

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Ready to add a big dose of positivity and empowered perspective to your day, you've come to the right place. Welcome to She Said/She Said Podcast. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. Here, we tackle everything from imposter syndrome and confidence building to the best advice on how to lead yourself through life pivots, including the ones that knock you flat. For the past three years, I've talked to hundreds of experts about their stories. Here, you'll find their actionable advice and lessons as well as my own tools that you can put to use in your own life. Stick around, I think you'll find this investment in you well worth it.

Hi friends, today I am thrilled to welcome the power duo behind The Southern Coterie, otherwise known as The Southern C. Cheri Leavy and Whitney Wise Long have created, using their words, a virtual front porch for Southern creatives and entrepreneurs. The community is largely made up of women and it is this exciting mix of artists, consultants, publicists, authors, artisans, podcasters, designers and so many more. I'm sure I'm leaving out a few categories. Today, we're talking about the power of community, especially for women. We're going to talk about women supporting women, what makes an effective partnership, inspiration and where it comes from and also why collaborative groups like this one are so important for women, perhaps even more so during a pandemic.

I'm not sure if you can tell but I'm really excited about this conversation. Now, the duo has just completed their highly popular and often sold out, The Southern C Summit. It takes place each year in beautiful Sea Island, Georgia. Now, of course this year, things looked a bit different. We're going to talk about that important pivot, what they've learned in COVID, all these other things. I am thrilled to welcome Cheri Leavy and Whitney Wise Long to She Said/She Said Podcast. Welcome, ladies.

Cheri Leavy:

Thank you.

Whitney Wise Long:

Thank you for having us.

Cheri Leavy:

Glad to be here.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm so delighted to have you both. You have just come off of The Southern C Summit, so we're going to talk about that. I was privileged to attend at least part of it, which I really, really loved. But before we get into all of that, I would love for each of you just to take a moment and tell us about yourselves.

Cheri Leavy:

Yeah, sure. So I'm Cheri Leavy, I split time between St. Simons Island and Athens, Georgia. I graduated from the University of Georgia and I serve on the Alumni Board and my husband is a huge Georgia fan and we do a publication called the Bulldawg Illustrated and the guidebook Guide 2 Athens. So we enjoy getting our time in in the college town that we come from.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You guys are all about UGA, right?

Cheri Leavy:

That's right. And so we just zip back and forth with our two golden retrievers.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's awesome. Whitney, what about you?

Whitney Wise Long:

Yes, I'm Whitney Long and I live on the coast of Georgia, St. Simons Island. And I'm originally from Alabama, went to Auburn University. I've been here on St. Simons... Gosh, probably 27, 28 years now, so I consider it home. And my husband and I are parents to four, I would say kids but now, one's a young adult and then three teenagers. So our oldest is a junior in college and then we have three high schoolers. A junior, a sophomore and a freshman. So we stay pretty busy between working and the four of them.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

All right, so let's talk about The Southern C, what it is and how did this idea come about? And also, how did you two meet?

Whitney Wise Long:

My husband is from St. Simons as Cheri and her husband and so they knew one another in high school and then when my husband and I started dating, Cheri and I had met and just stayed in touch through the years. I worked in the magazine industry as a freelance editor and scout and stylist and took a break from that as I was having children and then like I say, Cheri and I just stayed in touch. Was looking for a creative outlet, we connected and sat down over lunch and just started finding that the common denominator were the things that we enjoyed. Which were the people, places, things, products from the South. That was what we were into and reading a lot about. Garden & Gun, just different blogs and that sort of stuff.

So we wanted a place to promote all of these great things that were happening in the South and so we came up with the idea for The Southern C, which is The Southern Coterie and that's a French word that means a group of people with common and similar interests. So the common interest was the South and yeah, we started out that way. We had a newsletter for a while, for I guess almost two years. We started hearing that our members... So you had to become a member to post or share content, so similar to a Facebook or something, there was no cost associated with it. Anyway, so we had all these people across the South joining and having great conversations, they wanted to connect in real life and that's how the first summit was born, just listening to our members.

We were fortunate to join forces with Southern Living towards the beginning and they dubbed us the social network of the South and the South's most visited virtual front porch. So we played off that because that's what the feel was, it was like you were on the front porch talking to a friend. People would find out if you talk enough, like, "Oh, I went to school with your aunt." Or they were sorority sisters or, "My uncle knows your dad, they play golf," that sort of thing. So it's just that conversation and the members wanted to bring it to life in person. And so that's how the summit was born and Cheri, you might want to tell about the way we kicked off back in 2013 with that.

