

Laura Cox Kaplan:

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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.

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Hi, friend, welcome to Episode 150. My guest today is Megan Bushell. She is the CEO of DEFY. DEFY is a sports and performance drink and product brand that Megan co-founded along with former NFL Hall of Famer Terrell Davis of the Denver Broncos. Defiance and perseverance is something that Megan knows quite a bit about because her story and her path to the C-suite isn't necessarily typical. And I absolutely love that about this episode and I think you will, too.

Megan and I do a deep dive into her origin story and how competition, specifically in the Miss America Pageant system, fueled her ability to overcome fear. She was Miss Kansas 2004 and then placed in the top 10 at Miss America that same year. But that was only after trying and failing and trying and failing and trying and failing some nine times before. We talk about what Megan learned from that experience, and the value that comes from challenging ourselves from learning to compete, and especially learning from our failures and our setbacks. It is such an important building block for confidence.

Megan and I also do a pretty deep dive into the innovation around CBD products, what we should know about the growth in this market and the impact of companies like DEFY, which is working to help their customers to compete and stay in the game.

Megan, welcome to She Said/She Said.

Megan Bushell:

Thank you so much. I'm delighted to be here.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm so happy to have you. We have so much to talk about but I want to first talk about DEFY. What is the DEFY company?

Megan Bushell:

Oh my goodness. Well, DEFY is our company. We started it. I'm the CEO and one of the co-founders. We launched our company in May 2019. And DEFY is performance with purpose. We are all about define your everyday. And we initially launched the company with some very high quality premium CBD products. We started out with a line of isotonic drinks. So we expanded into CBD oil drops, which are also called tinctures, as well as a methylated muscle balm. And what I'm most excited about now is that we've expanded our product lineup into the alkaline water segment. We're rolling that out nationwide right now and giving back a portion of the proceeds from that water to the communities that we represent as a Black-owned, woman-owned and veteran-owned company.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Okay, there's so many amazing things that you just said in all of that. So I want to break this down a bit.

Megan Bushell:

Sure.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I want us to start Megan, by talking a bit about CBD because I suspect, speaking on behalf of my listeners, I don't think people necessarily have a good understanding of what CBD and CBD products are. How do they relate to or what is the relationship between marijuana and hemp and some of these other things? I think there's a lot of confusion around this. You're not selling legalized marijuana.

Megan Bushell:

Not at all.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You're not selling CBD. These are different things. So let's talk about exactly what this is. Not all of your products I realized contains CBD, but talk about the element of CBD, why this is important. Give us a bit of a primer if you will.

Megan Bushell:

Sure. CBD is one of the many extracts that comes out of the hemp plant. Hemp and cannabis are sister plants essentially. It's a great question. I think a lot of education is required for consumers in general because I myself back in 2017 had never heard of CBD. I wasn't a cannabis consumer. I didn't know the difference between cannabis and hemp. And not just from a plant structure and the benefits that come out of it, but also from a regulatory standpoint. Hemp-derived CBD is entirely federally legal. There's no THC in our products.

CBD stands for cannabidiol. And that is essentially a natural anti-inflammatory that occurs in hemp plants. And you can isolate those components as well as other minor cannabinoids that come from the plants and extract them from the plant and then put them into a variety of form factors, whether that's an oil, whether that's a ready-to-drink product, like what we have, whether that's a balm or topical or all sorts of different things. And it connects to the endocannabinoid receptor system that we all have in our bodies. And what that does is essentially helps to heal it from the inside out. So there's a whole host of different benefits there and there's a ton of information available on the internet that you can find to learn more.

When I started out and first really looking into this, it was because my business partner Terrell Davis, who's an NFL Hall of Famer and former Denver Bronco running back, he had suffered on a daily basis from the many hits that he took during his career in the NFL. That resulted in a lot of pain and inflammation that he was dealing with. He had no cartilage in his knees. Anytime he would do anything physically active, his knees would swell up because [inaudible 00:06:05] and he'd be kind of sidelined for four days, which is really tough for somebody who's a former pro athlete.

And so we really came across this because we just were looking at something that was a potential solution for him and his health. And the more I learned about it, the more I dove in and read the World Health Organization reports around cannabidiol and its other derivatives, the more really excited and fascinated I became about the potential for this to be a health and wellness solution for millions of people around the world. And so that's essentially kind of where DEFY was born was. Was

really understanding the potential here for this to treat a lot of people, for it to help a lot of people, and just overall improve their health and wellness.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. How big of a challenge in your job as the CEO is it to counter some of the misinformation or misunderstanding or just lack of awareness about CBD?

