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She Said/She Said Podcast with Laura Cox Kaplan - Episode 185 with guest: jewelry designer/founder Mignonne Gavigan

TITLE: How diversified experience (and hard work) helped jewelry designer Mignonne Gavigan create her lucky break! (Episode 185)

SHOW OPEN:

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Building influence is something anyone can learn. It's an investment you can make in yourself and it can hold the keys to achieving your dreams and having the life and impact you want to have. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. I've learned a lot over three decades about building and sustaining influence and how using it and using it effectively can make a big, big difference in your life and career. Here on She Said / She Said podcast, we're digging into the different dimensions that help us build and sustain influence. If you thought being an influencer was just for social media, think again. Whether you're starting a business, raising money for a cause, negotiating a promotion, running your household, or trying to connect with those who don't share your views, understanding and using the different dimensions of influence will increase your chances, success, whatever your goals may be. Listening to She Said / She Said podcast is a smart, efficient investment you can make in you. I'm really glad you're here and I'm excited we're on this journey together.

EPISODE 185 INTRO:

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Hey friend! Welcome! I'm so happy you're here.

If you are joining me for the first time, welcome! I'm really happy that you are investing some time in yourself, and that you are spending some of that time here with me.

This week, we are continuing our special collaboration series with The Southern Coterie. If you've been listening along, you know that the Southern C is a network of creative

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business women and entrepreneurs who gather to share ideas and to help each other grow their businesses beyond their wildest imaginaitons.

Much like she said/she said podcast, The Southern C is focused on helping its members make smart investments in themselves to help them accomplish what's most important to them. The theme of this series is -- appropriately -- growing and evolving

And how perfect that I'm welcoming the incredibly fabulous designer and founder Mignonne Gavigan to share her own journey with us.

If you don't know Mignonne -- be sure to follow us both on Instagram to see her incredible designs including the gorgeous scarf necklace i'm wearing in this episode ...

Today we're digging into her story, and the idea that really put her on the map and differentiated her designs, asthetic and approach from the competition.

One of the things I love most about her story is that the central piece in her design collection -- the scarf necklace -- came about as a bit of a fluke. Had she not been working three other jobs, and learning the different dimensions of the fashion industry at the same time, that lucky break might have been more difficult for her to realize.

I'll be talking more about how we can create our own luck in next week's episode, but for now, here is my conversation with the ever fabulous Mignonne Gavigan.

Mignonne, welcome to She Said/She Said.

Maggie:

Thank you so much for having me. It's truly an honor to be here.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm so happy to have you. you are the founder of your namesake company -- Mignonne Gavigan. Tell us the story of how you started MG.

Maggie:

Sure. So I'm originally from North Carolina, went to UNC and then ended up doing my last semester at the Sorbonne in Paris. And I graduated from college and I was like, "Well, what do I do now?" And mom said, "Well, what do you love?" And I had gone to design schools periodically, like North Carolina School of the Arts and my high school had bought some of my senior year artwork. But as I was coming up through high school, I was always cutting my clothes open. I was stealing my dad's old jeans and cutting them up and resewing them so they fit me better. But it had the great wash that he had, from years of wear. And I just told my mom that I loved fashion. And she was like, "Okay, well, there's a Parsons right down the street. Why don't you go in and see if you could take some classes."

I was also in Au Pair while I was in Paris. So I was going to be there for at least another semester. So I started at Parsons in Paris and then came to New York and finished Parsons there. And I just started working as an apparel designer and I had ripped up a vintage gown to drape a runway dress. And there was a piece on the floor, a torn piece on the floor with raw edges. And I picked it up, tied it around my neck with a safety pin and literally walked home from one side of Soho to the other. And three different people stopped me and were like, "Where can I buy that necklace?" And I was like, "Why shoot, I need help paying my rent. Give me your phone number and let me take it. Let me make you one. Give me four weeks."