Cheri Leavy:

Well, it was interesting because Whitney and I were developing a business and we realized a lot of the ladies we were networking with through this also own their own businesses, interior designers or retail shop designers or a jewelry designer. And the commonality, we would talk about home life and whatnot but we were also talking a lot about how to grow our businesses and I think that's a characteristic of Southerners, is just lean on each other to help each other out. And so that just grew into, we wanted to get together in person, we wanted this space or this place to gather. And so we were like well, let's do that online and in person and the commonality became, really providing the resources and the mentors and the inspiration and the problem solving that would come with putting together a bunch of female entrepreneurs. And so our content pivoted more towards... It was still promoting everybody's products and businesses and the people and the places but it leaned more into the small business owner.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

One of the things that really strikes me is that action oriented specific element that really is useful to the individual, right? It's not just information, it's really something that she can take away with her after the conversation and immediately put it to use, regardless of where she falls on the spectrum of this pretty broad range of careers and pursuits. Am I getting that right?

Cheri Leavy:

Absolutely and our membership serves us too, that's what's so crazy, is it tends to be where we are in our own business trajectory too. We had Weezie towels on the other day, Whitney and I had just been spending time on, what is the budget to spend to acquire a new member in The Southern C? Will they immediately start in on cost acquisition per customer? I literally start texting Whitney on the side, I'm like, did they hear us talking yesterday? This is so crazy. So it was developing like, if you were going to spend money on an influencer campaign, how much money can you spend? Just your long-term investment, will that person become a summit attendee? So there we were, so it happens to us all the time, it's amazing that we're able to have these conversations and they build us up in our business. Well, they got on the phone and talked about it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. How much does what you were just talking about, your personal experience, drive the content and the questions? Because in addition to the summit, which we're going to talk about in a second, you also provide a lot of content on a weekly basis for your members too.

Cheri Leavy:

Right.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So maybe talk about how your own experience drives the creation of that content.

Cheri Leavy:

And it truly does. Well, we also then are really... We listen well and so we listen to what our membership needs. So for instance, during the pandemic, we had a group of wholesalers that were on a membership call and there were tears shed, it was really scary, they were in New York. They were leaving New York to flee the city for a minute and get it together. And so basically, they were trying to find ideas because the orders had stopped, that was on a Tuesday. On Wednesday, we had a call with retailers on, okay,

you're stopping your orders, how can y'all work together? So by Thursday, we had the wholesalers and the retailers on a call together, thinking strategically, problem solving and they came up with an idea that the wholesalers would fulfill the orders if the retailers would promote it to their client base, they would profit share. So we're just real time problem solving, real time. And it's not always problems, it's oftentimes coming up with a collaboration between an artist and a clothing designer and they decide to do a ball skirt together and it just becomes the most fabulous thing. Those kinds of collaboration too, it's just really a think tank.

Whitney Wise Long:

Right and we are a small team and I've laughed to Cheri before because it's three of us basically. We have a fabulous PR team as well but three of us that are doing the day-to-day and I'm like, is that a team with only three people? But because we are small, we can be nimble and we can get programming together quickly, we can change a topic if we need to, we can have something maybe planned but then we realize the needs of what our membership and our community is wanting or needing at that time. And so we really try to meet them where they are in their walk and then find the voices, just the people with the knowledge to help them.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It strikes me that The Southern C had a real opportunity as it relates to programming during this last 12 month period. Maybe talk about what surprised you as it related to that. Everybody had to pivot on a dime in one way or another, maybe talk about how The Southern C worked to meet the needs of its members, which were different needs admittedly.

Whitney Wise Long:

Well, we ramped up programming immediately for our membership.

Cheri Leavy:

We were on calls sometimes twice a day.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah, the first probably two, three months, we were doing, like Cheri said, maybe calls twice a day. At 11:00 AM, at 2:00 PM. Just multiple, multiple calls every week and again, listening to what they were saying and trying to find who can address that in specific calls. So that really helped us with knowing our community better too. And then I think what was very unique is not only how we could bring the speakers to them so fast, it was just how people were so transparent with one another during what was and still is, unprecedented times. But just being able to get on the phone and cry if you needed to, cheer people on when you needed to. And I know you mentioned pivots, that, I think we all know, is the word of the pandemic, is your pivot.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right.

Whitney Wise Long:

And some may be temporary, some are permanent. But I think that just supported this opportunity to serve them in such a way that if everything had been status quo, we wouldn't have been able to customize our speakers and content the way we did.

