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Laura Cox Kaplan ([00:00](#)):

Hey friend! October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. To recognize the occasion, I'm sharing a refreshed, encore episode that I recorded with Ambassador Nancy Brinker. Nancy is the undisputed leader in the global fight against breast cancer. Her passion and creativity brought the disease out from the shadows and into our collective consciousness -- with the creation of the Susan G. Komen foundation and Race for the Cure. Today, finding a cure has become much more possible in large part because of Nancy Brinker's efforts.

Nancy joined me from her home in Florida back in 2019. And we recorded the conversation that follows there.

There are many important dimensions to Nancy's story, and so much that we can learn from her journey. Her dedication to others is incredibly inspiring.

For those less familiar with Nancy I've included a link to her bio in the show notes for this episode.

As we think about INFLUENCE and the levers that help us build and sustain influence, two important ones stand out to me in the conversation that follows with Nancy. The first is the clarifying power of having purpose and a mission that drives you -- in Nancy's case a promise that she made to her sister Susan G. Komen, which Nancy talks about in our conversation. Susan's name is now inseparable from the mission to eradicate breast cancer.

The second particularly important element is the power of story, and understanding how STORY can galvanize others around your mission. When you hear Nancy talk about her work, this theme and its importance to her influence comes through so clearly.

I also love how Nancy talks about how she learned the power of story from an early mentor -- the late Stanley Marcus who was the founder and former CEO of Neiman Marcus Department Store.

She also shares some great lessons on not taking no for an answer, but I'll let her do that in our conversation.

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You know, I try hard not to pick favorites among my guests and episodes on this podcast, but this conversation with Nancy Brinker is one that continues to inspire me. I hope it will do the same for you.

And, if you are like me and have trouble making time for that mammogram, this month's focus on Breast Cancer Awareness and this conversation with Nancy Brinker are two great reminders. Do it for you and do it for the ones you love.

In the meantime, here is my encore conversation with Ambassador Nancy Brinker.

Laura:

Nancy, welcome to She Said/She Said.

Nancy Brinker ([01:45](#)):

Thank you, I'm so honored I've- I've, uh, listened to it. I think the name is so novel and- and congratulations to you.

Laura ([01:54](#)):

Thank you. Thank you very, very much. Your leadership on behalf of women around the world is incredibly inspiring and I was so excited to come here today and ...

Nancy Brinker ([02:03](#)):

Thank you.

Laura ([02:03](#)):

... Meet you here in ...

Nancy Brinker ([02:04](#)):

Thank you.

Laura ([02:05](#)):

Palm Beach to have this conversation.

Nancy Brinker ([02:07](#)):

I'm so happy you're here.

Laura ([02:08](#)):

Thank you. Thank you very much. Take me back to where this started. You made a promise to your sister. Talk about sort of how Susan G. Komen got started.

Nancy Brinker ([02:20](#)):

Well, first of all, she was the most wonderful sister whoever I could ever have imagined and my only sister and, um, when I say this, I truly mean it. I take back everything, every, any award I've ever given anything to have her in my life again for a day.

Nancy Brinker ([02:35](#)):

That's how much I loved her and it's hard to describe it because I still get a little emotional about it, but you know, she was 33 years old, actually, she's more like 30 when she started having breast problems and has benign lumps and things like that, but the day that she called and said, "Nan, this is something different."

Nancy Brinker ([02:53](#)):

I was working in Texas, and my first job and she was living in our hometown of Peoria, Illinois and I jumped on a plane. I went to be with her and I knew when I got off, my father's face was so sad and I knew- I knew it was cancer. I just knew it and I also knew how she was going to react to it because when we were little girls, we visited my Aunt Rose who was our aunt, who was our great aunt who had a breast cancer in the 50's and it was treated with cobalt and a radical Halsted mastectomy which left a woman scarred and you know, she wore heavy corset, and yet she was the most cheerful person you've ever seen.

Nancy Brinker ([03:32](#)):

I saw it as a glass half full. My sister saw it as a glass half empty and I knew when I looked at her face that day, when we saw my aunt just kind of quite by accident getting dressed, I knew if she ever had a problem like that, she would never get through it because of where her mind was.

Nancy Brinker ([03:48](#)):

That she was a few years older than I so that she was not a baby ... She was a baby boomer, but she was in a different generation. Anyway, um, when she developed the disease, there was very little really good integrated care in Peoria, Illinois.

Nancy Brinker ([04:02](#)):

So she wanted to stay there because she loved our family doctor. Finally, you know, she has the biopsy and it wasn't that it was a bad surgeon, it was that his ideas were not formed and that we didn't really know what breast cancer was.

Nancy Brinker ([04:16](#)):

We had actually no knowledge of- of what a tumor consists of, what the prevention, uh, or rather early detection would be for a disease like cancer, but also, they had no idea of the causes, the genetic part, nothing, none of that was known.

Nancy Brinker ([04:32](#)):

It was cut burn, or, you know, poison and we had chemotherapy, we had radiation, but they were rudimentary and all patients were treated alike. If you had disease that had progressed and they thought that hers had not, you were basically carpet bombed with a lot of chemotherapy, and almost everyone was given the same sort of formula, if you will.

Nancy Brinker ([04:56](#)):

It was months before we could get her to go to a cancer center because she was so afraid. They did surgery, they did some reconstruction. It was not the right thing to do. Um, years later, I found out that she was BRCA positive as I am, which is a very, very accurate gene, um, mutation, which would tell you that you are at high risk for breast cancer.

Nancy Brinker ([05:17](#)):

So finally we got her to MD Anderson and, um, and it wasn't good. By the time she got there, they had one of the only breast centers in the United States. She really only lived another 18 months and ...

Laura ([05:29](#)):

How long was that between her diagnosis?

Nancy Brinker ([05:31](#)):

Uh, probably about 15 months and it was very, very long to wait even after surgery, to start with the chemotherapy and all that and I'm not sure she ever would have survived it even then.

Nancy Brinker ([05:43](#)):

Although I held really bitter feelings in my heart for the surgeon for a long time, long since forgotten, but it's easy to blame other people and she really was a trooper. She- she was amazing and had at least nine cycles of very heavy duty chemotherapy.

