I think, what? We have founders from 12 different countries or something like that?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

BRITTNEY RILEY: Yeah. And people are flying from the east coast to come to our launch days and we're hearing from people all over the world that are interested in the program, so we're really excited about that.

We also have an 80-percent net promoter score of our program, which we're really excited about kind of demonstrating that it's adding value and that people are interested in sharing it with their friends.

And then we've had some early successes and we're really excited about that. For example, one company, Enrich, who was actually in our first program, she's already raised around \$500,000 for her company. And, again, these founders are starting out at the complete idea stage. They haven't even incorporated their company yet or left their job. So, to show that, you know, founders go from idea to have already raised venture as half a million dollars over the course of a few months is really exciting validation that we're tapping into a pool of talent that no one else is really either supporting or tapping into.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, congratulations. Those are really amazing results. Yeah, I'm getting a little excited over here, like, "Hmm, when am I going to, like, make my way to Female Founder School?"

KATIE DOHERTY: Yeah, right? When will you join us?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I want to, like, know -- yeah, I want to, like, know all of the products that are coming out of the program. Yeah, I'm going to spend a little bit more time on your site after this.

So, you have shared, like, hey, there's this obvious gap in the founder community and gender representation is nowhere near equal at this point. And you've also, you know, cast some light on the fact that venture capitalists or investors more generally are, like, hungry to fund female founders. Those are two big reasons why it's important right now to invest resources specifically in female founders, but I'm also interested if you have, like, a heart reason? Like, why is it so important to you that Female Founder School exists?

KATIE DOHERTY: It's because we have full conviction that the world is a better place when there are more women in positions of leadership.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Woo! Say it again for people in the back! (Laughter.)

KATIE DOHERTY: Right! More women in positions of leadership! We really think that it starts with founding teams, so that's very much our north star. You know, the numbers are really sobering right now. It's about 6 percent of founder equity is owned by women, and the numbers for female founders of color are even more concerning. So, we really want to change that.

In addition, we think it's a massive market opportunity, right? When you have more people with more diverse backgrounds and life experiences that have access to tools and resources to start companies, we're able to create more unique solutions to a broader

range of problems. So, I think it's really important for the world, and I think it's also a major market opportunity.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I think so, too. I get really lit up thinking about, like, you know, the fact that most inventions in the world right now have been invented by men, even a lot of things that, like, serve women or products that women buy. Like, what does that world look like if women are actually considering their experiences in designing products and services?

And, of course, like, there's not "no" inventions by women out there, but I just -- like, I'm really excited for what that future looks like when things are actually taking my experience into account when they're made.

BRITTNEY RILEY: Absolutely, like, going back to restrooms, like, think about how often your cell phone falls in the toilet or almost falls in the toilet. (Laughter.) But what if we had pants for the modern woman? I don't know. (Laughter.) Just a little bit more practical and maybe doesn't carry her purse around the office.

I totally agree with you. I think it's a major opportunity to create new solutions for a huge part of the market they haven't really been designed for in the past. So, absolutely.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: You're clearly doing such important work here. You've already worked with so many female founders. What is next for you?

BRITTNEY RILEY: Yeah. So, big picture, our goal is really, as Katie said, to increase the pipeline, right? So, in order to do that, we need to be able to support as many founders as possible and give them the opportunity to validate their idea and start building their product. So, our goal is this year to work with 500 women in 2019 and expand geographically.

We're also looking even outside of the U.S. as well, so we're really excited about kind of building this platform that allows women all over the world to go through this foundational program. And then, obviously, we're focused on building a community that's important to all of those women as well.

And for kind of a quick plug, if you don't mind, our next program is February 23rd, which starts sprint one. And applications close for that on February 3rd, but we accept applications on a rolling basis, so you know, we encourage everyone to get their application in January because it's already starting to fill up.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Excellent. 500 women. That is such an amazing and ambitious and achievable goal. Sonia and I are committed to doing everything that we can to promote the program and help you get there.

In the meantime, where can our listeners find you on the Internet?

KATIE DOHERTY: Thank you very much for saying that. And, by the way, we think what you guys are doing is awesome to amplify women's voices and using the platform that you have. So, major kudos to those guys.