Megan Bushell:

Oh, my goodness. That is a full-time job, I would say, and education is so critical. That's why it's so important for the media, for retailers, for consumers, for mainstream media, as well as industry specific to really continue to push education and awareness around the differences in this. I think what's so important is that for DEFY, we really drew a line in the sand when we realized this was something that could help a lot of people. But as we were looking into it just for our own personal use, there was no quality control standards in the industry, there was no gold standard in terms of a brand that existed, that we really felt safe consuming and putting into our bodies and knowing what we were actually going to be putting into our bodies, because there's a whole lot of things out there.

The hemp plant, it essentially sucks up everything that's in the soil that it's growing in. And that can be good or bad. So that can be heavy metals, that can be toxic substances, chemicals, etc. And so in the early stages of this industry, there was a lot of concern, because you had hemp been imported from China, from Russia, from other places, and there was no real trust as to what was in that product that you were potentially putting into your body. And so we realized there was an opportunity for us to develop that gold standard and that quality control system here in the US. And so that's what we set out to do.

And not only that, not only being completely transparent in quality, purity and potency, but also ensuring that all DEFY products have 0% THC in them. And THC is of course, the psychoactive compound that is found in hemp and cannabis plants that causes the psychoactive effects, which is why the recreational side of the cannabis industry exists. And again, that was not our focus at all. We were focused entirely on health and wellness. And we were able to essentially find a scientific partner that was able to remove 100% of the THC from all of our products to ensure that there's 0% in every DEFY product. So you're getting all of the health and wellness benefits without the psychoactive effects that could be concerning for parents, for people who are drug tested at their jobs or things like that. And so that's really... Education is a critical component because not all CBD is created equal.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Sure. Talk a little bit about how you are managing for safety and soundness, where these products are produced and how you're managing that piece of it. Because it seems to me that that's really one of the biggest pieces.

Megan Bushell:

Sure. The industry has evolved rapidly over the last several years, which has been very exciting to see. When we first started out into this business, we almost didn't do this on multiple occasions because it was difficult to find partners that brought the due diligence levels that we expected to the table, that brought the science and technology that we expected to the table. But finally we did find some great partners and what's exciting is that over the last few years since we've been in business, the industry has

evolved immensely. And now there are a lot of the... I would say bad actors have begun to be essentially filtered out and shut down in the industry. So there's more quality companies doing business.

In terms of what we do, we only work with third-party accredited labs. We do full panel testing on every product before it ever goes into our manufacturing process. Everything is tested multiple times at the supplier level, as well as at our level and third-party accredited lab levels as well. And that's for purity potency, heavy metals, pesticides, other residual solvents and chemicals. All of that is made available on our website. So we're very, very transparent with customers. And of course, anything that doesn't pass with flying colors, never goes into a DEFY product.

Of course, we work with only FDA certified manufacturing facilities. So everything is in full compliance with FDA manufacturing guidelines. All of the facilities that we work with are ISO certified. So there's quite a bit of quality control that goes into the manufacturing of our products. And it's done at the FDA standard level for food and beverage as well as nutritional supplements.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, interesting. Because most people are not professional athletes, and even smaller segment are professional football players, who is your target audience for this? Certainly those individuals, but I assume that your target market must be much larger than that. So maybe talk about who your ideal customers are.

Megan Bushell:

Sure. DEFY was really built for those who are inspired to defy the everyday. And this is all about helping people, whether that's giving them the opportunity, whether they're a professional athlete, a collegiate athlete, maybe a weekend warrior, a yoga mom, somebody who's getting into cycling on the weekends, somebody who's looking to improve their overall health and wellness and to defy the everyday. That defiant mentality is a community that we've developed and that we continue to build out, because, for us, it's all about defying the everyday, and whether that's defying injury, defying the traditional recovery process, defying age, defying the limitations that society might have placed upon you or other communities might have placed upon you, defying hatred, defying prejudice.

DEFY is that real mentality that is a thread that goes throughout our entire community and our product line and our brand. And so for us it's people that are dealing with pain and inflammation, people that are dealing with age but they want to stay active and they still want to go play golf or tennis a few times a week, but their body is not performing the way that it used to when they were younger. And so there's really kind of a wide array. It's built for those people who are looking to defy the standard, defy the everyday and improve their health and wellness in a variety of different ways.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What impact are the changing and evolving legal landscape around legalized marijuana and certain regulations as it relates to that? How does that impact your business, if at all? Recognizing you talked about before, is that these are different elements and yet there's a relationship. And my guess is, knowing the regulatory world the way that I do, sometimes laws and regulations are a little slow to catch up, even though there may be a difference. It's an assumption on my part, but my guess is that's probably pretty spot on here. So talk about how the legal and regulatory landscape is impacting your business and where customers can find the products as well.