Nancy Brinker ([06:02](#)):

None of it worked, she never had any good news and it was sort of back and forth and back and forth and finally, when it was clear, she was dying, she looked at me one day, and she would never say when I die, she used to say, "When I get better Nanny, I want you to do something with me."

Nancy Brinker ([06:17](#)):

And I said, "What? Anything." You know, and this was, literally a few weeks before she died, she said, "I want you to promise me that we will work to make sure that nobody ever is sick with breast cancer again or dies from it and people just, children just shouldn't lose their mothers." And I said, "Of course, I'll promise. I'll be there and I'll be doing it right with you."

Laura ([06:39](#)):

And she's a mother of two children?

Nancy Brinker ([06:40](#)):

A mother of two children and, um, at that moment, when a person you love so much and I loved my sister, she was so wonderful to me. She really was like a second mother. I was the tomboy in the family and I always had to do kind of the dirty work.

Nancy Brinker ([06:54](#)):

She truly was the beauty queen and sweet to me though. She understood that to motivate me was to be nice, and I do anything for her that I could, which I did. (laughs). And anyway, um, but it was so devastating to lose her and it took, I'm still not over it and my father never recovered.

Nancy Brinker ([07:12](#)):

And to see a person you love so dearly shrink away so young, die like that so painfully and there was nothing we could do and so the few things I knew that really bothered her, A, that we didn't know enough about the disease, B, that there weren't enough therapies and every time we go back there and had the most wonderful physician, a man named George [Blumenschein 00:07:35] who was, he did everything and they did everything at MD Anderson at that- in those days, but was way too late, where- we were to learn later.

Nancy Brinker ([07:43](#)):

It was the pain and the agony that I had- that- that we all watched and knew how, uh, and yet she always had a smile on her face, always still helping other people. She was a great volunteer. She was beautiful, a model. Everyone loved her.

Nancy Brinker ([07:57](#)):

And yet, I saw things that were painful to me. One was people in our hometown thought it was contagious. Still in those days, in 1978, '79. Betty Ford had had breast cancer in 1974 and people watched on TV as- as the pr- as president Ford threw her a football as she was moving around, never ever seen before on TV, and you couldn't say the words

breast in public in radio, TV, film, you could not use the word breast, newspaper for sure. So you could see where we were in terms of communication.

Laura ([08:31](#)):

Yeah.

Nancy Brinker ([08:31](#)):

And so I promised her this and because when you love someone so much, you'd promise whatever you can in their moments and when she died at devastating, devastating as I already said, but after about a year, and I had been married a wonderful man about four months after she died named Norman Brinker who was inspirational himself in teaching me how to market things, how to build things he was building and had built already very large restaurant company was on its way into a second one.

Nancy Brinker ([09:03](#)):

Also, my father was very, very bright in what he used to do. He was a real estate developer and- and a great salesman at one time. My mother was a full-time volunteer always and there wasn't a week that went by that we didn't have to go with her to deal with homeless issues.

Nancy Brinker ([09:19](#)):

Um, The Red Cross, our local temple, whatever it was, we had to go with her and she taught us, both our parents did that to whom much is given, much is expected, and if not now, when, uh, to- to help?

Nancy Brinker ([09:32](#)):

And, um, we lived in that kind of community, people helped everybody else. So about six months after, uh, I married Norman and- and we were very happy. He had lost his wife, Little Mo Connolly, the famous tennis player in those days, um, a young player who died of ovarian cancer when she was 34.

Nancy Brinker ([09:51](#)):

So he was very sympathetic of this and one day, I got a group of women in- in our living room in Dallas, Texas, and said, "You know what? We are watching friends, and we all knew women who had died and we never found out what they died of, but it was if they had vanished quietly and we knew what that was."

Nancy Brinker ([10:10](#)):

And I said, "We're talking about a disease that we call the big C. We can't even talk about it, we have to cure it. I promised my sister, I'm going to devote my life to it. I don't

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expect each of you to have to do what I'm going to do, but I want you to, if you want to, I want you to come for the journey because each of you is valuable." One of them was Kay Hutchison.

Laura ([10:30](#)):

Oh wow.

Nancy Brinker ([10:30](#)):

Who, and others like that and Laura Bush.

Laura ([10:33](#)):

Yeah.

Nancy Brinker ([10:33](#)):

Laura Bush signed 800 invitations, you know, that's hard to do every day for our big events. We had a wonderful group that day in Dallas, Texas and in- in my- in our living room and that started Susan G. Komen Foundation for breast cancer research, Edge for Awareness Research and Education and, um ...

Laura ([10:54](#)):

Talk about where the idea for, you started with a race.

Nancy Brinker ([10:58](#)):

Right.

Laura ([10:58](#)):

Right?

Nancy Brinker ([10:58](#)):

Well, yeah.

Laura ([10:59](#)):

Really creative approach. No one was, lots of organizations are doing that now, but those are sort of copying the actions that you took at the time. Why a race? How did you come up with this concept?

Nancy Brinker ([11:11](#)):

Because, well, I found out that after we couldn't use the word breast in any of our ads, and people wouldn't even come to our event if the word breast was on the invitation, and men wouldn't let their wives join the committee.

Laura ([11:23](#)):

Oh my gosh.

Nancy Brinker ([11:23](#)):

So you can imagine, and these are educa- very educated people, leaders in the community and I thought to myself, "Okay, we have to somehow have something that brings people together who are survivors, some who aren't who can talk, share a pleasant day, and bring together products, people, um, um, things that people feel good about."

Nancy Brinker ([11:47](#)):

We- we have to do that and I don't know quite how we'll do it, but I was turned down by so many people in the beginning, uh, particularly women's companies, I would go and meet with the, uh, chair of women's, uh, I did with a bra company, a lingerie company one day and was literally thrown out of our office.

Laura ([12:03](#)):

Oh my gosh.

Nancy Brinker ([12:04](#)):

She said, "We don't sell death and dying. We sell beauty and fashion. Young lady, the meeting is over." And I- I- I never heard anything like that and I said, "Well, don't you think your customers are thinking?"

Nancy Brinker ([12:14](#)):

I'm not suggesting you talk about breast cancer, but I'm suggesting maybe a hang tag on a bra that would say, "Have you had a mammogram as primitive as they were then?" It had, you know, she said, "I told you the meeting is over."

