

*She Said/She Said Podcast With Laura Cox Kaplan*  
*Episode 283: 283. How To Create A uniquely special Customer Experience With The Colony Hotel's Sarah Wetenhall*

Laura Cox Kaplan ([00:06](#)):

Hi, I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. Welcome to She Said, she Said Podcast. Here on this podcast, we talk about the building blocks and the micro habits that help us create real and lasting influence. What do I mean by that? Well, we're talking about the kind of influence that helps you achieve your goals and whatever it is in life that you want to accomplish, but perhaps most importantly, it's the type of influence that helps you create real impact, and that enables you to truly thrive.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([00:46](#)):

Hey, friend, welcome to episode 283 of She Said, she Said Podcast. This episode is the fourth in our latest collaboration series with the Southern C, and you are about to be transported into the Pink Paradise that is the Colony Hotel of Palm Beach. More to the point you are about to enter the world of the hotel's visionary, CEO and Co-owner Sarah Wetenhall. Now, if the colony is new to you, trust me on this. There is no place quite like it. It is a true feast for the senses that blends the unique history and aesthetic of Palm Beach way back from the hotel's origins in 1947, but balances those against entirely modern conveniences elements that honor the hotel's tradition, while at the same time achieving a really modern and timeless experience. It's very hip and vintage all at the same time. Now, this award-winning achievement, is the product of Sarah Weten Hall's tremendous vision and insight into brand and the customer experience, but also in the way that she has selected partners who have helped her bring this vision to life. But Sarah's path to the Colony is not necessarily a traditional one, nor is it one that you might expect. So how did this former fashion PR exec who trained at Calvin Klein and Dolce and Gaana among others, and who took almost a decade long break to raise her three kids, how did she create this masterpiece? Stay tuned friend. There is much to love in this episode, and there is much to learn from Sarah, especially about creating a unique brand experience. Enjoy.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([02:42](#)):

Sarah, welcome to She Said. She said It's

Sarah Wetenhall ([02:45](#)):

So good to be with you today.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([02:47](#)):

Well, I'm really excited to talk to you, as I told you during the Southern C, and of course, this is part of our third annual collaboration series that we do with She Said, she Said Podcast and The Southern C. When I saw you at The Southern C, I think I mentioned my daughter and I took our very first Mother-daughter trip to the Colony last spring break.

Sarah Wetenhall ([03:13](#)):

Well, it warms my heart to hear that because that is one of our core brand tenets to be a multi-generational place where people of all different backgrounds, ages can come together and have fun, be fulfilled, and really find joy in our pink paradise. And a big piece of the Palm Beach story is multi-generational. So to hear that you brought your daughter that, that really warms my heart personally.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([03:39](#)):

Yeah, we absolutely loved it and just found everything about it to be really inspiring. And it kinda lights you up, frankly. I mean, it's this beautiful, truly pink paradise as you describe it. Sarah, I would love to jump into your story a bit because as I have read a bit more about you, and I've heard you speak about this becoming a sort of world famous hotelier, was not on your list of things when you were in college. <Laugh>. Let's talk about how this happened and where you got your start.

Sarah Wetenhall ([04:16](#)):

You know, I often say she, the colony is female. We refer to her as a female that she picked me. I didn't really pick her. You know, and as, as many things in, in life often are it happened by accident. Or I wonder if it was a greater design larger than me. But it happened by accident. I'm a mid-Westerner is where I grew up. I moved around a lot, but my roots are in the Midwest. I'm an only child and we bounced around a lot for my dad's job. And I ended up going to college in Nashville at Vanderbilt University, and that's where I went, my husband. And so after studying at Vanderbilt elementary education, oddly enough, with a double major in special education, I moved to New York because I quickly learned that although I loved children and I loved teaching after my student teaching, I didn't actually want to teach.

Sarah Wetenhall ([05:11](#)):

I've always had a love for fashion, a love for style, a love for design. Although I wouldn't have really described myself as a creative per se back in those days, I would've just said I, I'm a, a girl that really loves fashion. I realized I wanted to move to New York and get a start in the fashion industry. So I did that. I was young and hungry and so hungry that I didn't even walk at graduation. I got in my car and drove to New York because frankly, I, I was living on borrowed time. I had a certain amount of money and a certain amount of time to find a job. And I was like, okay, let, like let's go do this. We're we're, we're gonna do it. So you know, dove straight into New York and ended up getting a job as an assistant in the PR department at Calvin Klein.