Where you can find us is femalefounderschool.com, and as Brittney said, that next program is launching on February 23rd. So thanks very much for talking with us today.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, Katie and Brittney, thank you so much for making the time and for doing the work that you do. It was such a pleasure to talk to you today and I can't wait for our listeners to learn more about Female Founder School.

KATIE DOHERTY: Thanks so much, Colleen.

BRITTNEY RILEY: Thank you.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And now, let's get on with the interview. I'm excited to welcome to the show the founder and CEO of Girls' Night In, Alisha Ramos. Alisha, welcome to the show.

ALISHA RAMOS: Thanks, Colleen. Thanks so much for having me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Of course. I've been personally following Girls' Night In via your weekly Friday newsletter and social media channels for many months now. And I'm feeling incredibly relaxed as a result of it. But can you tell our listeners who might not be familiar with your company a bit more about the mission and product offerings.

ALISHA RAMOS: Sure. Thanks for following us. So, Girls' Night In is a self-care and wellness brand and community for women who'd rather stay in tonight. (Laughter.)

Our mission is to help women everywhere relax, recharge, and build more meaningful community in a world that's overwhelming and overwhelmed by technology and we're in this interesting phase of disconnection I think, which we'll talk more about I'm sure.

Right now, our main product offering is the weekly Friday newsletter that you mentioned. We send it out every morning on Fridays as a way to help you kickstart your weekend. We have recommendations for your night in if you're staying in, so we share things like what we're watching on Netflix, what podcasts we're listening to, what skincare discoveries that our team has made recently, and it's all designed to help you feel good about staying in and taking care of yourself.

We're proud to have a quite smart audience and engaged audience, so we also share some smart reads and interesting articles in there that you can share with your friends and discuss. So, it's a really nice way to kickstart your weekend.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Absolutely. And, you know, you're surfacing products that I wouldn't have known about otherwise, so I've definitely made some purchases based off of your newsletter. (Laughter.)

ALISHA RAMOS: Great.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And the smart reads are long enough that they have been, you know, bringing me through the entire weekend with really great content to think about. So, I really applaud the editorial efforts there. Our listeners are pursuing really big and purposeful careers. What advice do you have to prioritize self-care during these professional pursuits?

ALISHA RAMOS: That's a really good question and something I think about a lot. I think the first thing I would share is that as a preface, self-care looks really different to everyone. And then on top of that, I think it looks different at various phases of your career and of your life. For some people, self-care might mean taking a bath and, you know, reading a book and enjoying a face mask. For others, it might mean, you know, signing up for therapy or, you know, taking care of your physical health and prioritizing things like exercise.

So, there's a lot of different ways to look at self-care. For me, I have a couple of big pieces of advice. If you're in a really kind of busy phase of your career or ambitious phase of your career, one is to listen to your body. That's so key. If you are feeling really rundown, like for instance this week, actually, I'm starting to feel a little bit under the weather and maybe it's a sign that, you know, you should slow down and take a break, schedule a vacation soon, sometime in your future.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes.

ALISHA RAMOS: Another thing that's a little more practical, but I love this piece of advice, is don't feel like you have to be chained to your desk. And that's something I've really had to learn as a solo kind of like independent founder. I've been working from home and there's always a million things on your plate that you could do, but ultimately, kind of staying at your desk 24/7 is not productive in the long run and you'll probably experience burnout that way.

So, one thing that I have really started to incorporate and something that Colleen and I chatted about right before this recording was just taking more frequent walks outside and getting up physically and walking away from work and really like giving your brain a break, because it really deserves that.

So, those are two big pieces of advice. Oh, and I do have a third one: Take a vacation.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. You know, one that I just brought into the workplace the other day, I was sitting in the back of a meeting room and I realized that my jaw was really tense. So, I started giving myself a little jaw massage. And someone in the

meeting saw me doing it and then she started doing it, too. (Laughter.) So, self-care can be contagious.

ALISHA RAMOS: That's great. (Laughter.) I love that. It's like a self-care chain reaction. (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. And, of course, your workplace looks a little bit different now that you are in this entrepreneurial pursuit. But whether it's these jaw massages, getting up from your desk, prioritizing your vacation, are there any other work time self-care rituals that you highly recommend?