Nancy Brinker ([12:26](#)):

And I got up Laura, I walked out, I walked outside, this was in New York in the la- in the, uh, apparel are-, you know, the area, not much left to that today, but it was one of those New York days, cloudy, rainy, I couldn't find it and I am crying my eyes out on the street and I said to myself, "I will never quit, I will never quit. I will find a way. We will find a way to talk about this and organize in a way that people want to be there."

Nancy Brinker ([12:52](#)):

So I'm going home and I'm- were sleeping one night, all of a sudden, I had this dream and I saw Susie and h- her friends running. They were all in pink. They were all in pink. That was her favorite color.

Laura ([13:04](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Brinker ([13:05](#)):

They were running with swords and they were running at something and they were passionate and you could feel ... And I thought to myself, "They're- they're running, they want to ... They're racing, they're racing. They're running, they want to cure this disease. They're running after something."

Nancy Brinker ([13:22](#)):

So I woke up, Norman, it was 3:00 in the morning or something. He says, "What is it?" I said, "I think I figured out the name of this event." And we'd also met with a wonderful, uh, advertising agency, by the way, because we'd had our first event earlier, great, big luncheon with Betty Ford who came and that really live into that, but I realized it was going to be grassroots.

Nancy Brinker ([13:42](#)):

We had to have something that would bring people together and I said, "Norman, this is a race. It's a race of some kind. Women feel it's urgent." So anyway, I went to a couple- uh, this wonderful ad agency and we sat and muddled over it and out of that meeting came the term race for the cure.

Nancy Brinker ([14:01](#)):

And everyone said in- on our little event committee, and two of my girlfriends came over one day while we were meeting on the next big luncheon we were organizing, and they said they dr- they dragged me in the bathroom and they said, "Nancy, you can't do this. People are not going to turn out for anything. You saw what it was just to get our friends to this luncheon. Do you think people are going to turn out in a big ..."

Nancy Brinker ([14:27](#)):

We were going to do it at the Galleria which had a giant parking lot. "Do you think they're going to turn out for the Race for the Cure for breast cancer? Do you think their husbands are going to want them to do that?" This was in about 1981.

Nancy Brinker ([14:39](#)):

I said, "Well, we won't know unless we try and I want to try it." And they said, "You could disrupt our entire event. Here we are with a very successful big luncheon event. Now you want to do this and you'll draw the volunteers away. Never can do it."

Nancy Brinker ([14:52](#)):

I said, "Just give me a chance. I will bring dogs, cats, relatives. I will get ... I promise, I'll get people there." They reluctantly said okay, you know, race day came and we drove up and it was raining, it's drizzling and I thought, "Oh no. Oh no." But I got to the race site in my car, and I look and all of a sudden, I see these people coming and they- fortunately there was a parking garage and they all came out wearing their t-shirts and at the time we started using little re- pink ribbons, we never got credit for the pink ribbon because we didn't know to, you know, trademark it or whatever you do.

Laura ([15:27](#)):

Right.

Nancy Brinker ([15:28](#)):

I realized, "Yup, these people want to talk about it. They want to know, they want to see other people who had this. They want to be in a pleasant space." And we were giving away little favors. We were giving things away. We had some food sites there.

Nancy Brinker ([15:42](#)):

We had- we had music, and we were actually making it about an upbeat event and people shared their stories and they started walking and we had 800 people who turned up for the first race.

Laura ([15:53](#)):

That first race?

Nancy Brinker ([15:54](#)):

Yeah, and I said, "This is it." And we even had, I think it was the first or the second year we brought the first mammogram van to the sites where they could see. See by then, not so well-developed, but fairly primitive mammography was developed and this was the first technique that made people feel there was something they could do about finding the disease.

Nancy Brinker ([16:17](#)):

Imagine the only other one was to wake up one day and find a big lump in your breast. So that really kicked it off and then it wasn't very long, maybe a year or two later, in Peoria, our hometown, they started a big Race for the Cure which grew very fast and it started popping up everywhere.

Nancy Brinker ([16:34](#)):

And finally by the time we had created about 24 races in different cities, we went to Washington. We said, "We're never going to get anything done no matter how much

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money we raised unless we are in Washington making our members aware of the size of this disease and what they can do and getting more money into research."

Nancy Brinker ([16:52](#)):

Only about \$25 million dollars was going to research in those days. We did and when we showed up, 7,000 of us running around the capital, you can imagine what they thought. I mean, it was like, "What? What do these women want?"

Nancy Brinker ([17:05](#)):

You know, and Marilyn and Dan Quayle chaired the first race. Marilyn had lost her mother to breast cancer. So it went like that and it grew and it grew and it grew.

Laura ([17:15](#)):

Wow. Nancy, I have so many questions. (laughing). But one that I think, I haven't heard you talk about as much is your background, right?

Nancy Brinker ([17:26](#)):

Right. (laughs).

Laura ([17:26](#)):

So you were fueled by this passion and this love for your sister.

Nancy Brinker ([17:30](#)):

Right.

Laura ([17:31](#)):

You've made her this promise, you want to fulfill this promise to her, you're motivated, you're committed, but having the skill sets to know where do you start with something like this, talk about what you were doing. You were working I know in Dallas.

Nancy Brinker ([17:46](#)):

Right.

Laura ([17:46](#)):

In your first big girl job.

Nancy Brinker ([17:48](#)):

Right, exactly.

Laura ([17:49](#)):

[crosstalk 00:17:49] out of college.

Nancy Brinker ([17:50](#)):

Right.

Laura ([17:50](#)):

But what were you doing?

Nancy Brinker ([17:51](#)):

I had, um, I had some experience in broadcast journalism, but mostly, the greatest place in my life where I learned all about marketing, not all but a lot was from the greatest teacher in America's, then, today, always was Stanley Marcus and I worked in the executive Program ... E- E- Executive, uh, Assistant Program.

Laura ([18:12](#)):

And for those who don't know who Stanley Marcus was ...