Sarah Wetenhall ([06:00](#)):

And that was the beginning of a decade and a half long career in the pr, marketing and advertising side of the fashion space. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. I worked for Calvin for a bunch of years. I worked for Dolce and Gabbana. And in retrospect, like those, those two fashion

powerhouses were the training ground that really taught me a lot of what I do today. And they set that foundation. Again. I like obviously would not have known it at the time 'cause I was 20 something at that point in time and just kind of getting through my days. But those really, those experiences and, and working for brands like that really set the foundation for, for what we've built at the colony. And then after that, I moved over to the agency side because I wanted to learn strategy. I wanted to learn how to pitch. I wanted to still stay in the fashion, fashion and luxury business. You know, but, but to do it on the client side and not in house. And so I did that for a number of years. Go

Laura Cox Kaplan ([07:04](#)):

Ahead. Can you, can you go back be, before you complete the story and maybe go back to, you said something really interesting that what you learned in these fashion houses was really foundational for ultimately running the colony. And, and I I think folks would maybe find that a little curious. Tell me how and, and why that was the case.

Sarah Wetenhall ([07:25](#)):

So it's fascinating. I mean, this was the, this was the late nineties at Calvin Klein in particular, also DOL and Gavan. But I was at Calvin first. And the sense of brand was so strong in those days at these houses at, you know, the Calvin Kleins and the Donna Carns and the Ralph Laurens and, and these, these these places. And, and I think it still is part in particular Ralph Lauren. But but my experience at Calvin, you know, the sense of brand was so strong and so consistent. You know, Calvin was the head designer at that point in time. It was before he had sold the business. He came in every day, he was very hands on and and he touched everything Hmm. Soup to nuts, everything, you know, from the orchid that was in the lobby to the way that we all dressed.

Sarah Wetenhall ([08:10](#)):

We all had to wear all black. Like, there, there was no room for personal interpretation. You had to have stick straight hair, red lipstick, all black clothes. I mean, down to the paperclips and the pens on your desk. <Laugh>, you know, you were only allowed to write in black ink. There were special rubber colored paperclips that were covered in black rubber. All your paperclips were black. Every, your entire experience was prescribed from the minute you walked through the headquarters to the minute you left. And like, what was always fascinating to me, I mean, I'm a details person. I am like I said, I've always been kind of designed and fashion driven. But even at headquarters where, you know, you weren't in the boutique, you weren't shopping, you know, you, you weren't a VIP this is headquarters, so this is corporate. Your entire experience was prescribed from the minute you walk in to the minute you left.

Sarah Wetenhall ([08:59](#)):

Mm. And it was, it was curated in an incredibly beautiful way. And it, it was that sort of living and breathing that on a daily basis that taught me what I know today and what I've enacted at the colony about details mattering about, about how, you know, the way an experience is all the senses, it's how it smells, it's how it looks, it's how it sounds. It's the way that you talk to people as well as the words that are said. It, it, it is a complete sensory immersion. And I lived that every day at Calvin Klein. And, and so that really, I think, set the foundation for, for what we try to bring to life at the Colony every day. And then going from there to Dolce and Gabbana, which was like kind of schizophrenic in a lot of ways, <laugh>, because Calvin is, was so, like, ultimately minimal, minimal, minimal, minimal.

Sarah Wetenhall ([09:53](#)):

And then Dolce is this like, Italian more is Moore. And like, why have just cheetah when you could have leopard and cheetah and zebra and mea and color and like, it, it was, you know, it was kind of a crazy transition. But, you know, but again, it hammered home that message in a really palpable and salient fashion that like a good, a good brand is, is not, I mean, it's about, it's about a taste level. Yes. But it's really about this consistency of message, right. And about again, you know, getting to that message from all different angles and really taking the message from the top all the way down to the details. Yeah. Yeah. You know, we used to have in, in the Dolce offices, even the housekeepers you know, who would come through and empty the garbage and, and clean the bathrooms, even they were in a prescribed uniform.