ALISHA RAMOS: I do have one that we wrote about in the newsletter a couple of weeks ago. Again, this one is really tactical and practical, but it's to keep a carafe of water at your desk. I think staying hydrated is so important for self-care and just your physical wellness. And if you don't want to get up from your desk a million times to fill up your water glass, which sometimes I don't want to do that, I'll keep a giant carafe of water on my desk and make sure that I finish at least two of them by the end of the day. So that's one worktime self-care ritual.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: That's a really important one for me. You know, it's a way to combat not having a headache in your afternoon meeting.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yeah, totally. Also, I don't know if this a self-care ritual per se, or just kind of like keeping sane at work is if you feel really overloaded and kind of overwhelmed with tasks, the way I've tried to prioritize my tasks is write down kind of top three really big things that I know I want to get done during the day, and it gives me a sense of kind of like completion at the end of the day. And that ties into my self-care, because I think I tend to get a little anxious if I have this long list and I haven't crossed everything off and just knowing that, okay, I did these three definitive things today, makes me feel really accomplished at the end of the day, and it's a nice little like time to reflect when you're done with work.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's such a great strategy because sometimes I will just lean into doing the things that are quick and easy and leave those big things for the end of the day. And if they don't get done, you know, you sort of spiral a little bit. I didn't do anything today, I didn't do the right things today. Having them on a piece of paper in front of you, prioritized, written out large so you can't really escape your purpose for the day, that's such a great tip.

ALISHA RAMOS: I love that. And I think one thing you just mentioned is, you know, we tend to get trapped in these negative self-thoughts, like, "Oh, I didn't get anything done today. I'm so unproductive." And so I think having a ritual like that where you focus on three big things is an act of self-kindness and being to yourself and saying even if you don't get those three big things done, you can say, "Okay, well, I tried, tomorrow's another day, and I feel good about this completing like one thing today."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So, Alisha, prior to starting Girls' Night In, you were a product design lead at Nava and a director of product design at Vox Media. Now, you're doing something totally different. What prompted this pivot into entrepreneurship and starting Girls' Night In?

ALISHA RAMOS: My pivot into entrepreneurship, I think deep down, I've always wanted to start my own company and I've always kind of known that in the back of my head. But in terms of timing, it just never really felt like the right time. It felt like I still had a lot of learning to do and a lot of experience to catch up on, so I think the timing thing was one thing.

And then one really practical thing that I am really open about and I've spoken about before is just the financial aspect of starting your own company. You know, I grew up with pretty humble means, you know? My parents didn't help me out after college. I was always very independent, but as a result, I didn't quite have the funds built up to launch my own company up until I was rather a little bit more senior in my career in technology and had the money saved up.

And I wish more people talked about this because I think a lot of entrepreneurs, you know, you'll hear stories of these people launching companies and it's amazing, but I wish there was more transparency around, for example, if you had your parents kind of help you out with that initial amount that you need to get off the ground. It just creates a more realistic picture for others who want to approach and go into entrepreneurship.

So, the pivot into entrepreneurship was really -- like the timing, I finally felt like I built up enough experience in the real workplace, and then I felt like I had enough money saved up to have a safety net of sorts.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Got it. And you're really speaking to something that has been so, you know, confusing for me. I'm still in my late 20s for a few weeks, and as I look around, I haven't felt like I have the experience to start something new. This podcast has very much been an "intra-preneurial" effort, but yeah, I have a lot of self-talk around I still have so much more to learn before I start something.

And I completely agree. Like, even personally, you know, looking at people who are buying homes, friends who are starting companies, this spiral of comparison often makes me feel like I didn't have the handbook to get there. But in reality, there are a lot of systems at play that we don't know about, and finances and support from parents are -- that's definitely one of them.

ALISHA RAMOS: Absolutely. I think it's a big factor and it's not really talked about a lot. I will say in terms of, you know, launching your own thing, I do agree with the saying that you should start before you're ready. I don't think anyone -- I have a lot of founder friends, and we always talk about how none of us actually knows what we're doing, it's just building the plane as we're flying it and so on.

I think entrepreneurship is really a job where you learn on the go, as scary as that sounds. So, I would give yourself more credit and, say, start before you're ready. But in terms of the kind of financial backing and resources, that's a different kind of conversation.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right. And you know, it's very interesting to me to hear that you didn't feel like you had the skill set to get this started, because you know, looking at Girls' Night In, you are so obviously a very creative person and, you know, you were working in very technical roles at both Nava and Vox. Just prior to that, you were doing freelance, front-end engineering and yeah, I'm just so impressed at how broad your skill set was.