Nancy Brinker ([18:15](#)):

Who was the son of the founder of the store Neiman Marcus who was one of the most creative, hardworking merchants ever, ever. When they told me, "I think Jeff Bezos is a genius." But before Jeff Bezos, there was- there was Stanley Marcus and he did all the same things they do on Am- Amazon just by hand.

Nancy Brinker ([18:33](#)):

And it wasn't with- we didn't have computers. He taught us everything. Never stopped selling, only sell the best products you can find. S- always be creative. Mix the merchandise. He told us so many things, um, taught us and lived the principles and every single day when you walked into the store, the- the counters look different.

Nancy Brinker ([18:55](#)):

Everything was changed. Everything was, um, develop the aura you want to sell and never stop selling, never miss an opportunity to sell something and then- and then that's where your business and your salary begins.

Nancy Brinker ([19:08](#)):

So, I took that to heart and learned so much of what he did and I had the opportunity to work directly with him. For only one reason, I'm bigger than most women and, um, we had one freight elevator ...

Laura ([19:20](#)):

Taller. Let's be clear.

Nancy Brinker ([19:21](#)):

Pretty big.

Laura ([19:21](#)):

(laughing).

Nancy Brinker ([19:23](#)):

And- and in those days, I was a lot bigger. I kind of looked like, I was kind of heavy, but I was strong and we had one freight elevator in the store and I could carry 10 to 13 coats and suits on each arm like this if I held up my arms ...

Laura ([19:38](#)):

(laughing).

Nancy Brinker ([19:38](#)):

Because we only had and we needed to get those clothes up quickly to the fitting rooms. So one day, I was on the elevator, all with my arms out I look like I can't even tell you what, and perspiring and Mr. Stanley gets on the elevator and I almost fainted.

Nancy Brinker ([19:53](#)):

I thought, "Oh, oh." He really liked good looking models and people who looked like twiggy. In those days, that was the thin girls, and here I am looking kind of like I'm not sure what, a firefighter in uniform I mean.

Nancy Brinker ([20:08](#)):

Not that firefighters don't look good, but I was- I was all decked out in my, you know, like that and tubby or than I should have been. Um, and I thought, "Well that's it, he's ..." And he kept looking at my name tag and I thought I went home and called my parents and I said, "Mom and dad, I think I'm going to get fired. Mr. Stanley, I- I- he saw me on the elevator, I introduced myself today, but I could tell he didn't like what he saw."

Nancy Brinker ([20:31](#)):

So, um, sure enough, two days later, I get this call, "Miss Goodman?" Which was my former name. "Yes." "It's Mr. Stanley, would you come to my office?" I thought, "Oh oh, this is it. He's going to fire me."

Nancy Brinker ([20:43](#)):

I go to his office and he said, "You know Miss Goodman, I haven't met you and I- why did you come here?" And I said, "Well, to tell you the truth Mr. Stanley, it wasn't because I fit in your clothes really well, it was because I'm fascinated with marketing and I'm fascinated with how you you've done it."

Nancy Brinker ([21:01](#)):

Every, he did a thing called a fortnight where he changed the store into a country every year and the way your mind works and the way you- you sell things and have lasting, um, affinity from your customers. I'm fascinated by that.

Nancy Brinker ([21:16](#)):

Well, he was kind of smiling and he said, "Well, I'd like- actually like you to do some projects for me. Would you be willing to do that?" I went, "Of course I would be. I'll do anything."

Nancy Brinker ([21:28](#)):

And of course in those days, we didn't have days off. We- well, we did, but nobody told us we had a day off. The P-, the HR department was about the size of a normal kitchen table and there was one person and an assistant in it.

Nancy Brinker ([21:40](#)):

So you had Sunday off, you knew the store was closed, but I never saw-, I learned, "Don't stop selling." So I worked very hard every day long hours, anything I needed to do. So that's really it and- and he frequently gave young people who worked hard more opportunity.

Nancy Brinker ([21:57](#)):

He understood who really had ambition and they said to us when they hired us, "We're looking for female executives." They were the only place I can remember at the time in Dallas and there were other wonderful retail stores that I'm sure did the same thing.

Nancy Brinker ([22:10](#)):

They were looking to promote women. He understood how important women were to his business and he wanted more women leading.

Laura ([22:17](#)):

Talk about how you took those lessons learned from him and applied them to what you did it Susan G. Komen.

Nancy Brinker ([22:24](#)):

Well, one that was always sticks with me is no means maybe. In other words, if a customer tells you no, it doesn't mean they won't buy anything, find something else. So always I thought about that, if you can't get people interested in this, then there is something and think about it, learn the customer well, understand, never stop contacting them, a personal touch been very important.

Nancy Brinker ([22:46](#)):

That was one thing and then make people tell a good story. Always tell a story over and over and over again about anything you're going to sell or be associated with or want people to understand.

Laura ([23:00](#)):

Why is that important?

Nancy Brinker ([23:02](#)):

Because you have to have, uh, people have to feel personally attached to what you're doing. Find a way to do that and if you tell a real story and it was touching to you and pulled your heartstrings, chances are, it will somebody else's and hone this story in a way that you can tell it under a minute and you can make other people relate to it because they have a story and find out what their story is, very, very important and never stopped telling the story.

Nancy Brinker ([23:28](#)):

I don't care how many times you've told it over and over and over because then you will create people, it becomes a mantra and it also becomes the core mission of whatever you're doing.

Nancy Brinker ([23:38](#)):

Everyone else will tell the story and it has to of course be relatable to everyone. So it isn't just about me. It's a story that all of us know and we need to remind ourselves every day and of course for that, you look at the Bible, still the most popular book in- in the world.

Laura ([23:53](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You are by anybody's estimation a genius in development, in raising money, um, for- for this cause for which you were so passionate, but for so many women asking for money ...

Nancy Brinker ([24:07](#)):

Yeah.

Laura ([24:07](#)):

In particular can be a real challenge. Talk about your and you've- you've sort of incorporated a lot of what you learned from Mr. Stanley ...

Nancy Brinker ([24:16](#)):

Yeah, right.

Laura ([24:17](#)):

Um, i- into that, but talk about your thoughts on raising money and how you can get over what seems to be an anxiety for an awful lot of people.