Cheri Leavy:

We hit the ground running too. I had friends around me that were in shock a lot longer than I was because of this group. Because we just dove right in and said okay... We showed that grit that Southerners have. We were like okay, let's lean on each other, let's problem solve. Quickly, some of our first types that we had present were business coaches to get people back motivated and pumped up. And then also, getting serious with what you could cut in your budget as you were suddenly faced with whoa, everything's closed. So there was a lot of budget talk at the very beginning. And then we were able to go back to growth mode as business people, a lot faster I think than other people around us. I have friends that own businesses and we would get a person from... Let's say Rebecca Minkoff came on and talked to our group out of New York and she was like, "Oh, this is so refreshing," because we were already that can-do spirit.

Whitney Wise Long:

Right, right, right. And I think it's interesting, the very first call we had, if memory serves correctly, is we had an alum who has been a mentor at the summit, who homeschools her children. And the first call was tips and insight on homeschooling your child or your children because as working moms and business owners... Some of us have virtual offices or you're in your home but some have brick and mortar, et cetera but that was basically what we felt like was the most pressing need at the beginning. Just me hearing from fellow moms, "Oh my gosh, I don't know what to do. How do we do this having them at home?" So again, just really, it helped us fine-tune what our membership and alums needed to hear and wanted to hear.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

One thing I want you to drill down into a bit deeper, I just want to really put a star next to it, is something that Cheri just said about the fact that you were able to hit the ground running because of the community, that other friends and neighbors and other entrepreneurs who didn't have this same community were a little slower to figure out how to make the pivot. I'd love for you to talk a bit more about why that's the case. What is it about having this community? And because you are largely women, I know you're not 100% women but you're pretty close, 99% maybe.

Cheri Leavy:

91.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

91%. Anyway, it's mostly women but I think this point about community and support and women supporting women, maybe talk a little bit more about why that was so critical as it related to the pivots that needed to happen in COVID.

Whitney Wise Long:

I think it was the strength and numbers mentality. Like, we're better together.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What do you mean by that?

Whitney Wise Long:

I mean we're better together, just supporting one another. Again, we were all in the same boat to some degree. I've always loved... It's an African proverb, it says if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. And I feel like that explains where we were at that time, we were moving fast and we were offering the programming and getting what needed to be in front of our members but it was just that being in a group. And just feeling like there was somewhere you could go once a week if you wanted to hop on one call or if you wanted to hop on four calls. We were there if you needed us.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Do you think that made a difference in terms of maybe individual members' appetite for taking risks at a time in which stakes were really high?

Whitney Wise Long:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cheri Leavy:

Absolutely.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah. We had a couple of people that launched businesses right as the pandemic was starting.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's amazing.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah. And they were on the calls and they were like, "Oh my gosh, what's going on? I just started this business and then a week later, the world changes." But I think it was so great because we had seasoned voices present or webinar leaders but also, seasoned fellow alums and members that were participating on the calls. We had Deb Johns with SCOUT Bags who weathered the storm back in 2008 and 2009 with the collapse in of the economy, with the housing market and everything. And she did a webinar and just had so much insightful information about what they did because it was similar situation. Just where we all found ourselves. So yeah, we were fortunate in finding those voices that could speak to what our people wanted and needed to hear and continue to. Like Cheri said, last week with our Weezie call. We like the hashtag #TheCompanyWeKeep and we really feel like we're in good company across the board.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that, that's really great. Okay, so in addition to the content that you provide, you also host The Southern C Summit, which is in Sea Island, Georgia, every year. You've had to pivot that construct a bit

and I was, as I said before, was really happy to be able to attend part of it virtually from here in the D.C. area but maybe talk a bit about what that looked like. Talk a little bit about what happens at the summit, it is described as a magical experience by so many of the attendees. And as I think I shared with you all, two, at least two of our former podcast guests, Lydia Fenent and also Amy Flurry had recommended The Southern C to me. Both to get you two on to chat with us about this idea of women supporting women and community but also, to join as a member and I'm so grateful that I did. But talk a little bit about the value of the summit itself and what happens there.