So that was the beginning of Mignonne Gavigan. That was back in like 2007. So I started making for friends and then eventually I started having trunk shows while I was working as a designer for other people. I was an apparel designer for a while, and then a handbag designer and then actually a footwear designer for a long time. And all those design posts helped me to understand. I worked at big companies, small companies. They also sent me on loads of inspiration trips. So also sent me to production factories all over the world.

So while I was working for all these other people, I was gaining this insight that was so helpful for when I did eventually start MG, because I knew that, one particular piece of advice that I will always take with me, the president of Nine West, I was designing shoes. And I was designing these elaborate shoes, [inaudible 00:04:40], funky things. And he was like, "Mignonne, we need a basic pump." He's like, "When you're building your brand and your business, it's built like a layer cake. But what your foundation is built on, what pays all your bills, are your core pieces. So we need to start there. And then at the very top of the cake are your editorial pieces that gain attention."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

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I'd love to go back and dig into that just a little bit. And have you talk about, at what point did you realize that the scarf necklace was going to become a company? Because you were, at the time, working at least one other job, if not maybe a couple of other jobs simultaneously. The fashion business is a tough world to break into.

Maggie:

You're right.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Talk about when you realized that this was the moment and talk about maybe a little bit of the preparation that went into it, funding a business, how you thought about that. Maybe give us that piece of the story.

Maggie:

So, well, thank you for asking. Thank you just for being interested in the first place.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love the product, as I said before. And I don't want to be too much of a fan girl here, but it really is very unique. And so wearable, it's easy to wear. I have it on with a t-shirt and a jean jacket.

Maggie:

Jean jacket looks great.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So really dress down, but you could dress it up, dress it down.

Maggie:

When I started making it back in 2007, literally friends of friends would somehow get my contact information. And it became so much so, that started happening so often that I started having trunk shows. And then eventually with the trunk shows, I saw real success with even this scarf necklace. It was not something that's a typical style and the jewelry world. Actually, when we first launched, it was just with about five different styles of the scarf necklace. And our PR for didn't really know how to categorize us. When we first started meeting with stores and department stores, they didn't know if it was a scarf or a necklace. So eventually, as we went into earrings and other different kinds of necklaces, we are definitely a jewelry brand.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So just to stop you for a second, how much does it matter that you fit so neatly into a particular vertical?

Maggie:

Well, they have different buyers and then they have a different budget.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I see.

Maggie:

So the scarf budget is different than the jewelry budget. And as we wanted to expand, we do small collaborations with artisans all over the world, doing other product categories. But MG will remain in the jewelry space. We feel like that's really important to our growth and our future, but with the success of this scarf necklace, it was fantastic. And so eventually I was working as a FWRD designer at that point and I was a waitress. But got to do everything you can to survive, but making things brings me so much joy. And actually I've found that people bring me so much joy as well. And providing happiness to people brings me so much happiness.

So our first year, I decided to leave the footwear industry. Let's go ahead and give this a ring. I felt like I had given it at least enough time. And it had been successful enough and its own small right, where I hadn't been giving it my 100%, to show me that there is interest for this thing. It was very, I would say, daunting and definitely freaked me out to be like are people even going to like this? Will I be able to pay my rent? So what I did, and I've had a lot of supporters along the way that have said, "As soon as you start your own fashion company, I'm going to be right there. I'm going to be your biggest supporter. I'm going to be your biggest fan. I will shout it from the mountain tops."

And that truly was the case. My first year, our salesperson at that time, Kenzie Fenebrisk, she is one of my best friends. But she had worked in the fashion industry for a long time, in sales. And she had worked for Tory Burch in Tory Burch's Kitchen. When Chris Burch was like, "Nobody knows who you are. You have to get out there on the road, show people how to do this. Do trunk shows all over the place." So Kenzie and I did, we did 52 trunk shows in 30 weeks.