Nancy Brinker ([24:26](#)):

It- it- it is a huge anxiety and actually, I'm not comfortable to this day asking for money. I don't like to ask people for money. What I like to do is ask people to join my dream and that's what my husband Norman taught me.

Nancy Brinker ([24:39](#)):

Ask people to join your dream and make it their dream and then they will give, then there's nothing they won't do. I like to think of myself as a person who brings people in to a mission and then they will do that, they will work for you, they won't have any trouble doing that.

Nancy Brinker ([25:00](#)):

We had an employee at Susan Komen a few years ago who I really clashed with and I think that was because she called me a fundraiser and I said, "You need to understand something, I'm not a fundraiser. I am a person who carries a mission in my heart all day long and everyone in this room knows it and because they know it, they know there's an authentic part there that they too like to be a part of, people want to be part of a cause and they want you to get them to where they believe the more they do, the better they'll be able to do and there will be positive results, and they will have some responsibility in it.

Laura ([25:37](#)):

Yeah. It really underscores that whole notion of understanding your why ...

Nancy Brinker ([25:42](#)):

Right.

Laura ([25:42](#)):

Why you're doing what you're doing ...

Nancy Brinker ([25:44](#)):

Right.

Laura ([25:44](#)):

And how that helps to motivate other people in addition to yourself.

Nancy Brinker ([25:48](#)):

And understand why they're doing it.

Laura ([25:49](#)):

Yeah.

Nancy Brinker ([25:50](#)):

So that if you take the time to understand the person that you're dealing with and asking to join your- your dream, your vision, what is it they want and need out of their life? Don't just assume yours is what they want, but always if the bra- if the mission is a common problem, a common threat and Americans and most generous people in the world, also you have to understand that they will, people in America will respond to crisis.

Nancy Brinker ([26:14](#)):

It's they don't nec- they're not necessarily most people I know were donors, prevention-oriented. It's getting better in education and certain things people are beginning to think of now, um, any medicine because we have more progress, but at the end of the day, Americans always respond to crisis.

Laura ([26:31](#)):

Yeah, yeah. I was astonished to read, I had never heard this until I started doing some additional research for this interview today that you as a child struggled with dyslexia.

Nancy Brinker ([26:42](#)):

Right. Right.

Laura ([26:43](#)):

And in those days, it really was not diagnosed. Talk about that experience and how that shaped you. I mean, I think people are astonished when they hear that because there is no lacking for accomplishment [crosstalk 00:26:57]

Nancy Brinker ([26:59](#)):

Well, well it's, um, I'll tell you what happened. I never realized that I was as learning challenged as I am until my son, until I- I had my son Eric. We have the exact same issues only by the time he was a child and older child going to ... We- we got him into a special school and he just whipped right through it.

Nancy Brinker ([27:21](#)):

I felt most of the time growing up particularly because of the way we ... Schools were set up which was hadn't really changed since the Industrial Revolution where the teacher sat in the front with a blackboard everything that isn't, anathema to a child who ... Well, I read well, I wasn't comprehending it and I had an auditory problem, a perception problem.

Nancy Brinker ([27:44](#)):

I don't hear things unless I see things. It doesn't break through and so in school all day, I found out that I was always doodling like this and I was drawing pictures of what we were supposed to be learning.

Nancy Brinker ([27:55](#)):

So if I could understand what the teacher was saying, to myself, I draw picture so I would remember what he was saying. It- I knew I could learn in pictures and then as I got older I- I failed.

Nancy Brinker ([28:08](#)):

I- I got great grades because I worked really hard and I memorized everything, but I didn't really comprehend it.

Laura ([28:15](#)):

Yeah.

Nancy Brinker ([28:15](#)):

I knew what the answer was, but it was because I had a way of memorizing it, but I finally learned how to learn and it was difficult because nobody understood that and when I took the SAT test to get into university, I think I had the low- of the lowest SAT scores in Illinois at the time.

Nancy Brinker ([28:35](#)):

And my parents were aghast and you can imagine devastated because I was lucky enough to have the kind of father who thought I could do anything.

Laura ([28:43](#)):

Yeah.

Nancy Brinker ([28:43](#)):

And he- he had a plan for me. He wanted me to go to law school and then he wanted me to- me to be a senator, a- a lawyer for a short period of time, and he wanted me to be a senator.

Nancy Brinker ([28:51](#)):

That was his entire ambition for me and I said, "Dad, that would be great, but I'm sure I can't pass the LSAT. I couldn't pass the SAT and get anywhere other than University of Illinois, they had to accept me because I had such top grades."

Nancy Brinker ([29:04](#)):

Um, but I was turned down every roles I applied. So you learn how you can learn, but it's difficult and I think today, Laura, if I had had Netflix, Prime, and all these things, I would have learned so much more.

Nancy Brinker ([29:19](#)):

I had a recent surgery and on my knee and I was watching all those, all the- all those channels all day longer that- that- that the product, their information and I was amazed at how much I learned.

Nancy Brinker ([29:32](#)):

I w- I set out before the surgery, to relearn, to try to learn world history again, and all the wars and battles of World War I and II in the Civil War, so I spent the entire time, the six weeks I was healing, every day watching tons of programming documentaries and it was fascinating to me and I thought, "Oh gosh, I wish I'd had that in school when I was growing up."

Laura ([29:54](#)):

From the standpoint of thinking about the impact of that struggle and how you've applied those lessons to your life, what- what impact do you think struggling with dyslexia had on your approach?

Nancy Brinker ([30:06](#)):

That you always have to pat yourself on the back sometimes because I always think out of the box from different people, I just do, I think differently. I always look at everything that's bad as an opportunity to turn it around and then how to fix it and how to fix it and that's the other thing you learn very quickly when you're always feeling like your nose is

pressed up against the glass and your classmates are debating and they're getting it, they're getting everything and you're not.

Nancy Brinker ([30:31](#)):

Therefore, your solution always is something different. It's like how do I take this what I do understand and turn it into something that will help fix it, but not the way they're doing it?

Nancy Brinker ([30:42](#)):

And that's really, I owe that to this- this sort of disability. Um, and then I learned to not be ashamed of it and not be afraid to say, "I don't understand what you're saying to me. I need you to draw me a picture or do it in a speak visually, so I understand what you're talking about."