Megan Bushell:

Well, you brought up a critical point, which is the legal and regulatory landscape and how that impacts the industry. The CBD industry as a hemp derivative, really opened up in 2018 with the passage of the 2018 Farm Bill, which passed in December 2018. The CBD industry already existed, you already had products in the marketplace, but the challenge was that there was no clear regulatory body overseeing them. They were falling under the guidance of the DEA instead of the FDA. And what that bill did was it made hemp and its derivatives federally legal, and it moved it from the DEA as a scheduled narcotic overview and it moved it into the FDA's overview, whether it's in nutritional supplements or food and beverage. And that was a critical step for making quality CBD products available to the masses.

Of course after that, the next step is for the FDA to put out clear guidelines for CBD usage in food and beverage manufacturing, as well as in nutritional supplements. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, the FDA has been very slow to act in that regard. And because of their slow movement in the industry, it has allowed bad actors to become rampant and to really take advantage of consumers. It has resulted in a variety of miscommunication, misinformation out there in the industry on the internet for consumers. So it's really presented quite a bit of challenges for the industry at large for the players that are really here to set the quality standards and to develop the industry in what it has the potential to be.

We do believe that the FDA is going to move. Unfortunately, they obviously have their hands full right now with COVID and that has certainly set probably the projections for those timelines and guidance back somewhat. But what that has done is that it has pushed it into the state's hands. And so what you've seen over the last few years is that every state has been passing their own legalization and legislation around guidance for companies for CBD and food and beverage, for CBD and nutritional supplements, for CBD and agriculture, because the federal government hasn't really been quick to move in that. The states have been going through and doing so themselves. So it's a bit of a patchwork quilt, regulatory environment that we find ourselves in.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, and a really big challenge in your job, I imagine.

Megan Bushell:

Certainly, certainly. But we have a great team, we have a great team of attorneys that keep their finger on the pulse of everything that's going on and keep us closely advised. There are some great councils and organizations out there that are lobbying Congress and whatnot, and really moving the needle. And so we stay as close to that as possible, while we continue to also move into other areas of the performance space with our alkaline water and our new boost product that we're getting ready to launch.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right, which I want to talk about that as well. But before we do that-

Megan Bushell:

Sure.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

... let's jump into your story a bit, which is so fascinating. I want you to talk about how you got here. You were Miss Kansas 2004, which is really interesting. You pursued a professional singing career. You've

done a number of different things, but how did you get here and where did the friendship or relationship with your partner Terrell Davis actually start?

Megan Bushell:

It's so funny, if you had told me or my family five years ago, 10 years ago that I would one day be leading and founding a CBD company in the hemp space and the performance space and being partners with a professional athlete, I think we all would have laughed you out of the room. It was certainly not a path that I ever expected my life to take, and my family always finds that highly entertaining as well. But it's been an incredible journey. And to your point, I do have a bit of an eclectic oddity of a background and an adventure over the course of my life. For me, it's always just about having an open mind and being open to opportunities and new pathways when they come to the table and really trusting in God that he's leading me in the right direction.

And so yes, I grew up in the Midwest, I was Miss Kansas 2004, competed and was top 10 at Miss America 2005 and in your hometown of D.C. We spent a couple weeks in D.C. before heading to Atlantic City for the final competition. So I spent quite a bit of time there. During that time, I was advocating for domestic violence prevention for several years. And so I was in your neck of the woods, working with Congress and whatnot. And it's fascinating how all of that comes full circle now, because we are dealing so much with the regulatory bodies again, trying to enact change in that way. And from there, that was a full-time job for the year being Miss Kansas. What most people don't realize it's literally a full-time job. You're a public speaker, you're doing your own PR, speech writing, event booking, all of the things and business development. It's a nonprofit organization.

And then following that adventure, I moved out to California and got my MBA at Pepperdine. The entire reason I moved out to California was I wanted to pursue a career in music and entertainment. And so I was in two bands. I was in a female fronted band with my best friend that traveled all over the Midwest for a few years and then I was in a big band that traveled all over California and did a lot of private events and black-tie weddings and corporate events and all that kind of stuff. I wrote and recorded an album. And while I was doing that, I was also working for a technology startup that was in the sports media space. So I was working about seven days a week for many, many years.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Or maybe nine days a week.

Megan Bushell:

Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Had you had an interest in sports? You were working for a tech startup in the sports space but was sports something that had been a big part of your life growing up or what was the connection?

Megan Bushell:

No, and that's what's so funny about it. Is that I didn't grow up in a very sport-centric family. I was super into musical theater and drama and choir and all of that kind of stuff. Essentially I moved out to LA to work in the entertainment industry, but I did love... I was also an undergraduate, I was an entrepreneurship major, as well as a music major. And so I always had that kind of dual brain focus, I would say.