Maggie:

So almost every week, we were somewhere else and it was fantastic, because this new shape of a necklace, you really need to put it on and try it on. What do the different colors look like with your skin tones and your hair? How do you like to dress? Some of those necklaces are much more flamboyant or loud and some are much more muted and neutral. And so it was a wonderful way to start the company, because so much of our success is built on repeat customers. And it's truly people that I may have met in person eight years ago when we first started this company, or maybe I met them two years ago, because as I said before, meeting people and showing them how to wear something and showing them that you don't have to just like a plain slip dress with this scarf necklace.

You can, as you're wearing it, wear it with a t-shirt and a jean jacket or whatever you're wearing that day. You can dress it up, you can dress it down. It also covers a broad spectrum of our customer base. The age range is all women. So that's also exciting. And so that really gave me the confidence to start. I felt like, as I mentioned before, having worked at other companies, big and small, some had failed. It was almost like a graduate degree in a course in what I wanted to do. And seeing what to do and what not to do. Obviously when we started this, I still had never started a company before.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right.

Maggie:

I'm still learning day to day, but it's been joyful.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I apologize for interrupting you. You, As I recall, studied political science for your undergraduate degree. I mean, I think that's incredibly valuable, but it's an interesting background. Where did the business piece come from? Was that a piece of the puzzle that you needed to hire when you started the business? Or did you need to study business? Or talk about how you developed the acumen you needed to actually know enough about starting a business in order to do so?

Maggie:

Yes. So I had a business partner, she's our co-founder and she's still involved in the business, but she has stepped back from the CEO role. We actually hired a very new addition to the team, which she's almost been here about a year now. But Lane, my former CEO, was integral in building this company. She had a finance background. So

obviously the finances were something she was great at, but she could learn and Google anything and figure it out. So she became our ops person. She was our finance person. She figured out and she was our shipping person and our production person, at one point.

The two of us definitely figured it out. But she had much more of a business mind. And I definitely learned a lot from her, but I would say that she was, for sure, the captain of the ship in the business department. So the two of us, we are very different in our strengths. So I think we really worked well with each other and together to build something, create a product that was interesting and unique and different and playful and fun and really well made. And the quality is beautiful. And then she was able to take it and run with it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

How much of the effort behind the design creation is really you versus a team effort, at this point? Because I know, as brands get started, as designers get started, the initial designs really belong to the designer. But ultimately, you evolve, you grow the business, you expand into these other products and things like that. And so you need a broader team. Talk about how you stay connected to your original aesthetic, if you will, but also continue to evolve and keep it fresh. I mean, sort of throwing back to, this conversation is part of our series of collaborative conversations with the Southern C, where we're talking about blooming and growing and evolving in our lives and careers. So talk about this concept of staying true to your brand while continuing to evolve it as well.

Maggie:

Okay. Wonderful. We've had to ebb and flow in how we're learning and how we're expanding and how very much, I'm a salesperson, I'm a creative. I'm involved in a lot of our, really everything, but networking, talking to advisors, talking to investors. So I'm stretched very thin.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And you're also the face for the brand too, which I want to talk to you about as well.

Maggie:

Right. Which was not the plan. But I was just putting it on to show people how to wear it. Going back to your question, when we first started, I was doing all our social media. I was doing our emails. I was putting together our line sheets. I was doing Photoshop and creating all the designs. Now, let's see, right at the beginning of COVID, actually brought on this talented designer. And she came with a world of experience in the jewelry world.

So hardware, metals, stones, diamonds, all these things that I had not been trained in. So she and I are a wonderful pair and work really well together. She's also exceptional at technical specs. She knows our factories very well in terms of what their strengths are and what their weaknesses and who should place different things and what relationships we need to work on or foster.

So in that regard, she has been an excellent help. We also hired a product development person, who then takes a spec and then runs with it and is all the communication with the factory. That's a lot of emails. And then we have a whole web team. You met Molly who came with us to the Southern C. And she is incredible. She has a background in PR. She had her own website, online retail store. She runs our e-com. She's our e-com, VP of e-com and brand creative. So she also heads all our photo shoots, does a lot of the styling, really everything that our brand, that the customer sees, whether it's on the website or if it's an ad or if it's packaging, it needs to run by her, on her desk and she needs to okay it. Just to make sure.