And I'm curious about how those technical skills have supported you in building Girls' Night In.

ALISHA RAMOS: Oh, that's a great question. I think the technical skills definitely helps me so much in building Girls' Night In. I think my experience at Vox Media was really formative in how I approach building the company now.

For example, to give you one concrete example, our website is something that I built on my own from scratch.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Way to go!

ALISHA RAMOS: So, that is obviously -- thank you! That's obviously, like, a huge cost savings when you're thinking about launching your own company. The technology and like the website portion is a bit part of that, so I feel lucky that I had that kind of technical background to build that.

In addition to that, one thing I learned in my technology career beyond the actual doing of the development and coding is working with data and being really data driven is super important to me.

Back when I first launched the newsletter, I remember we had maybe a couple hundred subscribers. It wasn't very big at the time, but I remember after sending every newsletter, I would look very closely at our analytics and look at the data to understand what is happening, what were our readers clicking on? Where were we finding more subscribers. And that kind of methodology is something that I really think I picked up at Vox and Nava in these more technical environments.

I would encourage any entrepreneur, even if you don't feel like you are, quote, technical, I think data is something that's so important and just learning from your users is so important both quantitatively and qualitatively. So, I would really recommend doing that.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: A focus on data has really helped shape my marketing and communications career. So, I will add an endorsement to that piece of advice.

ALISHA RAMOS: Great.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's something that you really can't ignore in this day and age.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yeah.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes, there are some creative geniuses who can put their ideas out into the world and they are incredibly successful, but we're in such an era of co-creation with our audiences right now.

ALISHA RAMOS: Exactly. I also think when you think about data, it's like a lot of people think, "Data, ooh, it's so scientific and technical," but really, data can mean literally calling up one of your readers or one of your customers and talking to them and learning about how they heard about you or how they used your product. And that counts as data and it's so important for us as a company to stay really close to our end user and make sure that we're building things that are useful for them. So, that's been really key.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Alisha, so, I've been a little bit sneaky about how we know each other, but I actually first met you at Harvard, where you studied sociology and history. And during your time at Harvard, you founded the advertising and marketing club, so that inclination toward "data-drivenness" and entrepreneurship has some really strong foundations.

I'm so curious about your upbringing. You've mentioned your, you know, relatively humble beginnings. And I'm wondering if your parents had any impact on your inclination toward being a self-starter.

ALISHA RAMOS: Ooh, that's a really good question. My parents, you know, they're first-generation immigrants from Korea and the Dominican Republic. One thing I'm really grateful about my upbringing regarding them and their parenting is that they always, you know, whatever I wanted to do, they were behind me 100 percent and supported me, even when I said, "Oh, I'm going to quit consulting and go into this design and technology thing," which they're, like, "What are you going to do? You're going to, like, create art on your computer? Okay." (Laughter.)

But they were actually -- they always trusted me, and they always just wanted me to be really passionate about whatever I do and try to become the best at whatever I do. So, I really do credit them with giving me the freedom to explore, definitely.

In terms of being a self-starter, yeah, I guess as a child, I've always kind of been inclined towards problem solving. I don't even know if it's leadership or whatever it is. I would frame it more as if I see a problem or if I want something, I try to solve it in a very creative way.

One example is -- this is going way back, but elementary school, I started this Beanie Baby sharing club because I saw all my friends, you know, buying these Beanie Babies. I don't know if you remember Beanie Babies.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Oh, yeah. I'm thinking about, like, the Princess Diana one that everyone thought was really priceless.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yes! The bears and the flamingos, yeah. I was all about Beanie Babies, but my parents, of course, you know, couldn't shell out hundreds of dollars for me to collect Beanie Babies. And so what I did was I went to my classmates in the first grade and said, "Hey, what if we pooled all our money and bought a couple of Beanie Babies each month and rotated them around?" (Laughter.)

And so they did that. And one day, I came home and my mom was going through my backpack and she found a wad of dollar bills in the front pocket of my backpack. And said, "What are you doing with all this cash?" And I told her about my Beanie Baby club, and she made me return all the cash because it was illegal. (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: You were crowdfunding Beanie Babies. (Laughter.)