Sarah Wetenhall ([10:46](#)):

And again, this is a corporate headquarters. This is not a retail store. You know, like e even the kitchen and the Dolce and Guana headquarters in New York served Italian espresso and Italian biscoti. And so if you came up, you know, as a buyer from a store for a buying appointment, you received a proper Italian espresso and ti and, you know, it, it, it was, again, it was a brand experience. Yeah. And it was that level of detail and of nuance and consistency you know, that I, that I was trained in in my twenties and early thirties.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([11:18](#)):

Yeah. How do you, how do you kind of make sense or, I mean, and this is going to be, I I will admittedly say probably a very naive question, but one of the things that strikes me when I hear you talk about that and that that really rigid adherence to brand consistency, where does the creativity come in? You know, we, we talk about, you know, dopamine dressing or getting, you know, creative inputs from all these other places. Maybe talk about how, you know, in your experience at Calvin and also at Dolce, sort of how you learned to think about within fairly rigid confines of a brand.

Sarah Wetenhall ([11:58](#)):

It's interesting because, you know, like I said earlier, I would not have thought myself a creative person Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> because in those days, I, I, it wasn't about my creativity. It was about me enacting at Dolce, you know, Dominican and Stefano's creativity, or at Calvin, Calvin, Mr. Klein's creativity onto the world or onto whatever my project was. It wasn't about my, my creativity. And I think that's actually why for so many years, I didn't think I was a creative person.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([12:25](#)):

Hmm. Interesting.

Sarah Wetenhall ([12:26](#)):

'Cause I almost like, I, I subverted my own creativity for these, these brands. 'cause I, I was a mouthpiece. I was a vehicle. It wasn't about, you know, my creativity per se. Yes, it was about my brainstorming and my ability to do the job, but it wasn't about, you know, me styling a look or me putting something together. It was about me, me messaging. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> their creativity out to the world. And so, you know, it, it's fascinating, you know, when you think about it that way and wonder, okay, you know, where did my creativity come from? Or how, you know, how, how did I, you know, somehow make up in my crazy brain this, this wonderful pink paradise? And that, frankly, for me, came from years of being a guest at The Colony Yeah.

Sarah Wetenhall ([13:12](#)):

And decades of going to Palm Beach and being a member of that community and loving a town so much. But, and frankly, staying at The Colony as a, a guest, which we can get into that story Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> at some point. But I stayed there for, for, for decades as a, as a guest, and frankly, didn't feel like my needs were being served. Like I longed for a hotel that offered me all these other things that the Colony didn't offer at that point in time. And it was that kind of pent up demand, so to speak, and love of Palm Beach, and feeling like there's not a place that epitomizes the soul of Palm Beach. And that's where my creativity came. And that I, you know, I unleashed that on the colony using the years of experience building brands and was like, okay, now I know what to do.

Sarah Wetenhall ([14:05](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. But like, like I, I, I know the playbook. The playbook is set. I know what the market needs. I know what I would want as a guest, and so let's do it. I mean, that's where the creativity came from, that fantastic. And that's why I feel like I'm, you know, in, in my forties now I'm like in awakened creative. Whereas if you, like, if you had asked me this, if we had spoken in my twenties and thirties, I would, oh, I'm not, I'm not a creative person. I'm not, it's not about me. Again, I'm a mouse piece for these brands. And so it's been an interesting

evolution to now acknowledge, you know, as a mature adult. I, I, I am a creative. Yeah, a hundred percent.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([14:39](#)):

You absolutely are. I mean, I don't think there's anyone who would argue with that. Okay. That is absolutely fascinating. So I want to I wanna kind of spring forward. You've worked in fashion for all of these years. At some point you well, so you, you, you had already met your husband, I'm not sure when you got married, but you had three children and you ultimately took, took a break from your career. Maybe let's, let's, let's talk through that and kind of the transition and the big pivot that you made to taking a break and then to deciding you and Andrew deciding to buy the colony.