Because that's something that was still is very important to me. And when I was building it, I was very particular in what the details of it were, and she's just taken what I had started and completely run with it and has done just an excellent job. And so I think part of growing and expanding is giving up a little bit of these things that you used to do and hold so dearly. But in order to continue to grow, you have to let somebody else who can focus on whatever that thing is and let them focus on it. Because it needs that attention. Otherwise, things get left in the dark, they don't get focused on, they don't get taken care of. And a lot of it needs that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Any great advice for how to make those determinations? Because what you just said applies whether you're talking about the business context or whether you're talking about life at home or whether you're talking about life in some other capacity, but the ability to prioritize and figure out what you're going to focus on is a really important skillset. Do you have any tactics or advice for how you go about figuring that out for yourself?

Maggie:

I would say, and this is what I did, I talked to a lot of people. I talked to a lot of other brand owners, whether it be in my space or other product categories. And when Layne, my old CEO, when she was going to step away, I needed to find a new CEO, which was a daunting task. And that was during COVID.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh my.

Maggie:

Yeah, it was scary. But I literally just picked up the phone and I would cold call people or I'd email them first and "Hey, can I have a phone call?" And they were very willing to talk and give advice and somebody would recommend somebody else. And then they'd say, "What about this person, would be perfect." So I really appreciated that. And then secondly, in terms of the design, the designer and the design area, I have buyers that I've worked with that have helped grow our company, our Neiman Marcus buyer, especially, is a very close friend of mine.

And we've become so close because she's completely honest with me. And she'll say things like, "You guys need to expand in this area. And I know this isn't your history or your experience, so you probably need to hire somebody in that area to help expand your company in that way." Or if one of these advisors or people that I was talking to, to maybe see if they knew anybody that would be interested in the CEO position here, they would say, "Do you want me to take a look at your website, give you feedback? What's your business plan look like for the next five years? What are your revenue goals for the next five years?"

And really taking a look at, listening to their advice and seeing how can we expand? How can I take that and really run with it? And I think that was the beauty of the Southern C to me, is all these people being so open and being able to, I think, walk away from that conference wanting to go back, wanting to maintain these relationships with these people who are so willing and able to give advice.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It can be hard to find groups like the Southern C. They certainly exist out there. It's not the only game in town, even though I think it's a really, really good one. But finding groups like that and also forging a connection with people. I mean, at least my impression of the fashion world has always been that it's not necessarily a particularly kind place. And that it can be incredibly competitive and cutthroat and lots of the bad that come from comparing yourself to other people, other brands, all those sorts of things. Maybe talk about how you avoid falling into that, the yucky side, and stay above the fray and how you build those relationships that really can be very positive and mutually beneficial.

Maggie:

Well, that's a great question. I believe the foundation of this company, when I was starting it and putting it together, that was one of the most important things to me, is culture and being kind to one another. I grew up in a household with four kids. And one thing that was reiterated over and over again was to be kind to one another. Definitely, when I entered into the fashion scene here in 2005 in New York City, it was cutthroat. It was so mean, it was unkind. It was not building each other up. There was an air of cutting other down. As I moved through my different design positions and experienced different cultures, I learned exactly how I did not want an environment to be, should I start a company.

So even when people decide that they want to take a new position at a different company, I'm the first one to say, "Hey, great, keep in touch. Let us know if there's anything we can do for you." And ultimately you don't want to make somebody stay if they're not happy or if they feel like they want to try something new. And so I think everybody should feel that freedom. And I do think we have people that come on as an intern and haven't had any other jobs here because they love it so much. And I think even our new CEO, she came on and even our first phone call, she was kind of like ... what'd she say? She was so funny. She's like, "Are you really that nice? Are you that nice a person?" I mean, I wasn't trying to be overly nice. I feel like I want to support her. I want to hear from her. Kindness is definitely a pillar that our brand believes in and stands for.