ALISHA RAMOS: I was crowdfunding Beanie Babies. I really wanted some. So, I think that's one example of just kind of the creative and crazy ways that I solve problems and try to rally people to a cause.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. And, you know, I'm even thinking about your undergraduate studies in sociology and history. There is no computer science there, but you have built the Girls' Night In website. Like, how did that curiosity to learn how to build a website, where does that come from?

ALISHA RAMOS: The curiosity to build a website really, again, I actually think it comes from my childhood. I lived a very sheltered childhood. My upbringing was very mild. And one thing I loved doing was, of course, spending time on the Internet and going on websites like Neopets. And I think, eventually, I found a couple of websites that taught HTML to kids. One was called *Lisa Explains it All* and the other one was called *Funky Chickens*.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Oh, my gosh!

ALISHA RAMOS: Do you remember *Funky Chickens*?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. This is the website that I used to build my X Pages.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yes.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: As you, like, started to intro that sentence, I was, like, "If she says *Funky Chickens* --" (Laughter.)

ALISHA RAMOS: Yes. And I'm so shocked you know about X Pages, because that was another thing that really ignited my love for coding and design and just making things for the Internet.

So, it was there. I think it was always there. I was always really curious, and I taught myself how to code in HTML tables and all of this stuff, but never really considered it as a career because I just didn't have role models in my life to show me that, "Hey, you can create things for the Internet for a living and it's really cool." Until, unfortunately, after college I started seeing around me these, like, really cool software companies coming up like Tumblr and Pinterest and all these things and I wanted to be a part of that. And so I decided to teach myself again.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Oh, that is so cool. I'm having such a moment thinking about *Funky Chickens*. I was talking about this website with friends the other day, and it's still live.

ALISHA RAMOS: Oh, is it? Oh, my gosh.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's like funky-dash-chickens with a Z maybe, dot net? We will fact-check that, but --

ALISHA RAMOS: Oh, my goodness.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's definitely still live.

ALISHA RAMOS: It's quality. I learned how to code marquees with *Funky Chickens*.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes, same!

ALISHA RAMOS: I don't know if you remember little scrolling text, yeah.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I know. Sort of everything that's affiliated with like bad '90s website design I learned on funkychickens.net.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yes. We need to bring it back. (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So, Alisha, I listened to your interview on the *Sweet and Sour* podcast, which was a joy. That's a show about exploring different facets of Asian-American life. And, of course, this show is focused on supporting women in building their big and purposeful careers. How do you think about this work that you're doing in coming on these shows of identity representation in addition to your work as a CEO?

ALISHA RAMOS: I think about this a lot. I think about identity and representation my role now as the founder of a company a lot and how those intersect.

Recently, I had a discussion with one of our advisors in our kind of like monthly meetings about my hesitation I doing a photo shoot that we recently did with a fashion brand. And I was kind of like, "Oh, I don't love being in the spotlight. I'm pretty shy, I'm introverted, I don't know if I want to continue being in these, like, glamorous photo shoots; it's not who I am." But then my advisor said to me, "Alisha, you founded this company, whether you like it or not, you are the face of this company and you will be moving forward."

And that was a really big wake-up call for me in a positive way, even if it makes me uncomfortable being that. I am a woman of color and I am a founder and CEO. I think that is really powerful and I'm really grateful to have met a couple of our subscribers in real life who have come up to me and said, "I'm so glad to see someone who looks like me in this position," and it's really inspiring. And, like, if that's the impact that I have on the world, that's really, really cool. And I do want to show the world that a person who looks like me, who acts like me can be a founder and CEO and be really successful. I am now kind of pushing myself out of my comfort zone a little bit and doing more of these interviews and being out there a little more in the hopes that it'll help someone else.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I'm really glad that that advisor, that mentor got ahold of you in that moment of not wanting to be in the spotlight because, you, I commend you for stepping outside of that introverted nature, because it is so hard. But it sounds like you've already connected with some of the people who you're making a difference for, and I can't wait to see how many more people are motivated to start their own business after seeing this next high-fashion photo shoot. (Laughter.)

ALISHA RAMOS: Oh, my gosh, thank you. I appreciate that.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So, along these same lines of identity, let's talk a little bit about your audience. What was your motivation to focus on millennial women with Girls' Night In?