Sarah Wetenhall ([15:13](#)):

Exactly. So yeah. So Andrew and I met in college. We dated for a number of years and married in our late twenties when I was working for the PR agency for a number of years. And we got pregnant with our first child who is now 14, believe it or not, <laugh>. And at that point decided to take a bit of a break. You know, I I, I worked in an industry that, I wouldn't say it's not family friendly, but it's not necessarily easy on families. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> you know, and again, this was 14 years ago. And so the, the, the thought of working remotely and, you know, and having fluidity in one's workplace was not a thing that Right. You know, I, I worked in a job that was very much, not even nine to five, it was nine to 7, 8, 9, 10, whenever you finished your work.

Sarah Wetenhall ([16:05](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And there was a lot of European travel, and my husband at that, and still is. But at that point in time was an investment banker on Wall Street who also traveled a lot for his job. And you know, we kind of, as we were very excited to welcome our son, but looked at each other and I was like, I just didn't see how this is gonna work. I just don't see it. So I took a break as many families often do, and had three children. They are now, as I said, 14, and then I have 12, and I have very soon to be nine. I cannot call her eight anymore because she gets very upset. She's very soon to be nine <laugh> and spent you know, what, what was at that point in time, you know, seven-ish years, eight-ish years, nine-ish years at home with them Wow.

Sarah Wetenhall ([16:56](#)):

Raising them, which was great. And I always knew that I would, I would go back you know, and Andrew and I would brainstorm and talk about what that would look like and what did I wanna do. And you know, I spent an interesting number of years out of the workforce because those were also the formative years of social media. Mm-Hmm. And those were a very serious number of years where my, the job that I knew it kind of that pr marketing and advertising job

significantly changed. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, you know, I, when I took a step back, you know, print media was king. Right. You know, I mean, it was, you know, all about ad dollars and brands and, you know, these, these big box magazines. And in, you know, less than a decade, the world significantly changed. Social media existed before, but it wasn't what it is today.

Sarah Wetenhall ([17:49](#)):

Right, right. The world of influencers and, and this, this whole, again, the whole industry significantly shift shifted while I was at home with the children. And so as we would brainstorm, like, what, what would I like to do? You know, at one point I, it kind of came to me in a hard and fast that I, I don't think that I could do my job anymore, even Mm mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> because the world so significantly changed. Mm-Hmm. And I was quote unquote outta the game at that point in time. And it was awkward that, you know, I had become senior enough that, you know, learning something new seemed really foreign to me. It, it was, you know, it was kind of, it was kind of an odd thing, you know, you know, learning about social media and trying to be expertize in something that literally had evolved while I was out of the workforce. Right. Like, how could I even come in, in a senior position not not having that knowledge base? Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([18:39](#)):

Because you literally almost have to start from the beginning again in, in terms of learning that. And so that is, that is in and of itself fairly intimidating, I would think.

Sarah Wetenhall ([18:48](#)):

It was, it was a very kind of odd thing. And so whenever we would talk about it, you know, it would just, the kinda, the conversation would go nowhere. And I'd be like, I just, what I wanna do, I don't know what I wanna do. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And at that point in time, you know, we, we'd still, when the conversations really started, we had had two, we had not, I was pregnant with Maggie our third, and was starting to think about like, okay, you know, when she's of a certain age in the next few years, maybe I'll go back, but I don't know, again, all of this, you know, and the same sort of conversations also erupted. 'cause Again, this is still a pre covid world. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> you know, but I'm not gonna go back and like, have to do like, FaceTime and, and, and, you know, like in an office and working, you know, nine to again, nine to seven, nine to eight, nine to nine, where I have to like put in a certain number of hours like that that doesn't fit with the family life.

Sarah Wetenhall ([19:32](#)):

So we were still kind of at loggerheads just trying to figure out what it would be I would do. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And so the conversations evolved, evolved, stalled, you know, how they often do. Yeah. You know, you just, it's kind of a continued thing. So we had Maggie the third and when she was one, my father-in-Law called who used to own the colony he bought

the colony in 1969. He you know, he was what we would probably call today a venture capitalist. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. But at that point in time, you know, there was like, you didn't call it VC then, you know, he, he and his business partner invested in businesses and bought things that interested them and revitalized them and ran them when it suited them, and sold them when it didn't. And, you know, and he had a pretty interesting life.