And so what I realized when I was, I would say in my early 20s, was that I really had to have both in my life, both business and entrepreneurial ventures, as well as music, to feel fully, essentially satisfied and happy in life. They were both very important components for me. And so I ended up having an office opportunity and an early stage startup in the sports media tech world. And what that led me to do, I ended up being with that company for seven years. And it started out as a pilot program, we had the New England Patriots on board. And over the course of the next seven years, essentially partnered with the vast majority of NFL teams, half of the NBA, half of the NHL, third of the MLS, [inaudible 00:20:43] with NASCAR. And because I had gotten it at such an early stage, I was the one developing all those relationships and doing all of the business development and all of that. And so it was quite funny that I would go to the Super Bowl every year for many years and be around all these athletes and not know who they are.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, no, that's amazing. That's really amazing. I would love for you to go back though to your pageant days and what was it about your interest in being part of talent and beauty competitions, because I feel like they get short shrift. It's easy to discount or discredit them. But anyone that I have ever met who's ever done well in pageants or talent competitions, is pretty smart cookie. It takes a lot of wherewithal and emotional intelligence to do well in that space. But maybe talk about what the original attraction was for you and what you learned from the experience that you're applying to what you do now.

Megan Bushell:

Sure. Well, I first got into pageants because I loved music, I knew I wanted to be a professional musician in my life, but I had horrible stage fright when I was in high school-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh, well.

Megan Bushell:

... and when I was a kid. I went into college and I was a double major in voice and entrepreneurship and I was pretty silly I had horrible stage fright. I was too afraid to get up on stage and perform in front of people. And so one of my mom's friends was on the board for a local pageant in the state of Kansas and she asked me to compete. I didn't know anything about pageants, but I knew that it would force me to get up on stage and sing. And so I thought this could be a cool opportunity for me to work on developing that stage presence and that confidence. I did that pageant. I ended up being first runner-up. I had no idea what I was doing, but I had a lot of fun and I made some great friends and I realized that this was an incredible organization.

And really, the Miss America Organization and Miss Kansas Organization, it really develops women, it provides them with the skill sets and the tools to be able to develop to pursue their dreams. It provides you the opportunities to get out of your comfort zone to challenge the the norms and the stereotypes and the opportunities that have previously been in front of you. It gives you a platform, it challenges you to develop opinions about controversial subjects, and to be able to learn how to express those opinions in a way that's not polarizing to other people, and to engage in open dialogue and conversations instead of unfortunately, the environment we find our political environment, and now where it's very polarized, and people aren't really having open conversations and listening to each other. So it teaches you how to do that.

It also teaches you how to speak in public and how to perform in public and how to get involved in your community and really make an impact. Because every person in the Miss America Organization has a social impact initiative that is very close to their heart that they are advocating for and doing community service for. And mine was domestic violence prevention, because that same friend of my mom's who had invited me to compete and first opened the door and given me that opportunity, she then at some point, opened up and shared more about her story, which was that she was in a very abusive relationship. She was incredibly strong woman, she'd overcome this abusive marriage. She had two daughters who were around my age.

And when they opened up and started telling me stories about their childhood and how really horrifying their experience was, to me, it blew my mind. I was so I think blown away that these strong women that had come out of this horrible experience and developed into such incredible people, that they should have never had to go through that in the first place. And so that became an issue that I was extremely passionate about and that became my platform, which I worked with for several years. I think that's one of the most important things about the Miss Kansas Organization and Miss America. Is that it gets these young women involved at a very early age in important initiatives in their communities. And so they are really changemakers and they become the movers and shakers and changemakers in our world.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Talk a little bit more about your overcoming stage fright. I teach a university course and fear and overcoming fear is at least one component that we talk about. Talk a little bit about that, because stage fright is a form of fear. Many people have it. Fear of public speaking is a big one. Maybe talk about the tools that you use because someone meeting you now would never have any idea that you've ever had stage fright or fear of public speaking or fear-

Megan Bushell:

Sure.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

... of being on stage. How did you get control of that? Or what is your toolkit that you turn to? Or how would you teach someone else to overcome that?

Megan Bushell:

Well, I think when it comes to overcoming fear, in my particular instance for stage fright, it was about putting myself outside of my comfort zone very intentionally on a regular basis, because that was the only way that I was going to get over that fear and become comfortable and become better at it. There were a variety of tools that I did. Pageants were one of those. Additionally, I enrolled myself in Toastmasters, which is a public speaking organization that's international. And it's a safe environment for you to learn and have constructive criticism from other public speakers and learn how to develop persuasive speeches and informative speeches and all sorts of stuff and get that real-time feedback. Also learn about the various texts you do when you are giving a speech, whether it's snapping your fingers or playing with your outfit, or whatever the heck it is. There's all sorts of things we all do that we're completely unaware of.