If there's a mistake that's made, we never want somebody to feel like all the blame is on them. Obviously they didn't mean to make the mistake. So let's work together to figure it out or change it or let's all get in here together. So I appreciate you asking me about that. Because that's something that is certainly not common in the fashion industry. But I do think there has been a wonderful sense of collaboration between female designers that I have felt, especially in New York City and definitely at the Southern C, as you're mentioning. Not just designers, but entrepreneurs, that are willing and wanting to help each other and in a kind way and not tear each other down. But to really build each other up, which has been a cool, I think, tidal wave of females, especially, finding independence and following through with goals and dreams and finding success.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. That's awesome. How do you strike the balance between being incredibly nice, being the type of person and the type of organization that people want to work with and also not sending the signal that someone can run over you know? Making sure that nice is not the same thing as not being tough. I talked to Lela Rose about this in our

conversation a couple weeks ago. And she took that on directly. And I'd love for you to address that as well. Because nice does not mean that you can't also be tough. But maybe talk about how you articulate that in a way that you strike that balance between being nice, but also standing up for yourself.

Maggie:

Well, that's another great question and I appreciate it. I'm sure Lela's answer was fantastic, because she's a perfect example of being ferocious in her passion and what she does. And she's hilarious, she is so talented, but she is from the south and she's a lovely lady and extremely polite and kind. The way that I think I deal with that is from my core, I know what my morals are and what I'm going to put up with. I have three brothers. So growing up and holding my own was something that, I think growing up in the household that I did, I always was having to do that. So deciding, seeing how the fashion industry was and seeing that I wanted kindness to be a part of our brand, was separate from being run over. I have learned, and I think it's part of growing up, that I actually thrive with dominant personalities, because I feel like they help me grow.

But I also have been able to separate myself and really stand on my own two feet and speak up when I know something's wrong. Or if something doesn't feel good or if I feel like maybe I'm being taken advantage of, I just go ahead and call it out right then. I mean, honesty is the second most, well, not second most. But kindness and honesty need to go hand in hand. And honesty is calling something out for what it is. So of course, we want to promote kindness here, but that doesn't happen all the time. And if we do run into a situation where something isn't as we would hope it to be, it definitely is addressed. And it's addressed right then, in a way that's matter of fact and neutral, but that's dealt with immediately and, I think, in a professional way.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. I think it's so important because I think, oftentimes as women, and this is not unique to the fashion industry at all, I think it can be hard to strike that balance and feel like if I'm too nice, and especially in male dominated environments, if I'm too nice, then I won't be taken seriously. And so getting that balance right, where you can be nice and you can also be tough at the same time, I think is really an important message to always deliver.

Maggie:

You know one thing, when I first moved to New York, it was so funny. I was walking through a door and somebody just bulldozed me right over and then didn't even turn around and say, "Excuse me," or, "Oh my bad." And so I think from the very, and New

York City has probably been, I think a big learning lesson for me, in terms of people and kindness and creating cultures. You really have to survive New York City to be able to stay here and have a business here. And so that has helped with me standing up for myself, for sure. Because you learn. You have to. And I think, from what you're saying in women in other industries as well as this one, if you don't stand up for yourself, nobody is. Nobody will.

So I think that's one of the first things to learn about, if you're going to start your own business, get yourself out there. Be persistent. Have things that matter to you and hold tight to them, but also conduct yourself in a way that's matter of fact and upfront and professional. Having goals in mind, I think too, helps with not getting run over. Because then you don't even know if you've gotten run over. And really doing check-ins with yourself to see if you're heading in the right direction. Because maybe you don't even know if you've gotten run over until you're sitting back and think wait, what just happened here? Did I navigate this as well as I could?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Maggie, do you have a process that you use for reflection? You mentioned reflection a second ago. Do you journal, do you meditate? Is there something that you do that allows you that time and space to pause and really think about what's going on around you?