Nancy Brinker ([30:59](#)):

And then I used to be terrified of financial, reading a bank statement, anything because I knew, I- I still don't do that particularly well, but once I'm explained what is the business, what are the- what kind of profit are they looking for? How do they do that? What are better ways to make it happen? And then I can be very additive.

Laura ([31:17](#)):

Then you learned how to make that work for you.

Nancy Brinker ([31:20](#)):

You do, yeah.

Laura ([31:20](#)):

Yeah. So, I'd love for you to talk a bit about you have taken on yet another project, you're still very involved with Susan G. Komen ...

Nancy Brinker ([31:29](#)):

Right.

Laura ([31:29](#)):

Of course, but you're now embarked on a more localized approach to addressing women's health and breast cancer in particular. Talk a little bit about your latest initiative.

Nancy Brinker ([31:40](#)):

(laughs). It's true and the other thing I was going to say to you about being a-, uh, having some deficits in learning is that you become more intuitive sometimes about things, you feel things sooner than other people do.

Nancy Brinker ([31:54](#)):

When I came back to Florida to live and I've been here many, many years, we lived in Texas and Florida and when I was a little girl, my parents brought me here, very different state, people were coming to ride.

Nancy Brinker ([32:04](#)):

Um, they were coming here to play golf, ride horses, play sports, dog races and whatever else they were doing and there were a few million people living here.

Laura ([32:11](#)):

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Nancy Brinker ([32:12](#)):

Under seven million anyway. And, um, I got back here, all of a sudden in the last few years, Florida has become the third largest state. Uh, now that people go, "What?" It is population wise, the third largest state.

Nancy Brinker ([32:28](#)):

Um, now why? What do we do? Well, we have an odd sort of infrastructure. We are- we are our tax base is property based- property tax based. So we don't have a state tax and that's actually, I believe, good in some ways and we also have very weak infrastructure, our roads, our highways, our schools aren't where they should be.

Nancy Brinker ([32:49](#)):

And likewise, our healthcare. We have a very fragmented healthcare system, particularly in Central Florida where I live. So there are miles and miles of- of- um, places where we don't have, um, health care.

Nancy Brinker ([33:03](#)):

We didn't know maybe some emergency centers. We have lots of hospitals, but in this particular part of the state, we have lots of for profit hospitals which do not allow ... Their mission does not allow them to treat low resource people or underserved people.

Nancy Brinker ([33:19](#)):

So that's really tragic. We do have federally qualified health care centers which President Bush was so, um, uh, powerful in that movement as- and as was President

Clinton and as was President Obama. They all understood. These are centers funded by the government which provide primary care on a sliding scale so that if a patient comes in, they don't have to go through a m- morass of having poor insurance and can't get a doctor's appointment.

Nancy Brinker ([33:48](#)):

So they'll pay what they can, but many, many come there with nothing and they are treated, but only for primary care. So now, what do you do in particularly in disease like breast or cervical cancer where your disease is detect it and then all of a sudden, where do you go?

Nancy Brinker ([34:04](#)):

So this really has troubled me the last few years because we have over 900,000 women living in this county in Palm Beach County, everyone thinks we're wealthy. We are on the one road that goes up and down the ocean and the few roads next to it and the small town of Palm Beach, there's a tremendous amount of wealth.

Nancy Brinker ([34:23](#)):

When you go west, even five to six miles, all of a sudden, it becomes Rural Health, it becomes an environment that's nothing like what we have here. So it troubles me and we have over 180,000 women of those 900,000 women that we have in our population who are at high risk with these diseases and have no care at all.

Nancy Brinker ([34:46](#)):

So I've studied this a long time with Susan Komen, worked for 40 years building that organization and decided we got to do something. One of the most, one of the best ways to do it is to make sure you have patient navigators in your community who are community competent.

Nancy Brinker ([35:02](#)):

So patient navigators are people who work somewhere between nurses and guides and social workers and, um, in this case, we wanted to bring on people who lived in the particular community.

Nancy Brinker ([35:15](#)):

We have a massive amount of diversity in this county. We have everything, plus all many, many of the people who've come here due to the storms. Puerto Ricans, Cubans, uh, Bahamians, uh, Guatemalans, uh, Venezuelans, you name it. We have a large African-American community.

Nancy Brinker ([35:31](#)):

We have a large Native American community, we have everything here. Each with their own disparities. So being a part of helping increase the survival rate of breast cancer by almost 40% from 1989 to 19- to 2014, I said to myself, "There's something wrong here." And what's wrong here?

Nancy Brinker ([35:50](#)):

Two things, in 1971 when President Nixon signed the war on cancer, we promise to have this disease cured. Well, but we also promised to be able to translate and transfer the intellectual capacity of what we have learned in research that is finding products, medicines and devices to treat the disease, ways to help people diagnose it early to our entire population, not just to people who had insurance coverage.

Laura ([36:21](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Brinker ([36:21](#)):

So, that's one problem we have and the second problem we have is that we have a tremendous lack of education and so, um, we have got to spend a lot of time educating and so that's what we've done.

Nancy Brinker ([36:33](#)):

We call it the promise fund. We've had great support in the first two years. We are totally granular in this. We want, we're building a model, not another charity. It is a 501(c)(3), but what we're doing is pairing navigators and we find them in already working social agencies in the county and we have lots of agencies, we have lots of wonderful organizations that are part of the United Way, part of the community foundation, but we've got a ... We figured we've got to find a way to address not just the prevention and detection of these diseases because we now know that breast and cervical cancer are almost totally curable found in stage one or two and what are we doing?

Nancy Brinker ([37:17](#)):

We're letting them progress because there's nowhere to treat patients, then the malpractice attorneys could jump out. If a patient dies of these diseases that should have been detected and we do not have Tort reform in this state as they do in Texas.

Laura ([37:30](#)):

Right.

Nancy Brinker ([37:30](#)):

That would be a very intelligent thing to have Tort reform, and make sure that no physician is, uh, sued for helping a patient. I think they have that law and so that's what we're doing.

Nancy Brinker ([37:41](#)):

We're- the model is we are hiring the navigators from the communities where they live. We are finding navigators who work in already established agencies and we- we grant the agency a grant so they will do the work that we need to do because we don't want to create more overhead.