I think most importantly, to my earlier point, it was about making a conscious decision to regularly be uncomfortable. Meaning being outside of my comfort zone, being open to new opportunities, saying yes to things that I wanted to say no to because I just wanted to say no out of fear.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Do you think it ever becomes... We talk a lot about getting comfortable with the uncomfortable. But the reality is, I think for most people, it's learning to just continue to do it anyway, even though it's uncomfortable. That it never completely goes away. It's more a matter of dealing with it and recognizing it for what it is. Is that true in your case as well?

Megan Bushell:

100% true. Absolutely. I would say practice makes perfect, but I would say it's never perfect. It's just about that constant repetition, is what gets you essentially better. I still get nervous when I get up on stage, whether it's to give a speech or whether it's to perform a song. That will always be with me, but those butterflies also help to fuel the performance and to fuel the delivery and it makes it exciting.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that you just said that. Several people who have come on the podcast, including someone just recently, said that. That it's really about using what would otherwise be fear and anxiety, and actually channeling that into positive energy, which I think is such a great way to think about that. Okay.

Your whole origin story is so interesting.

Megan Bushell:

Thank you.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love how you tie all the pieces together and I do think... I mean, I did beauty pageants younger in life. I was like 11, 12, 13 when I did beauty pageants. But I'm a big, big fan, because I grew up in a very small town. And this was my way of expanding my network-

Megan Bushell:

Exactly.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

.. and to your point, building confidence and learning to compete and participate and not be afraid of an audience and all those sorts of things which are very important life skills that I think gets short shrift, because people say bathing suits and makeup and this and that and it's a lot more than that.

Megan Bushell:

It's so much more than that. It's really... I don't necessarily like the words that I'm about to use, but it's like a finishing school, because it teaches you the things about being a professional and pursuing your various career dreams and pathways that you don't learn in school. It teaches you how to communicate, it teaches you how to speak with a five-year-old to an 85-year-old and everyone in between. People have all sorts of varieties of education and experience in life. It teaches you how to put yourself together

and look professional and carry yourself in a professional manner with poise and grace and how to navigate dynamic and changing and awkward and uncomfortable situations. That's something that is really lacking in any sort of educational system we have today. So you have to find other resources to be able to learn those skillsets. It teaches you mental toughness and how to overcome challenges and how to overcome failure.

I competed for two and a half years before I ever won my first pageant. I lost nine times before I actually won a pageant. What that taught me was how to assess, figure out what I needed to do better, and then challenge myself to do better the next time. And keep putting myself out there and then taking a step back, "Okay, what went well, what didn't go well? What do I need to improve upon? Okay, let's implement that and then see what happens next." And so it was that process that I learned through pageantry that I credit with pretty much every other success in my life. Is that ability to go through the motions of trying and failing and trying and failing and trying and failing and reassessing every time and figure out, "Okay, what worked? What didn't work? And what can I do better?"

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You were probably also getting good candid feedback as a result of those failures and setbacks as well at the same time, right?

Megan Bushell:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And it also forced me to take the emotion out of the process because if I got too wrapped up in the fact that like, "I'm failing, I'm failing, I'm failing, I'm failing," you can just think that you're a failure and stop. But I had to realize that this is just a growth process and I have to take a more analytical viewpoint to it and not get so wrapped up. It's not saying that I'm a failure, it's just saying that there's one thing that I did that didn't work out, and how can I be better than next time?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. I think that's such a big piece. The idea that what you learn from failure is frankly more beneficial than what you learn from your successes.

Megan Bushell:

Absolutely.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's all added in what you really shouldn't call failure, failure, because you do learn so much from the process. So you go from Miss Kansas, you go to Miss America pageant, you began to pursue a professional singing career, you end up with this sports tech startup company. So take me to the becoming a CEO piece, and how did that all come together?

Megan Bushell:

Sure. Well, when I was with my prior company, I started out at very much the ground stage. So it was myself, the CEO, the creative director, and the lead engineer. And that was it. It was very early stage.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Was the singing career a side hustle or something you were doing simultaneously? How were you doing all these things?

Megan Bushell:

It was simultaneous. The singing career was at the same time that I was doing the other company, the tech company. And of course, with singing gigs, they traditionally were on evenings and weekends. And so I was able to work my day job, essentially, and then travel all over God's earth, all over Southern California. I spent a lot of time on LA highways. But traveling essentially every weekend doing two or three gigs a weekend. And then of course, first thing Monday morning back at it in the day job. And so I was doing that. But the beauty of my last position and the beauty of Miss Kansas and kind of how this thread has woven through all of the various opportunities in my life, is that in startup role, you wear 17 different hats. As Miss Kansas, I wore 17 different hats. So I was doing operations marketing, I was printing the materials and running to the post office to mail them, I was on all of the phone calls and business development, doing the sales and business development with all of the professional sports teams with the new technology platforms that we were partnering with. So I was doing operations, business development, public relations, investor relations, all of the things.