Cheri Leavy:

Well, I think it's that whole getting that many smart, savvy businesswomen in one space. The energy is electric. You can come by yourself and jump in and feel like oh, these are my people and they just swoop you up. That's what's so great, is we have an event happen the very first day. Everybody's like, "I've got two places at dinner tonight, anybody want to join?" So people are jumping in, there's that instant camaraderie. We have been so fortunate to have created a space where competition gets left at the door. And so it's very much about serving each other and that spirit, really I think it helps the event. This year it was really important for us to create a safe event and so we were very glad that we were partnered with Sea Island to do so because they have been hosting events safely with very little COVID, thank goodness, afterwards and we were able to do the same.

We had been talking about going virtual and streaming and we were nervous and that's one of those pivots that now, we were forced to do it because if the in person event didn't work out, we needed somewhere... We needed to carry on, right? So we would have the virtual. So we went for it and it went really well and we loved it. And that's a pivot we'll keep, we'll never stop doing the virtual part, so that we can have a way to have more people involved in the conversation. I popped in on some of the mentor groups during the virtual and they had a very similar energy that we had in real life. So I was excited to see that connection happening. We're glad, now, we'll be a hybrid event, right?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's so interesting to me because I think people have adapted pretty quickly, out of necessity of course but also, learned that you can have these connections. Before COVID and the pandemic, I really was very committed to having every podcast conversation in person. And I would go to the far ends of wherever I was and bring my mic along and carry it on the plane and have to stop through security and they'd be like, "What is that in your suitcase?" Anyway and it was such a pain because I thought there's no way that you can have the same connection and that is true to a certain extent but this is really good. Now we've learned how we can connect with each other on a virtual basis and to allow that additional opportunity for those who really aren't able to travel, either because of concerns at home or they have little children or their sick or who knows what?

It really is an interesting dynamic and an interesting way of thinking about that and hopefully, will provide us with more opportunities. I realize this is an organization that was started because of that *je ne sais quoi* if you will, related to the South. What is it about the South? And you do include members who are not quote, unquote Southern. I consider myself a Southerner even though I live in the D.C. area and I'm from Texas, which is not really the South, right? The Southwest is a little different. But I consider myself an honorary Southerner as I suspect your membership does. But you are inclusive of women who are not from the South, right?

Cheri Leavy:

Yes.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Maybe talk about how you create an inclusive community?

Whitney Wise Long:

So yes, we do get that question when tickets go on sale often. Do I have to be from the South to attend? And we're like, absolutely not. And we have people from all over the country, from every part. So back when we started in 2013, we had three events in six months, which was just insane and we quickly realized that that was physically not a sustainable model for us to be in three different places within that amount of time. So anyway though, I would say by the time we rolled into our first event in Charleston, that's when we were getting people from all over the country. And I think the constant will be that we have our events in the South but people can be from all over, our membership base is from all over. For us, we just love being in the South, showcasing it, being in different cities, fun places. We were in Charleston for three years, then we came to Sea Island and this was our fifth year on Sea Island, I believe.

And with me being here full-time and with Cheri being here part-time, it just made the most sense to be in our backyard. But I think we will always host our events in the South and so I feel like there's just something that when you do get to these locations, you're leaving that big city vibe behind and people are very transparent and open and ready to share and be together. And you mentioned the magic of the summit earlier, we do have so many people say it's like this pixie dust, the summit pixie dust. And it's the people but I think the location definitely helps. When you put people in a beautiful five star resort and we try to stay on campus so to speak the whole time... And especially this year with COVID, we did not do any off site dinners and that sort of stuff but I think when you put them in a pretty inspiring place, magic happens, whether you're front the North, the South, the East, the West, whatever. So yeah, that will I think always be our location. We will be back on Sea Island but even outside of that, we would stay in the confines, below the Mason-Dixon I guess.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah.

Whitney Wise Long:

And we do some workshops throughout in different locations, Charleston, Atlanta, Athens, that sort of thing. And we've had so many New York alums say, "We would love for you to do an event here." And we were like, maybe a workshop but the big event, we'll always keep in this area.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. What are you guys seeing in terms of... There's a lot of discussion about mass exodus from cities and people leaving with their families to smaller and mid-sized cities more similar to where you guys are, what are you seeing from that standpoint? Are you seeing a lot of that now?

Whitney Wise Long:

Well, my husband's in real estate here and I know personally, we are seeing it every single day.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Interesting.

Whitney Wise Long:

But all coastal areas and I think particularly in the South, all coastal areas are really hot markets right now. And I think it speaks to quality of life. I think we all know now, you don't have to be in an office five days a week. I think we're going to see that with corporations offering the opportunity to do what you're comfortable with. Maybe it's a hybrid, like you were saying with your children earlier, about school. But I definitely see that personally. And then our people that have brick and mortar, that's a little trickier if you're trying to leave and go somewhere. I think it's going to continue like that.