Nancy Brinker ([38:00](#)):

We don't want an office, we don't need a lot of equipment, we need people who communicate, you know, virtually now.

Laura ([38:08](#)):

Yeah.

Nancy Brinker ([38:08](#)):

Because of technology, we're able to do this and each navigator has a piece of, you know, has an iPhone or an- or an, you know, device, as does almost every person who almost has no resources, has access to a device.

Nancy Brinker ([38:22](#)):

So our navigators then are able to do programs in the communities where they speak the language and know, educate people, become in contact with them if they're real and direct in just what they do.

Nancy Brinker ([38:35](#)):

They navigate them to the care there is and of course, the problem comes in is for those where there is no care, that's why we are also funding work at the federally qualified health care centers because we want them to have the facilities for patients to go to be treated.

Nancy Brinker ([38:55](#)):

One of our first corporate partnerships with Uber health because they understand how important transportation is and we're dealing with social barriers. So we're not just dealing with the disease itself, but all the social determinants around it.

Nancy Brinker ([39:09](#)):

Uh, a patient who is a very lowly- low resource oftentimes loses their home because of the cost, can't feed their children, uh, can't get back to their job. So we're- those actually sound like little things, but they're big things in the life of someone.

Nancy Brinker ([39:24](#)):

So we're dealing with those as well and as we build this model, we want everybody in the world to replicate it because it's built on philanthropy, it's built on the assets we get from the property taxes that we can, and all the organizations already giving grants in the community and it's really pulling together and assembling of resources with a plan to direct people to care, good care, so that we can help them get back to a healthy life.

Laura ([39:53](#)):

Yeah, it's a really, really smart extension of a partnership model.

Nancy Brinker ([39:57](#)):

Yup, exactly.

Laura ([39:58](#)):

[crosstalk 00:39:58] that is incorporating all of these different sectors.

Nancy Brinker ([40:00](#)):

That's exactly what we're doing.

Laura ([40:02](#)):

It's amazing.

Nancy Brinker ([40:02](#)):

And we don't want a national charity, we don't want another, we don't want that overhead. We want to do the direct service ourselves and what's so exciting to me Laura is that the people who get involved in our work love it because it's roll up your sleeves and hands or you can do it at home, you can do it anywhere. It's a little bit like a giant Tupperware party without the Tupperware.

Laura ([40:25](#)):

(laughing).

Nancy Brinker ([40:26](#)):

It- it- it's- it's amazing. We get people together, we get them on a path, we make sure they're okay and the navigator doesn't stop there. She keeps up with the pa-, uh, what- our lead navigator, a woman named Liliana Herrera herself, had breast cancer about 12

years ago, um, had to give up her car, her job and, uh, her apartment so that she would fall in the below 200% poverty level so that she could be treated because there was no other treatment allocation in our state.

Nancy Brinker ([40:57](#)):

That's unacceptable and she had to live in a warehouse while she was undergoing treatment and eventually, she recovered, she now is back to work with us and others and, uh, she tells her story so eloquently and she is our lead navigator and we now have I think all together six or seven in the community and they're- we're growing them every year. We're giving more grants every year.

Laura ([41:20](#)):

Yeah. Nancy, that's amazing. I want you to talk about you're working on a new book, a follow up to Promise Me as I understand it.

Nancy Brinker ([41:27](#)):

Right. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura ([41:28](#)):

Talk a little bit about what that the- what's the focus of this book?

Nancy Brinker ([41:31](#)):

The focus of the book is fo- doing a social commentary on our national cancer program which was founded in 1971 by President Richard Nixon in a panel of brilliant people who committed to launch the war on cancer.

Nancy Brinker ([41:46](#)):

I was 21 or 22 years old. I can't, you know, it was 50 years ago. My co-author is a man named Eric Rosenthal who is a very, very funny, brilliant writer and journalist and who also has been following along the path of the cancer community, uh, as he worked at in many cancer centers and has written and commented for years on all the big meetings, the, um, the advances made in those that not and so we're taking the approach that we're going to be sort of armchair evaluators from our different perspectives of what's gone on in the whole cancer effort and how it has affected our population.

Laura ([42:27](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Brinker ([42:27](#)):

And where are we in that effort and the biggest problem as I see it, we both see it are the disparities so that as fast as we're curing people, or at least getting them to a stage

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of a long-term chronic disease, the curve is going to start going downward for all the disparities that are growing dramatically in the country and we're not able to treat them or reach them.

Laura ([42:47](#)):

Yeah, this is your third book.

Nancy Brinker ([42:50](#)):

Yeah.

Laura ([42:50](#)):

Right? That you've written.

Nancy Brinker ([42:51](#)):

Fourth book I think.

Laura ([42:51](#)):

Fourth book, fourth book.

Nancy Brinker ([42:53](#)):

But anyway.

Laura ([42:54](#)):

And- and I don't know how much your latest book will go into your personal experience, your experience with Susie, but in certainly, Promise Me and also the book about the race ...

Nancy Brinker ([43:07](#)):

Right.

Laura ([43:07](#)):

The title ...

Nancy Brinker ([43:08](#)):

The race is run one step at a time.

Laura ([43:09](#)):

Exactly.

Nancy Brinker ([43:10](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura ([43:11](#)):

You had to dig deep and really relive all of this emotion which you do in telling these stories, but how hard was that for you in writing these books?

Nancy Brinker ([43:21](#)):

It's- it's hard because you really have to take it apart and make sure what you're saying is not just emotional because you get them y-, emotional. I had to- I had a very difficult time going through, um, issues with an organization that had attacked us, uh, in- in 2012 for wanting to change our granting structure of what we were doing ...

Laura ([43:41](#)):

This was the Planned Parenthood controversy?

Nancy Brinker ([43:43](#)):

Right.

Laura ([43:43](#)):

And it was very misunderstood.

Nancy Brinker ([43:44](#)):

And it was, it became political.

Laura ([43:46](#)):

Yeah.

Nancy Brinker ([43:46](#)):

We had worked so hard to never be political and they made it political and, um, and it never was intended to be. It was intended to adapt resources to where we believe they needed to go and unfortunately in our own organization, people weren't listening to the messages we developed with them, uh, and went counter to what we were talking about, but worse than that is it was members of the media who really exacerbated a terrible conflict.