I was with that company for several years and had the opportunity to grow with it. And so, from that, I became friends with Terrell Davis towards the end of my career at that last company. He was connected to us because we were essentially connected to a lot of professional people in the sporting world at that point. And we essentially became friends. That connection happened through Beau Wehrle who's the President and Chairman of DEFY. And so he's the one who kind of made all those connections. He's really the linchpin that put this whole thing together and the visionary behind it. And so the three of us became friends and we decided there's a really interesting opportunity here in this emerging space of CBD that not a lot of people knew about, but that had potential to change a lot of lives. And so the three of us decided to start a company together and that's how DEFY was born.

I originally started out as the COO, because in a new startup, in an emerging industry, there was no roadmap. Luckily, I had been also previously in a startup, in an emerging industry with no roadmap. And so I'm very good at... I would say, one of my best skillsets is that I'm really good at figuring things out and helping to build a path when there is no path. And so I started out as COO, and I've essentially been in every single role in this company and done every job until as we grow we're able to hire on and train new people, and the company is growing from there. And so I stepped into the CEO role last year. I've just been thrilled and excited, but it's also quite surreal to be the CEO of a performance company in the sports space. And my partner is of course Terrell Davis, who's one of the greatest of all time.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. It's amazing. Talk about how you think about picking good partners. You have two amazing partners that you're working with, but how do you know, how do you pick good talent as partners? What's your secret to doing that well? What advice would you have for other people who are listening?

Megan Bushell:

Well, I think first and foremost, you have to realize that if you think you're the smartest person in the room, you're doomed for failure. So, my goal is always to surround myself with an incredible team of smart people and talented people because I know that I cannot do everything and take this company to the vision that we have for it. That is the first and foremost thing that you have to decide. Is that if we're going to build a real company, we have to hire great talent.

And then a lot of that, I think, is just instinct and gut as you get to know people. As you're going through the interview process, doing your due diligence, leaning into your network, leaning into people that you trust and positive mentors, and developing that team out from there. We've had to kiss a few

frogs to find the right team and the right partners, for sure, but I'm incredibly blessed to have the fantastic partners that we have. With TD and Beau Wehrle from the get go, it started out as a friendship first. We did not come together as acquaintances and decided to start a business together. We became friends first, we developed that trust, and that foundation and a relationship first. And then decided, "You know what, we all bring something unique to the table here. We can create something that's really beautiful and really special and that doesn't currently exist by combining our talents and our resources."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Talk a little bit about the fact that you're in, at least to some degree, a male-dominated industry as it relates to the sports world. Again, there are lots of women that are in sports, but for most part, your two partners, your two senior most partners are men. Talk a little bit about that dynamic and advice that you would have for other women in terms of navigating male-dominated fields.

Megan Bushell:

Well, I've always been essentially in male-dominated fields in my adult career. With the sports tech company, obviously that's... The sports world, the technology world, and the media worlds are very male-dominated worlds and I was at the intersection of all three of those. I think it's about leaning into your talents and leaning into the assets that you have. For me, I also come from the pageant world. And so there's a certain image, there's a certain stereotype, there's certain assumptions that go along with that. And quite frankly, I got my MBA following my career in the pageant world, specifically because I was tired of being underestimated as a blonde beauty queen. And so I got my MBA because I wanted to have those three letters behind my name that told people that I was also intelligent and to not to underestimate me.

From there, I think I really learned that lesson and kind of took that in. And so that really, I would say, influenced my career in the sports tech world, because being an attractive woman got me into rooms and got me in meetings that I might not have gotten otherwise. But what closed the deal and what kept me in the room was the fact that I was intelligent and I had something to offer and I had a really great deal to offer to them.

I think that so much about working in the male-dominated industries, is about obviously, of course, having poise and class and professionalism and everything that you do, but leaning into your assets. You bring something. You bring a unique perspective, you bring a unique look, you bring a unique viewpoint and opinion to the table, and so much is about leaning into that. Leveraging that to get into the room. And then leaning into the conversation and having an opinion and having your points fully developed, and being prepared for the opportunities when they present themselves, keeps you in the room and can help elevate you into advancing your career from there.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, I mean, that's really, really great advice. It also requires too that you understand your value in terms of what you're bringing to the conversation and what you're bringing to the organization. What's your advice for thinking about how to understand your own value in an organization? Male or female, but understanding where you fit and what you bring to the table.