I just think this virtual office concept has changed the way we all work and it's changed the future. But I also know that that can be a little isolating because getting back to how the summit started, if you have an office at home, you really crave that face-to-face in some form or fashion. And when we had the first summit in 2013 when our attendees, I mean our members, were saying, "We would love to meet in person," I think that was the catalyst for that. I'll get here on my computer and I'll work, work, work, the next thing you know I'm picking up the kids at school and I haven't seen another person until I pick up the kids. So I think there's always going to be... Even though we can do virtual offices more easily, you can do your podcast like this but that's where I think inspiration really, really comes from, is those face-to-face conversations. Even six feet apart, like at the summit, for the real life attendees.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Let's talk a bit about creativity. You're both creatives, given the nature of your work and the nature of your membership. Maybe talk about the challenges of keeping those creative ideas flowing and your tips and advice for really fueling your creative spirit. Maybe also the flip side to that, dealing with burnout, right? Because with creatives, just as you're talking about, how do you keep the spigot from drying up? What are your tools for really keeping that creativity and that inspiration going?

Cheri Leavy:

I think that's what this community is for. I truly believe that when you make the time and the head space for working on your business, not in it... A day of working in a database or the parts that us creatives don't love as much but to be able to endure all that, you've got to have the head space to be brainstorming new... To be brainstorming marketing ideas, to be creating vibrant social media campaigns. So I think having a community helps you avoid that burnout. I know I've gotten on member calls before grumpy and like oh, okay, here we go. And then by the end of it, I'm so refreshed. So I think I feed off the people, so that helps me avoid burnout. And other times, communication, I think it goes back to that and just having this professional growth community.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

How about this whole idea of mindfulness? I just had on the podcast, my friends who are the cofounders of a health and wellness entity called BB&R Wellness, they host a podcast called the Health Gig Podcast but their focus is on the whole mind-body connection but specifically around mindfulness. Maybe any practices that you two individually engage in around mindfulness to really focus on the care and feeding of your spirit and your soul.

Whitney Wise Long:

We probably do not do that enough, I'm speaking on behalf of both of us. And we again, hit the ground running every morning and go, go, go to get things done but I think it is so important. Just a very, very small thing I've done within the last year was I deleted Facebook off my phone and now, if I want to get

on it, I have to make a point to sit down at my computer and open it up and that sort of stuff. So I think just very small practices that help can help and that was just clearing some of the brain space from things that are negative and just things that I don't really need to have in there. But that's just one little thing I've done for me. I do think that mindfulness is so important, having a home office or working out of your home because the lines blur so much, there's no separation of church and state there.

And I'm a mom working in my house but I need to be able to take those breaks, to center and just get focused because there's just so much overlap between the two. It's probably two or three years ago at the summit, we did a little mindfulness practice between sessions, with someone on stage walking us through that and I think that's something that we should investigate bringing back because it was really, really nice.

Cheri Leavy:

Totally.

Whitney Wise Long:

And then this year at the summit, we built in some mindfulness minutes between speakers to do a brain dump for lack of a better term, to take what you had just heard and put on paper but then also, to just try to relax and close your eyes and think through things and just center yourself again. So that was something we were hoping to pass along to attendees.

Cheri Leavy:

I know, so we did yoga during the retreat too, which was lovely and it's so neat because her theme was let go and as I was with her, I thought okay, I'm not letting go, I'm just grateful right now and that was really interesting. So then I told Whitney, so for Lent, I am practicing positivity. So I'm not saying anything ugly, it has to be super constructive and not ugly, right?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Love that, yeah.

Cheri Leavy:

So that's what I'm working on here.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I think everybody should do that, Lent or otherwise.

Cheri Leavy:

Right.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

We're at this moment in time in which if you can just stop for a second and be really grateful.

Cheri Leavy:

Hey, is that productive to say?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And whatever nasty thing is right there on the tip of your tongue, just reframe it in the moment, right? Are you going to feel better when you've spouted out that awful thing on Facebook or Instagram or wherever it happens to be? Or Twitter, where the most vile things live. But it doesn't make you feel better and it contributes to this angst and this yuck that we're dealing with.

Whitney Wise Long:

If there's ever been a time to give grace to one another and to yourself, it's been since March.

Cheri Leavy:

Yeah, right.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. For sure, for sure.