Maggie:

Well, I think that's so important because you get going and you've got a family and every single second of your day is taken up with being productive and efficient, planning. I started running during COVID and it was so helpful. My stress level was through the roof and sitting still and just if I kept working, I eventually was going to combust. So I started running and I put my earbuds in and just turned the music up really loud. I wasn't even necessarily listening to the words, but just so that I couldn't hear myself breathing.

And I think the motion and the exertion that I was able to give my body, it relieved the stress. It also gave me the ability to give myself clarity on issues that I was confused about or wasn't able to see how to deal with. And I still run today. I don't run as often as I used to, but whenever I can, I definitely get out there and know that I need to do it for my head. And as long as my knees will take me, I hope to continue. Maybe, it'll need to turn into something else eventually, but I was doing yoga for a little bit for meditation, but then I hurt myself. I turned 40 this year. Everything just flies out the door.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh, it gets worse. I could tell you. We won't go there today though.

Maggie:

That'll be for another day. I love it. I'd love to hear about it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Exactly.

So COVID obviously was incredibly stressful for, I mean, for everybody for different reasons. But may talk about your experience and anything that you took from the experience that helped you plan for the business going forward. Anything that really changed significantly, maybe for the better, as a result of the pandemic?

Maggie:

I think I grew personally so much, in terms of dealing with huge problems. Things that I felt were out of my control, but I needed to figure out a way to control them. So literally feeling like the world was ending and that I was on a sinking ship and then putting just one and put forward one day at a time and just making a list and tackling that list and just chipping away at these huge problems. And eventually, we came out on top. We grew year over year, last year and the year before. We got our PPP loans, we survived. And I think COVID was such a blessing in disguise, for me, especially in that regard, in the amount of growth that I experienced for myself and being resilient and weathering a storm that I wasn't sure I was going to be able to weather.

So COVID, at first we had to furlough and we had to cut costs, but we survived. We were able to negotiate rent. We came together with a lot of other designers to put together resources in different verticals. So share PR companies or production people or factories. It was a real coming together, I think, of brands in my eyes. Other jewelry brands, especially. How can we lean on each other to survive? How can we get rid of this inventory that now a big department store can't take? How can we work together to sell that?

And so also finding key players in new positions and now we see, when a person decides to leave, we kind of say, "Oh, this is an opportunity for us to look at our infrastructure and where do we really need people? Do we necessarily need that same position filled? Or do we need maybe a small part of that filled and then a whole new role pops up." So I think it was just one of the best learning experiences. I mean, I sure hope it doesn't happen again anytime soon, but it was extremely eye-opening. And to

look back on it now and see that we were able to come out in a positive and successful way, I think everybody deserves a pat on the back for that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. So I've heard you describe the company as an omnichannel brand. And I can't say that I fully understand it exactly what that means. My audience may, but just in case they don't, maybe explain what that means. And also did that shift as a result of COVID, given the challenges that big department stores like Neimans and Bergdorfs, and some of the others that you had relationships with and that were selling your products, did that shift as a result of COVID?

Maggie:

Well, interestingly enough, no. So omnichannel means that we're not just direct to consumer. We also sell in wholesale avenues. So boutiques, department stores. We do not have a brick and mortar, but we are in over 250 boutiques and then we're in about four department stores, four or five. And then we sell online, so through our website and ideally, and what it was through COVID, it was 70% DTC. So direct to consumer website, versus wholesale, because wholesale really struggled during COVID. But then we really want it to be about 60/40 at any given time. Just so, wholesale gives us a wonderful ability to forecast and see what the stores have placed. But ultimately, we order into, it's called ATS, available to sell, where we know that they're going to want immediate reorders of things that we know are going to be popular that season.