Megan Bushell:

Speaking from my perspective and my experiences in the startup world, there are always so many gaps that need to be filled and so many roles that need to be filled, but not enough time, resources, people,

etc, to be able to fill them. And so what I've always done, as I was earning my way up, was essentially recognizing those gaps and figuring out which ones that I could fill to bring value to an organization and to solve problems for an organization. And that may be just trying different things, putting yourself outside your comfort zone and whether that's trying different roles, different areas of research, different opportunities that you haven't tried before, and learning if you are good at that, if you have the capacity to build into that and to really develop that role inside yourself and that skillset inside yourself. And if so, you will just continue to add value, gain new skillsets and solve new problems for any organization that you're with.

And so I think for me, a lot of people are experts in a particular field. And that's fantastic. And some people are generalists and can do a lot of different things. And that's fantastic as well. I think it's also just being open to trying new things, figuring out what you're good at and what you aren't and leaning into those and identifying how you can help solve problems for organizations.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, I love that. That's a great answer.

When you think about what's next, and you actually touched on this a moment ago, DEFY has branched out into non-CBD products as well. And you've also had a chance to really begin to develop your whole corporate social responsibility platform too, and this is I understand that you did during COVID. Maybe talk a little bit about that piece of the business and how it's developing and how you used that COVID time as a corporate entity.

Megan Bushell:

Sure. When COVID first came out... I will take a step back and actually say that before we ever launched the company, we were dedicated to having a CSR and we knew that we wanted to specifically honor and serve the military and military veterans. My partner, Terrell Davis, TD for short, when he was in his time in the NFL, he actually created the Mile High Salute. So rather than when he made a touchdown, doing a silly dance or anything like that, he would stop and he would salute the troops and honor the troops.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

[inaudible 00:41:35].

Megan Bushell:

He's the originator of that. And so he's always respected and honored the troops in a variety of different ways over the course of years. My background, I have many family members who served in the military in a variety of capacities on both sides of my family. And so it was always something that was important to the founders of this company, that we do something to get back to military, and active duty as well as veterans.

And so when COVID hit, we had an opportunity immediately to make an impact by actually donating over \$400,000 worth of our product to first responders, to food banks, to feeding America across the nation. And that really opened the door for us to really dive a bit deeper into our CSR. And so then we took a step back and we decided to launch DEFY Nation, which is essentially that community of people who defy their everyday. And DEFY Nation is essentially kind of the name of our CSR, as well as the name of that community that we're really creating to support that.

What we also realized through the course of the last year was that... It's funny that we had to kind of have a light bulb moment around this, but DEFY is a black-owned, woman-owned, veteran-

owned company. And we didn't even realize that because it wasn't something that we had purposely architected. It was just the nature of a group of founders coming together and a group of team members coming together that were the best people for the job that also represented these really interesting communities and brought these unique perspectives to the table. And so we expanded our CSR, in addition to supporting veterans, to really serve the Black community and the women's community. And so with the launch of our new DEFY alkaline water, we're actually donating a portion of the proceeds from every bottle sold to three charities that we've selected that serve those communities.

So DEFY Nation is essentially the community that we're aggregating and the platform through which we are driving these donations to the Disabled American Veterans Organization, to the National Association of Women Business Owners, and to the Center for African American Health. We've also done work in the past with Team Rubicon, with Team Red, White & Blue, and a variety of other organizations. And we just look for different ways to get involved and make an impact.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, what you just said was so amazing, in that you hadn't really thought about it. But the reality is, that who you are is part of your culture and the values in the organization. And so it was so inherently there in terms of what you were trying to do. You didn't necessarily have to articulate because it was there. Right?

Megan Bushell:

Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Which I think is such an interesting element as it relates to thinking about creating a corporate or organizational culture if you are who you say you are. Like all of the bells and whistles around corporate social responsibility should just be additive and talking about what's already there, as opposed to creating something that's completely separate. Which is such an interesting piece and I think sometimes people really miss that.

Megan Bushell:

Well, to your point, whatever we did needed to be authentic and true to who we are. And that was something that was just a natural extension of who we are and what we believe in and what we represent.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. It's still a real challenge to get more women into the C-suite and into CEO jobs in particular as you well know. You have a lot on your plate currently, not only as the CEO, but you're also the step-mom to three children, you got a lot going on in your life. I don't know if you still sing professionally, even part time, but maybe you still dabble in that a bit. But maybe talk a bit about this whole notion of, dare I say work-life balance. I hate the term, but for lack of a better one, how do you balance and prioritize all of the people and things in your life that you're trying to accomplish?