Cheri Leavy:

My mindful practice is going to be start every day thinking about what I'm grateful for and then when I go to do anything snarky, like a screenshot to Whitney, I'm not going to do that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, if it's just to Whitney, it's probably okay.

Whitney Wise Long:

You're in the safe zone.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You're in the safe zone, exactly. Yeah, I have a very small group of friends on text and that's where we allow ourselves to be maybe a little edgier than we would otherwise. You were talking about deleting Facebook, Whitney and I completely appreciate that. But at the same time, we have an opportunity to try to put positive things into the world. And you've got these platforms that you can use for that purpose and so I've tried to think about this moment in time and what can I do to try to make the world better, right? Even if it's just a tiny pebble dropping into a pond, can it have just a little ripple effect that maybe makes one other person feel better, right? There's value in that.

Whitney Wise Long:

For sure. It's needed right now more than ever. I have a love-hate relationship with social media and it's such a large part of what we do but it is this rabbit hole you can go down. So just really try to be mindful of the time spent on that. And I am trying to be more with my four kids. If they're talking with me, I'm so intentionally now trying to put my phone down. Not even have it in my hand kind of thing because it's just oh, okay, you're looking at it and talking to them. I'm really trying to be more, phone not in my hand.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Present.

Whitney Wise Long:

But it's hard.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It is.

Whitney Wise Long:

It's dinging, you got texts going off. I'm like no, no, no, that is not something that I have to reply to this minute.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, I'd love for you to talk a little bit about your partnership and what makes it work. I know you guys have been friends for many years but what is it about your particular partnership that works? Cheri, the best part about Whitney and Whitney, the best part about working with Cheri.

Cheri Leavy:

Well, I think our communication has gotten stronger, even from when we just started. So there's a maturity to it now that I really place a value on. I feel much more confident in it even. I feel like we've made some good business decisions and we have plugged along and to be coming up on a 10 year marker is a big deal.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

How long did that take to really get to that comfort level? I knew you knew each other, you were friends but it's different when you're friends and also in business together. And so maybe at what point did that comfort level really kick in?

Cheri Leavy:

I would say we always have had a friendly rapport and whatnot but I would say the maturity came in the second half of this decade. I would say in this most recent five years is where I feel like we have a very grown up... It's a marriage.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right, for sure.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah, work wife.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah.

Cheri Leavy:

So you have to learn to listen to each other well and to find the common ground in the decisions being made. And sometimes, you can't win every argument, right? That's a successful marriage too, is know

when... Okay, she feels more strongly about that than I do, I'm going to trust her instinct on that, whatever it might be.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Whitney, how about you? How about the best part of working with Cheri?

Whitney Wise Long:

I think that with Cheri, she is such a go-getter, she's got a big heart, she is a cheerleader and that makes it easy to work together. I think we are very like minded, we're similar yet different. Our strengths and weaknesses, we seem to fortunately balance one and other out there and I think that's huge because we are able to compliment one another with our abilities and in our skillset. And then also know that we are sometimes at different places in life, she's got multiple businesses, busy with that. I may be busier on the home front and so there's again, just that grace of you know what? If you don't respond immediately, I know that you've got stuff going on. So just getting to know one another deeper through the years and just again, saying, she'll get to it when she can or Whitney will get to it when she can and be understanding of that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, how about advice for picking a business partner?

Whitney Wise Long:

It just fell into our laps. It was knowing each other.

Cheri Leavy:

Whitney and I both wish the other one was a little more financially astute, like accounting with budget.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah, any CFOs out there looking for jobs?

Cheri Leavy:

I know, our first full time hire would be CFO, right? Our husbands would say that too. Luckily, we've had good advisers and good instincts in that department. But I do think you have to be able to communicate.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And be able to work through those differences. Any advice for when you really come to a roadblock? Maybe that never happens but when you do, how you work through those differences of opinion when you both feel really strongly about something.

Cheri Leavy:

We tend to land on the same side when we're feeling strongly, which is lucky but we also have strong... We have a strong accountant that advises us well, we have a strong PR firm that provides a ton of strategy for our business, she's been with us... Leapfrog, they have been with us since we started. And then strong website, so I think we have strong advisers that help us through the things that we need support on.

Whitney Wise Long:

Right and it's great having that outside voice, the one-off that can come in and be like, "Okay, this is how it is."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, how much can you guys rely on the community? I assume that you're getting a lot of input from The Southern C community as well.