ALISHA RAMOS: That's a good question. When I first launched Girls' Night In, I knew that I wanted to create something that I personally wanted in the world and I wanted to see in the world. And, ultimately, what that helped me do was ability to empathize with our main readers and subscribers, and that empathy -- empathy is kind of a key thing that I would love for the Girls' Night In kind of company to coalesce around. I think empathy is everything, and understanding where users and your customers are coming from is key.

So, being a millennial woman definitely gives me a leg up in that. I also think our generation is in a really unique spot in our economy, in our culture, in politics and everything. We have the opportunity to create such a huge impact. Also, kind of looking at the Girls' Night In mission of helping women build more community. As a late-20-something-year-old as well, I think that mission statement really has resonated with other women who are around my age, who have now kind of, quote, aged out of the demographic where you're going out all the time and you're meeting all kinds of people

because you have this very active and lively social life, and now we're entering this phase where we're starting to settle down a little more, maybe you know a couple of our friends are having children or they're married, and it's this very interesting and different stage of life socially that presents its own like challenges and opportunities.

One statistic I like to talk about for Girls' Night In is that three-fourths of adult Americans experience social isolation or consider themselves socially isolated.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

ALISHA RAMOS: I do think it's an epidemic, and it's a key part of wellness that isn't really talked about as much. And I think for women and men, actually, like around my age, I think a lot of us feel this way. I think there are a lot of factors involved in that. I think technology is like a key piece and reason behind that. But I think it's something about this stage of life that we're all in that makes our mission really resonate.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I agree 100 percent. I'm definitely not going out to networking events, young professionals' events as much as I did when I first graduated from college.

And, you know, the process of building a really big career oftentimes requires that you are going to a city where you don't know anyone. So, while these statistics are maybe a little depressing, I'm not sure that they're very surprising. I've seen that community connection really tends to slow after that initial entering the workforce. And I really appreciate the community that you're building both on the Internet and offline.

The newsletter, of course, was the premier product for Girls' Night In, but you've also built up these in-person communities in several cities around the Girls' Night In book club. You have touched on a couple of themes here, but why was it so important to you to have this offline component?

ALISHA RAMOS: As you mentioned, we do have in-person, offline monthly gatherings, mostly book club gatherings around the U.S. It actually came about organically. A little over a year ago, a couple of our readers asked us, "Oh, hey, I love the idea of a Girls' Night In, and the best kind of pairing for a night in is a book. Can we do a book club for GNI subscribers?" And we said, "Sure."

So, the first one was done virtually, and then in our comments I think on Instagram, we had a couple of people try and talk to each other about, "Hey, I'm in this city, does anybody want to meet up and talk about this book together?" And so kind of looking at that behavior, we thought, "Oh, it would be nice to facilitate those meetings." So, it all came together really organically. I wish I could say there was a big strategic reasoning behind it or planning, but it was really organic and now it's really blossomed into my personal favorite part of building the company.

I think if you ever get the chance to go to a book club gathering, it's a really special time because a lot of the women show up alone. They are new to the city or they're going

through an interesting life transition and they're interested to meet new people in their city that they otherwise would have never met. So, it's this really like magical time to come together and talk about an amazing book that's usually written by a woman author.

And going forward, this is definitely a really important part of the Girls' Night In company and our brand and our mission because it really speaks to -- back to what we were talking about, this idea of wellness and then this idea that people are feeling more disconnected than ever before. I think there is this really, like, deep craving to meet real people offline face to face and have like a civil conversation with each other and maybe even make a new friend.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. And I'm going to have to plan my next trip around a GNI book club date, because you're not in Seattle yet.

ALISHA RAMOS: I know. We're working on it. We're working on it. Soon.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I'm glad to know that that's a priority.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yes.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I've been following along with the books and I can't wait to find all of the other GNI newsletter subscribers and book-clubbers in the area.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yes. It's on our list. Definitely. (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So, Sonia and I have started engaging other women at the company who are interested in podcast production to contribute to our show, whether it's through interviewing or through some production work. And it's been incredibly helpful to have this support. But, quite frankly, it's been a little bit challenging to like let go of that control. This is like our baby that we've been creating.

Of course, Girls' Night In is your brain child, and as your business scales, how have you come to terms with releasing that control and empowering others to help you realize your vision?

ALISHA RAMOS: Oh, I think you should have a whole podcast about this. This is amazing. I love this question. It's something I think about a lot as our business is growing and our team is growing and we're starting to bring in more people into the fold.