Nancy Brinker ([44:13](#)):

Uh, one woman in particular who I know you're supposed to forgive people, but it's been very hard for me to forgive her for what she did because media people are powerful and when they say things, and when they have a following, and a political bent, it's difficult and they made this extremely political and it never was meant to be.

Nancy Brinker ([44:32](#)):

We always knew when we started Susan Komen, we couldn't be political. We didn't have the money to and at the time, Planned Parenthood had a massive war chest. The woman who was leading it, uh, her mother had been the governor of, uh, Texas, and her husband who's a- a member of a great labor union so they knew how to do this and it was traumatizing to us.

Nancy Brinker ([44:51](#)):

It was horrifying to me, uh, that we would get caught up in something like that and, uh, when- when we work so hard to be apolitical.

Laura ([44:59](#)):

How did you deal with that?

Nancy Brinker ([45:01](#)):

Um, I cried a lot. I threw a lot of books on the floor and I got very angry, very angry and, um, I finally learned that I had to preserve myself and stop all that anger, to do something about it.

Nancy Brinker ([45:15](#)):

So, I didn't want to spend a whole time explaining it, we'd explained it, people didn't listen to it, or they distorted it and I said, "There is nothing more than to be done here." You- they- they won what they wanted which was to position us as the lead in the war against women in President Obama's term which was very sad.

Nancy Brinker ([45:36](#)):

I like the Obama's, he gave me the Medal of Freedom and I was as honored as I could be and I never understood why they allowed that to happen or why Joe Biden allowed that to happen.

Nancy Brinker ([45:45](#)):

He knew who we were, he knew who I was and why would you do that? And so that you do harbor certain things that don't go away and I'm not a- talking about a political attack here. Every relationship to me is personal. It's not political.

Laura ([45:57](#)):

Right.

Nancy Brinker ([45:57](#)):

Um, So y- I learned, I just went on, I said, "I am not going to do this anymore. I'm going to go back to what I know how to do and do it and whatever who wants to criticize is going to criticize and I'm going to spend the rest of my life doing what I know is the right thing to do." And that's all you can do.

Nancy Brinker ([46:14](#)):

Um, I pray a lot, I get up every day, I go to work, I work hard. Um, I just passed my 73rd birthday. I'm praying to God that I live as long as my parents who live well into their 90's I hope I do, and, uh, I hope I die working. That's what I want to do and fix more things and do this, do what I know how to do because if you bend your- the people who are criticizing you, a lot of the criticism isn't really of what you're doing, it's either envy or its nastiness or in the case of being a fairly moderate person politically, it's political.

Laura ([46:48](#)):

Right.

Nancy Brinker ([46:49](#)):

And that should never make its way into we're the world's most generous country, we always have been. If we destroy our private sector, uh, either by becoming socialists or communists or whatever people are talking about now and destroy capitalism and Americans love to give and share.

Nancy Brinker ([47:06](#)):

We're still as to Tocqueville said, the most generous people on the face of the earth. Let's keep it like that. It's worked pretty well for people and I do think there are things we can all fix about our com- and it starts in your own community.

Laura ([47:19](#)):

Right.

Nancy Brinker ([47:19](#)):

It starts in your own community and anybody who doesn't believe that is not thinking straight.

Laura ([47:24](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Nancy, one final question I ask everyone who comes on the podcast for a single piece of advice. It could be a life hack, or maybe a mantra, something that maybe you wish you had known when you were younger or something that you tell others who asked you for advice? What would be yours?

Nancy Brinker ([47:42](#)):

There are two piece of advice. One is something that was written by Lorraine Hansberry, the writer. It went something like this, "If you are exceptional at all, or do something well, prepare to be very lonely. It's very, very lonely when you go down a path and all of a sudden ..."

Nancy Brinker ([48:01](#)):

And I've never seen my own efforts what I would consider truly successful because as Madame Curie said, Marie Curie who was the greatest influence in my life of someone I never got to meet, um, "I never see what has been done. I only see what remains to be done. Focus on what remains to be done."

Nancy Brinker ([48:19](#)):

It's always good to look back and say, "Gee, I did a good job. I got an A there, that was great." Or, "I'm still mad at this person." Forget it, walk off and continue to know much remains to be done and take your life really seriously, but try to have certainly a little more.

Nancy Brinker ([48:35](#)):

I've had a wonderful life, I had a wonderful husband, unfortunately he passed away. I have had wonderful people in my life and- and thank God every day for every day you do have and in that every day, that day you may have and it may be your last, do something for someone else.

Nancy Brinker ([48:50](#)):

No matter how small or so big. It's the only thing that will ever make you feel really, really good. That's my advice. It won't be a new dress and it won't be a new whatever it is or a va- a vacation can make you feel good, but knowing in your heart and your spirit, you help someone, there's no better feeling.

Laura ([49:07](#)):

Yeah. Nancy, you are a treasure.

Nancy Brinker ([49:09](#)):

(laughing). Thank you for saying that.

Laura ([49:13](#)):

Thank you for being here, thank you for sharing your perspective and your wisdom. It is incredibly inspiring.

Nancy Brinker ([49:20](#)):

This transcript was exported on Oct 07, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Thank you and thank you for coming all this way to visit me. You're welcome anytime.

Laura ([49:23](#)):

Hey friend, thanks for joining me for this encore conversation with Ambassador Nancy Brinker. To learn a bit more about her and her incredible accomplishments, check out the show notes for this episode - Episode 165.

As Nancy talked about her journey, I hope you found great inspiration in her passion, her creativity, her use of story, and her incredible persistence -- even in the face of those who either underestimated her or told her no.

I'd love to hear what resonated most with you. You can reach me via the website at shesaidshesaidpodcast.com . You'll also find me [@LauraCoxKaplan](#) on Instagram FACEBOOOK, Linked In, and Twitter.

AND, if you have an extra minute, I'd be so grateful for a nice review on Itunes. Those reviews help others who are looking for thoughtful, insightful content like she said/she said to find it.

Take care, Have a great week, go get that MAMMOGRAM, and I'll talk to you again soon!

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