Cheri Leavy:

A ton. Most everybody that we work with is in the community. Almost everything, even lawyer, Angie Avard. So we do lean in on our community. She does a lot of copyright and trademark stuff.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Maybe talk about as you are evolving and growing a business, it may require that you create or develop a different tribe than you've had around you, maybe advice for developing that new tribe of people, how do you go about that?

Whitney Wise Long:

Well, I think you attend events when you're able to. Conferences, events, summits, whether it is in person or virtually now, which will probably be the trend for a while. But just expose yourself in that way to continuing education but continuing to grow your circle and your tribe, like you said. Because that's where you learn, is when you get out from your immediate circle.

Cheri Leavy:

And I think that's the beauty in The Southern C too, is it's so many different industries and so many different cities and towns, so you basically have all these movers and shakers coming together, instead of going to an interior design conference. Which is great for growing your business but this mixes it up and I think you gain ideas from the other industries. You're hearing what they're getting from their other connections.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And that's really where innovation tends to happen, right? When you're able to apply methodologies in one industry and apply them maybe a little differently in your own industry, right? And you get that, well gosh, we could do that here even though nobody else is doing it that way, that's a great way to think about innovation.

Whitney Wise Long:

And we have a hashtag that we use, #ConnectCollaborateCreate and that to me is just amazing to go back and look through the years how the hashtag has grown and see all the things that have happened as a result of building this larger tribe and the things that people are doing together. And to me and I've told this to so many people but I think one of the coolest things about the summit is, when you attend virtually or in person, your summit experience does not end the day you go home. That's really, really when it's just starting to take off because people stay in touch, they support one another, they reach out when they have something come up, an opportunity. They're the first ones to like your post on

Instagram. It's just this really, really unique, again, pixie dust type thing where you come, your tribe is growing by attending but then it just continues to grow beyond the actual confines of the event.

Cheri Leavy:

And we dub everyone alumni afterwards. So when we see them in the press or we see them working on a project together, we use the hashtag, #ISpotTSCSummitAlums and so that further encourages supporting one another and keeping that group going, there's a sense of belonging.

Whitney Wise Long:

It's a giant group of cheerleaders that are there. That are again, liking and commenting and sharing and just thinking of one another when opportunities come up for collaborations and working together.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, I love that. I love that, that's great. As you look back over what you've accomplished so far, what is the broader impact that you hope The Southern C will have had?

Cheri Leavy:

It is so rewarding to watch the businesses grow and see over the years, some of the ones that have been with us since we started and to see them on a national stage some of them and just the impact they're making. And so I think watching those businesses grow, even sometimes watching someone close a business to pivot more attention to another part of their business, we feel like we are there to be the support to help them grow through whatever those transitions might be. And I think we're both honored to be a part of it. That's the thing. And the more support we can lend, the more variety of industry and types of ladies that can become involved, the bigger that ripple effect, like you were talking about.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, that's amazing, I love that, I really love that. Maybe one final question, if you could go back to where you first started when you started The Southern C, maybe a single piece of advice or a life hack or mantra, maybe something that's kept you centered or something that you wish you had known then that you can share with our audience.

Whitney Wise Long:

Gosh, that's a hard one. 2013 seems like so long ago, I'm trying to think back to the very beginning.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You're made a lot of progress since then.

Whitney Wise Long:

I know, I know. This year seems like such a long year, right? So 2013 really seems like a long time ago.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right.

Whitney Wise Long:

I think for us, it was leap and the net will appear. We are so blessed, so fortunate, that our business has taken off like it has because we really just... I don't want to say on a whim but basically, on a whim, listened to our members or... Yeah, our members of the social network at the time that wanted to meet in real life and we just said, "Let's do it." And the next thing we knew, we had booked a venue here on Jekyll Island, the new Convention Center. Did not have a PR company, we went up to Charleston and met Leapfrog PR through a mutual friend. Came in like a whirlwind, said, "We have this going on in three months, can you help us?" Thankfully, they agreed and they jumped in. It's just taken off from that but you hear that saying a lot, leap and the net will appear and for us, it worked out. There were growing pains along the way, we still have growing pains, it's not been all roses and sunshine and unicorns and that kind of stuff but that's just part of any business, it's ebb and flow type thing. But I think just take that chance.