I think first and foremost, when I'm hiring or looking to bring on someone new, the biggest thing that I look for is the person who is truly passionate and understands the Girls' Night In mission and brand and vision and aligns with our values. I think that's key because that will be the main motivator behind everything.

So, I think the vision and the mission and the values, they really have to align. One other thing that's more tactical is as I bring on more team members and take things off my

plate, it's really made me take a hard look at our current processes and documentation is really important. So, if you're producing content, maybe it's getting together with the team and collaborating on setting some like editorial ground rules or strategy and vision and you know this is how we write and this is our voice and tone, this is how we wouldn't write, because of X, Y, and Z. I think really kind of like documenting that is so important.

And that way, it helps you scale as you bring on more team members, they can kind of look at that documentation. And also, I think it's -- one thing I try to do is present those things not as like set in stone, it's as you add more team members onto anything, I think they should be empowered to have their voice heard. That's my personal approach. I think others might be a little more kind of top-down, but yeah, ultimately, if you have a brain child or a business or a project and you have a really strong vision for it, it's about getting the right people on board who share your mission and values, and then second is working with those people to set that documentation and kind of like ground rules of how you create that thing.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right. And, of course, bringing on more people to help support your business requires money. Many of our listeners have ambitions of starting their own companies, but the current rate of funding women founders by venture capitalists is still pretty bleak. Will you share a little bit about your approach to funding your business?

ALISHA RAMOS: Absolutely. As we touched on kind of earlier in the conversation, my approach has been to bootstrap. I bootstrap because I felt like I had no other choice. I actually don't know if that's true or not, but I just had the feeling that, to your point, the funding landscape is kind of -- the odds are stacked against women founders and women-of-color founders in particular. And so kind of looking at that and looking at what I had saved up in my bank account and my own skills of what I could build on my own, I decided to just go for it and bootstrap it.

Looking back, bootstrapping, it is very painful. There will be, you know, months where you're, like, "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe I left my amazing tech salary for essentially nothing to start this business," but I think bootstrapping is the best way to start a business because it helps you really think deeply about the unit economics of the business. I had to get comfortable with numbers really fast and as you know, like Harvard doesn't teach accounting or any of these real-life --

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Correct. (Laughter.)

ALISHA RAMOS: -- finance things that might be helpful in real life.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. My degree was in visual and environmental studies. (Laughter.)

ALISHA RAMOS: Oh, yeah, there you go. So, I had to get really comfortable with my numbers. I had to build my financial model from the ground up. I was doing a lot of

Googling about, you know, net profit versus gross margin or what have you. And it's kind of like going back to what we talked about, about doing something before you're truly ready. Bootstrapping is one way to do that. It'll help you understand do you have a product that people will pay money for? How are you going to scale this product? How are you going to grow it? Even if, you know, when I started Girls Night In, even now the product isn't perfect. It's not like my ideal dream thing, but just that initial step of bootstrapping and seeing how far you can go and seeing who will pay you money and how much for what things. That's a really, really, really useful practice for an entrepreneur.

Not every business can start with bootstrapping, obviously, but if you can, I would definitely recommend staying lean, stay scrappy, and try to stay afloat for as long as possible.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's so clear that bootstrapping has made you intimately involved with every aspect of the business.

ALISHA RAMOS: Yes.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: But I hear you saying that it's not the perfect product yet. What is your vision for the future of Girls' Night In?

ALISHA RAMOS: My vision for Girls' Night In is to have Girls' Night In become a brand that truly reimagines how women take care of themselves, both through online means and offline means. I think, again, like our offline community is really important to me personally and for realizing that vision.

I think moving forward, our society is going to want more of that offline connection, so that's where kind of where we're headed in terms of growing out the company and the brand and we really want to reach as many people as possible not just in the U.S., but internationally. We already do, but we want to grow our audience and have a real impact and help women feel okay about taking care of themselves and help them make self-care a daily ritual no matter who you are or how busy you are, we really want to help you prioritize that in your life.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: That is beautiful, and I can't wait to see you realize that mission.

ALISHA RAMOS: Thank you.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Alisha, how can our listeners get involved with Girls' Night In?

ALISHA RAMOS: Yeah. You can sign up for the Girls' Night In weekly newsletter at girlsnightin.co. You can follow us on Instagram @GirlsNightInClub, and yeah, we also are on all of the other social media channels as Girls' Night In Club.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And for listeners who have felt particularly inspired by your story who want to see more people like you in their Instagram feed, where can people find you on the Internet?