So it gives us the ability to not have lumpy months, in terms of selling, but to really smooth out our months, in terms of dollars and making sure we've got the money that we need and we're making the money that we've set for our goals. And I think there was a huge, it was almost a trend, to be a DTC company. And I think that has changed quite a lot from some of those companies that are, or [inaudible 00:39:38], where there's basically one product that you can put a whole bunch of marketing behind. And then it really scales the company quickly. Whereas we're interested in growing at an organic pace, where we can maintain our brand identity and our brand equity and define our brand and keep it the way that we want to keep it and keep the products the way we want to have them be made and look. And the price points that we want.

And that's a constant conversation of, well, what do our next five years look like? How are we going to achieve that? And the world and the market is constantly changing. And so we just have to keep, I think, having the conversation with what do we need to do now? And keep leaning on people and advisors and keeping a pulse on what's happening in the world.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Clearly it's not a one and done kind of thing. It's something that you're constantly revisiting and looking at and retooling and thinking about how your customer's reacting to the product and how the businesses that you're working with, how their customers are reacting to the product. So it's a constantly evolving thing. Maybe talk for a minute, Maggie, about where your own creative fuel comes from. How do you recharge the tank? Because you're doing all these things, you're wearing all these hats. And so you've got to have some way of reinvigorating and refueling both creatively and otherwise. Maybe talk a little bit, you talked about reflection, you talked about running, which is awesome. Is there anything else that you're doing to really supercharge your creativity?

Maggie:

Well, I walk everywhere. So people ask me where inspiration comes from, and truly it could come from the side of a wall where the paint is peeling off and the different shapes and colors it makes. Or if, wherever I'm walking, I walk by a window and I see an interesting pillow that I've never seen before. As I mentioned, when I worked for other brands, I traveled the world. And to see what other cultures are doing with textiles and maybe translate that in through a textile or shape, into the medium of beadwork. And embroidery has always been something very interesting to me. Nature is extremely interesting to me. If you look at a butterfly's wings or even a bird's wings, the color story that naturally exists is beautiful. And how can you translate that into sequins and beads and embroidery?

And so I think, for me, it's keeping my eyes open. I mentioned running. I can't run on a treadmill. I truly can't, because I'm not seeing new things. I'm not seeing a leaf on a tree or a blossom of a flower or the gradient color of the sky and maybe a sunset or the reflection of the sunset off of a skyscraper, here in New York. I think all those things are creative fuel for me. And luckily, when we make things, I think it provides happiness to people that wear it too. Because it's a very unique and creative brand.

It was funny. When we first started my old business partner. I'd show up with some super crazy butterflies or something. And she's like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, that's not going to sell." And then it would be the first thing to be sold out. And I think that's what sets us apart from other brands, is our creativity and our personality and using different materials and coming up with new ways of looking at something. Traveling to all these places or looking at other parts of the world for industry has helped me not just look at what's happening in the market, but to do something different. And how can we translate something different? Obviously we want to look at trends and what's

happening, reassort our product base. Size of the earrings. Are people into more dainty earrings now or bigger earrings? When we first started these scarf necklaces, what was in Vogue for jewelry was teen tiny little crystal things that you could barely see.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right, right.

Maggie:

We're the complete opposite. And I think you just have to go with what, for me, it's what feels good and what makes me happy. And I think that, a friend of mine this weekend told me that's translated through our products and then gives whoever's wearing it a sense of happiness and courage. And just for what they're wearing and how it makes them feel, that always feels good, I think.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. You touched on this earlier in our conversation, but you became essentially the default image of the brand, to a large degree. Maybe talk about how that evolved and also maybe how that helps you connect with your customer more directly.

Maggie:

Sure. Well, so back in the day when I was doing all of our social media too, and our Instagram, I needed to show people how to wear it, because it was a new beast. We talked about that. And so I would do lay down outfits and shoot it out of my window. This one particular time of the day, when I knew the light was going to be great. But then I'd go up to the roof and take some pictures of myself wearing it. How would I wear it and what would I wear it with. And I think I find a lot of joy in getting dressed. I love clothes. I love colors and textures and how to wear different things, something that makes me feel good. And I believe that I wear our pieces in a way that people wouldn't think to wear them.