Cheri Leavy:

I agree that that's probably the best piece of advice because sometimes, when I've watched some of our members when they're slow to launch an idea and they're overtalking it, overthinking it and I'm not saying... You should certainly have a business plan and have the structure and the fundamentals in place before you launch but I watch so many and I'm like, oh my gosh, you have got to get out of your own way, just go for it. You've thought it through, you're solving a problem, go for it. So I do think it is that take the leap, take the risk. You have to realize that everyone around you is vulnerable and scared and wishes they were more confident, we're all in the same boat in that regard. So it's never going to be perfect.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And too, it's that idea of recognizing that it's uncomfortable as you just said, it's uncomfortable for almost everybody. And so recognizing that the discomfort is not about necessarily telling you not to do it.

Whitney Wise Long:

Right.

Cheri Leavy:

Right.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's just a warning, it's just to say hey, it's an opportunity to learn and grow but getting comfortable with that idea of discomfort, which is an overused statement but I think it's not well understood what that means.

Cheri Leavy:

I totally agree.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And you just articulated that beautifully.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yes.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, so great. I think because of COVID, those groups that have done this well, it's made all the difference. I think Cheri, you said it best when you talked about the fact that the people who were able to make the pivots were the ones that had that community. And it's that support of knowing that when you take the risk, you got people to help keep pushing you, right? Because if you think you're all by yourself, it's just scary as can be.

Whitney Wise Long:

Well, it is. It's that mentality of, together we're better and it's so true and we've just seen that come to life continually the last, what are we in? 10, 11, 12 months of the pandemic stuff now.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

10 years.

Whitney Wise Long:

Almost a year coming up soon, right?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It feels a little like a decade.

Whitney Wise Long:

Crazy, crazy to think about.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

But at the same time, I always think about this because we've learned so much. Yes, it was hard and we've worked really hard and we've been challenged in ways. Most of us have never been challenged in ways like this before but hopefully, you learned so much about yourself and about others and if you were able to make those pivots, it's because you doubled down and figured out a way to do it. And so the learning associated with that, to me, the opportunity for growth has been exponential. I'm always so annoyed when I see things on social media about, write off 2020 or pretend 2020 didn't happen or whatever and I realize people are joking. At the same time, you're on this planet and if God has graced you with life and breath and the ability to do something and make a difference, my goodness. Just because it's hard.

Cheri Leavy:

Right.

Whitney Wise Long:

I sent this to my husband and son the other day, it was an EEK! Magazine or Forbes or something but this really, really stood out to me, getting to what you're saying and it says, chaos opens people's mind, the innovators of the world are living in a golden age right now.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yes, amen.

Whitney Wise Long:

And so it is that creative thinking, that thinking outside of the box, this is presenting opportunities that you never would have had before to think that way. And like Cheri was saying, we had talked about doing a virtual or streaming before with the summit. But we were like oh, we don't need to, it's fine, we've got our big group coming, et cetera. If they want to make the effort, then we can offer the program once they get here. But this made us have to go to include streaming and it was so wonderful, we won't turn back from that. It felt chaotic in making those decisions but it was such a good decision that we had to make.

Cheri Leavy:

I think COVID gave me such a sense of purpose with The Southern C membership. It really helped me not get bogged down in what was happening in the world.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah, there was no time for a pity party at that point.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right, right.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, those decisions become even more consequential perhaps than they were before, right? Because you literally had business owners who were in, from business perspective, life or death situations and it really becomes very purpose driven and mission driven, to a larger degree perhaps than it was before. I think that's fascinating.

Cheri Leavy:

Absolutely. It definitely did, I'm with you, there were good things that came out of 2020. I'm not writing it off.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. Ladies, this has been so great, I really have loved the conversation and I know the audience is going to love hearing your perspective. It is such a powerful testament to the importance of women supporting women and the importance of developing this community around you.

Whitney Wise Long:

Yes, we are better at being cheerleaders for others than ourselves. We're getting to the PR and press, we need to work on that and mindfulness.

This transcript was exported on Feb 23, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I love it. I absolutely love it and I really appreciate you both so much.

Whitney Wise Long:

Thank you, have a good day, it was nice to see you.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

All right, you too. Take care. To learn more about The Southern C, check out the show notes for this episode, episode 141. I hope you found this episode thought provoking and most importantly, a valuable investment of your time. If you enjoyed the episode, I would be so grateful if you could let me know. You can direct message me on Instagram at LauraCoxKaplan, all one word. Or contact me via the link on the She Said/She Said Podcast website. Finally, just a small favor. Because your feedback is so essential as we create content for the next few weeks and months, I would love your thoughts on topics that you want to hear more about and also thoughts on thoughtful guests who you believe would contribute in a positive way to this dialogue. As always, I am incredibly grateful that you've joined us today and I look forward to seeing you next time. Until then, take care.