ALISHA RAMOS: You can find me on the Internet on Instagram @AlishaRamos and on Twitter @AlishaLisha.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Alisha, thank you so much for joining our show today and for sharing your experiences.

ALISHA RAMOS: Of course. Thanks so much for having me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I can't wait for the Girls' Night In book club to come to Seattle. And in the meantime, I will catch you on the Internet.

ALISHA RAMOS: See you on the Internet! (Laughter.)

(Music.)

VOICEOVER: Cutting Edge, our take on stories in the business and technology world.

SONIA DARA: In this episode's Cutting Edge segment, we're going to discuss an article by Veronica Neto that was published on December 2nd on Fortune.com entitled *Michelle Obama Believes Leaning In Does Not Always Work*.

The article covers the former first lady's comments about work-life balance during her Brooklyn stop on her *Becoming* book tour.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Obama's specific comments were, quote, "That whole 'so you can have it all,' nope. Not at the same time. That's a lie. And it's not always enough to lean in, because that sh*t doesn't work all the time."

SONIA DARA: Leaning in here, of course, is a reference to Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. The book encouraged women to be ambitious about their careers, to sit at the table, and to stay in the driver's seat of their careers, even if family plans were on the horizon.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: But these statements from Obama were hardly a personal attack on Sandberg. In fact, in Chapter 9 of Sandberg's book, *Lean In*, it's really aligned with Obama's commentary here. It's called *The Myth of Doing it All*.

And then in 2017 in *USA Today*, four years after Sandberg encouraged us to lean in, she acknowledged that we still weren't better off after all of that leaning in. She commented that, quote, "We are stuck at less than 6 percent of the Fortune 500 CEO jobs." There were 19 countries run by women when *Lean In* was published; today, there are 11.

SONIA DARA: Sandberg acknowledged some of the limitations of *Lean In* in her follow-up book, *Option B*. Quote, "When I wrote *Lean In*, some people argued that I didn't spend enough time writing about the difficulties face when they don't have a partner. They were right."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: We decided to talk about this news topic because a lot of the coverage on Obama's comments pit her against Sheryl Sandberg. *Elle's* headline was, "Michelle Obama isn't a fan of Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* approach." *Slate's* headline was, "Michelle Obama doesn't believe in *Lean In* feminism -- what a relief."

SONIA DARA: So, my personal take here, in my quest to build an awesome career and a big life, sometimes I'm leaning in, and sometimes I'm not. And I appreciate women that have taken the time to share their stories to inspire me in both directions.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. I agree. Sometimes I'm leaning into my career, sometimes I'm leaning into self-care with my Girls' Night In newsletter. In the pursuit of gender equity in the workplace and in the world more generally, we don't all need to align to one strategy all of the time.

SONIA DARA: Yeah. It's important that we continue to critique and refine strategies, but I'm not sure that it's productive to pit two powerhouse women against each other.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Media definitely relied heavily on a cat-fighting motif, juxtaposing Obama and Sandberg, but I appreciate getting perspectives and guidance from both of them to inform my approach to work and life.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: We're going to tie things up here and let you get back to your holiday celebrating and planning. But before we do, I want to extend some sincere thanks to Katie Doherty and Brittney Riley for getting us up to speed on Female Founder School. I'm already looking at flights down to the Bay Area to see when I can get down there and experience the program.

SONIA DARA: And thank you to Alisha Ramos for keeping us extra cozy this holiday season with those #GNIvibes. I love kicking off the weekend with my Girls' Night In newsletter, and I know that our listeners will, too.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Please remember to rate, review, and share our show on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts.

SONIA DARA: And if you have any feedback or questions, you can e-mail us at wibt@microsoft.com or tweet us @MicrosoftWomen.

All right, listeners. Your mission for this episode, if you choose to accept it, is to make plans to attend an identity-based conference in 2019. The twist here: We're challenging

you to go to a conference supporting a population that you don't personally identify with. So, maybe it's a women's conference or a gathering focused on LGBTQ+ representation, or a conference dedicated to professionals who identify as a particular race or ethnicity. Of course, respect the space and do your research to make sure that allies are welcome. Then, get outside of your comfort zone and commit yourself to learning.

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