And I think it's helpful to our customers to see, oh. And then they can figure out an outfit like that out of their closet. So by default, I would be on our Instagram. And because it's jewelry, my head would be in it. If it was sweaters or pants or something, you wouldn't necessarily see my head or my face. And then once we started doing Google ads and Facebook ads, to see which imagery performs the best, it was by far and away, the images that I was in. And I do believe it's that connection with the customers that I was able to achieve from the very beginning and continued to do as we do these in-person, either selling events or like the Southern C and meeting all these new people

and touching all of wherever they're from. And learning more about them and what they want to see and maybe what they gravitate towards.

I think listening to your customer is really important. And so yes, by default I am the face. But it's also, we needed a name for the brand. You asked about my name. My godmother, her name is Mignonne and she and my mother were Pan Am stewardesses together. And they were best friends. So her name's Mignonne Marshapel. She's from New Orleans and that's who I'm named after.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. That's amazing if we could just touch for a second on one of the topics that is core to this podcast is around influence, building it and sustaining it. And we talked a little bit about the importance of being a nice person to work with. Being tough, but being nice at the same time. If you could maybe touch for a second on the influence that you hope to have within the industry and maybe the impact that you hope to have in your space.

Maggie:

Well, that's an interesting question. You know, we talked a lot about kindness and joy and happiness and bringing that to people on a daily basis. I think passing that along would be something that I would hope I could have a little bit of influence over. Being able to be fashionable and be coming up in the world of fashion means so many different things. And to me, I think what's most important is for somebody to just be themselves. And so, however that looks and however that feels, that's something that I've learned. And I hope that an influence that I have is to help propel that onto people that maybe that's not how they feel currently. But to feel confidence in themselves, in whatever version of themselves they are.

I think that's so important. And I think too that what we've talked about also is leaning on each other and being open and honest with each other and helping each other out. I think that is something that, as a female, can sometimes not be what's actually happening. And so if we can help that be what's happening, I would love to have influence over that as well. So maybe those big things would be cool to see.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. I absolutely love that. I ran across something that I thought was so interesting just recently. We know that there's value in asking other people for help. An obvious thing is that you're getting help. But one thing that's maybe a little less obvious is that by asking someone for help, you're also validating that person's expertise and their opinion.

And you're making them feel good about sharing what they know with you, which I think is so beautiful. And it's a term that's called the Ben Franklin effect. And it was the way that Ben Franklin would connect with people who had a potentially a very different point of view about whatever it was that they were talking about. But I thought that was so beautiful-

Maggie:

I love that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

In that you get the help, but it's really about validating this other person, which I thought was so lovely. One final question before I let you go, maybe a single piece of advice for a younger Mignonne Gavigan. Maybe something you wish you had known when you were just starting out. Maybe it's a life hack or a mantra, something that you tell yourself. Share one final piece of advice with us.

Maggie:

Well, I would say, people will say can you believe that MG is where it is? To be honest, when you're in it the day to day, you don't see where it was and where it's gotten to, necessarily. And I think the days where you're like, is this working? Is this worth it? Should I switch gears? Are we being successful? Is this going to be where I want it to be? And I think just sticking with it. I think just surround yourself with good people and smart people that can help guide you. And none of us know exactly how to do this or exactly how to take the next steps, but to be willing to listen to people and be open and honest. But to really just stick with it. If you find that you are making something that's interesting, or that you've found a path that's interesting to you and you're having success with it, then I would say for sure follow it.

My parents were wonderful people. Back in the day when I was very lost and what am I going to do? What am I going to do? My dad was like, "Do whatever you want, but you're going to have to pay for yourself." And my mom -- she was a lawyer, said, "Do something that makes you feel good. That brings you joy." And I think both of those pieces of advice have helped me just keep taking those steps one at a time.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. That's beautiful. Thank you so much. This was such a joy

Maggie:

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Thank you so much. This was awesome. Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate this.