Megan Bushell:

I really look at life and seasons and try to give myself a bit of grace for whatever season that I'm going through and the environment around me. The people in my life, what season they're going through as

well. And we've all had a very interesting season over the last year, dealing with COVID and adjusting to working from home, to schooling from home, to new technologies and all sorts of different things. And not to mention the added stress that all of the uncertainty that occurred within last year has added to everybody's lives in general.

And so how I approach work-life balance, I think I'm always looking... I believe that I'm a work in progress and that I always have areas for growth and development, but I also have to give myself a little bit of grace that you know what? This might not be the season where I'm in the best shape of my life. This might be the season where my business is growing and my family is focused on those needs, whether it's learning how to virtually school or do all of these different things. And I don't believe that you can "have it all" at the same time. I believe that you can have a lot of wonderful things in your life, but I believe to really accomplish anything, you have to be focused. And so you have to determine what your focus is for the season or this moment in time.

And so for this season and this moment in time, my focus is on my company and building it into what we believe it has the potential to be, as well as on our family and navigating this uncertain time that we all find ourselves in. And so I don't sing anymore right now. I would love to pursue singing again at some point in my life, but that's not my focus right now because it's not the most important thing on my plate. I'm certainly not competing in a swimsuit anytime soon again. It's those times where it's about prioritizing and giving yourself a little grace in the other areas.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. You mentioned COVID. COVID affected all of us in one way or another. Are there any changes that you think you'll make as a result of the experiences over the last year, year and a half?

Megan Bushell:

Well, what's interesting is that we as a company had actually moved out of our preexisting corporate office at the beginning of March. And we were in the process of identifying and signing a new lease on a new office space. And then of course, COVID, hit and everybody started working from home. And so what's great about that is that I don't know that we will have traditional office spaces the way that we all used to. Our team is currently spread across the country, we've got people in Texas and California and Nebraska and North Carolina, and of course, Colorado, where we're headquartered. And we're all quite efficient now, I think, working from home.

The company has also saved quite a bit of money in terms of the pace at which we are able to rapidly expand right now, in terms of meeting with new critical retailers, new distributors, new partners. We can have meetings with some of the top retailers across the country within the course of a week, because we're doing it from our home desk. Rather than having to travel across the country to meet with these people face to face, we have face-to-face meetings through our computer. I think that that has absolutely changed the course of business as we know it and identified a lot of efficiencies in that way. So I think that's absolutely changed and that will continue to have a tremendous impact on work-life balance and how we travel, where we work.

We as a family went to California for a week to get out of the cold and to go to the beach. And we were sitting by the beach, having the same meetings and the same conversations that we would have been if we were sitting in the snow in Colorado. So I think it opens up a lot of unique opportunities as we move forward.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's been such an interesting dynamic for so many people for a host of reasons.

As you think back on your life, if you could boil down your advice and maybe give your 22-year-old self a single piece of advice or any 22-year-olds who might be listening to this podcast, what would that be?

Megan Bushell:

The thing that I have always told children and other people that I was always told growing up, and that was my key point when I was talking to people through the course of my years in pageantry and beyond was to dream big, because you can do absolutely anything that you set your mind to, and you're only limited by your imagination. That's where I would start and go from there. But opportunity requires preparation first. So you have to have the imagination to believe that you can achieve the things that seemed far out and far out of your imagination at the moment, and that might seem impossible. But first you have to dream it, and then you can find the way to make it happen. But you have to be willing to put in the work. I would say that those are the key components that have led me through the many eclectic experiences in my life.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, I love that. That's amazing.

Megan, thank you. This has been such a pleasure. So nice to get to know you.

Megan Bushell:

You too. Thank you so much, Laura.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You're so welcome.

Hey, friend. Thanks so much for joining us today. To learn a bit more about my guest, Megan Bushell, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode, Episode 150. You'll also find a link there to DEFY, the CBD sport drink company that Megan co-founded with Terrell Davis.

Now, before I let you go, I need your help. If you're enjoying She Said/She Said Podcast, I would love to hear from you. And there are several ways that you can contact me and send us some feedback. The first, if you are listening on iTunes, is to click the review button there. Give us five stars. And then write just a few words about why you listen to She Said/She Said Podcast. Those comments help others who are looking for podcasts like this one to find it. And I also love hearing from you. You can also direct message me on Instagram @LauraCoxKaplan or @SheSaid/SheSaidPodcast. And finally, you can use the contact link at the shesaidshesaidpodcast.com website to send me a message as well. Be sure to include why you listen and what we can do to continue to improve this content and make it even more meaningful for you.

Friends, most of all, I am so grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us today. I hope you found this little investment in you well worth it. I'll see you next time. Until then, take care