Sarah Wetenhall ([20:20](#)):

And so he owned and ran the colony from 1969 through to the late eighties and loved it and kept his apartment there in the penthouse, even after he wasn't the controlling partner, he lived there. Wow. So that's closing that loop as to how I've been in Palm Beach for so many years and had been going to the Colony for so many years. Is that was home. Yeah. For my father-in-Law. And so fast forward, he called us and was like, you know, hey guys the family that bought the colony from me all those years ago is ready to sell it. And they offered it to me. He was 82 at that point in time, and he is like, I'm not doing this, but you guys need to do it. He's like, the happiest years of my life are the years that I ran this hotel. And you've gotta find a way to do this. This will change the trajectory of your life. This will change your family's life in untold ways. You've gotta make this happen. And so at this point, we had a 1-year-old you know, he'll love it. You know what you don't know. We were also renovating our apartment in New York City and living in temporary housing and doing all these crazy things, but

Laura Cox Kaplan ([21:23](#)):

Like

Sarah Wetenhall ([21:23](#)):

Always, like all signs pointed to no. Like,

Laura Cox Kaplan ([21:27](#)):

So, so Sarah, can, can you remember back to that very moment when he called and what your reaction was in that moment? Were you like, you got to be out of your mind, or were you like, well, I was

Sarah Wetenhall ([21:40](#)):

Sitting on the floor of our, because we were living in temporary housing, it was actually his apartment in New York. My father-in-Law's apartment in New York, which he never went to this two bedroom tiny apartment that didn't even have a real kitchen. And it had like a hot plate and a, and a toaster oven, <laugh>

Laura Cox Kaplan ([21:56](#)):



With three small children, <laugh>,

Sarah Wetenhall ([21:59](#)):

Three small children, a dog, and all this craziness. The living room was so small, there were wasn't enough seating for the whole family on the sofa. I'm sitting on the floor, <laugh>, like with my 1-year-old as chaos is ensuing around me. And, and, and I, I picture it so vividly, and I was like literally a 50 50 torn between, what the heck? This is insanity. We, there's no way we can do this. And oh my gosh, this is a dream come true.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([22:30](#)):

Interesting.

Sarah Wetenhall ([22:31](#)):

And, and, you know, and a dream come true because as I said, you know, we had spent years going to the colony and years sitting by the pool being like, wow, this place could be so great if do, do, do. Yeah. If only do, do, do. Wow. Why don't they, whatever it is, do this. Why don't they do that? So there was so many years of these pent up hopes and dreams that when we got that call, it was like, there's no way we can do this. This is lunacy. And then, oh my gosh, this is also something that we had almost dared to never dream of. Like, we, we didn't think it would ever be a possibility, but wow, we, we have to make this happen. Yeah. You know, which is crazy because I, I knew nothing about hospitality. My husband knew nothing about hospitality. Like I said before, he's in finance and still is. And my background obviously was in the fashion industry. So like, in no way were we suited to buy this hotel and to run this hotel. But we looked at each other and we were like, we've gotta do this. We've gotta give it a try. So

Laura Cox Kaplan ([23:34](#)):

Where did you start, Sarah? You, you made the decision to buy, and then what did you do next?

Sarah Wetenhall ([23:41](#)):

So we went through, it was a quick six months of due because, you know, it, it wasn't an insider deal necessarily, but it kind of was because it was my father-in-law's former business partner. Sure. So, you know, it, it was a really quick due diligence. And the first thing I did was hire a consultant. I, you know, I called literally everyone I knew that was even hospitality adjacent. Like, you owned a coffee shop, you like to drink coffee, you like to stay in hotels. Great. I'm following you. Literally everyone that I knew that was even quasi related to the industry you know, my husband went at his investment bank down to the, the group that covers hospitality and was like, okay, my wife and I are doing this crazy thing. Like we, we need contacts. And, you

know, I was flooded with, you know, with with friends of friends and, you know, again, sixth degree of separation relationships.

Sarah Wetenhall ([24:31](#)):

And I just got on the phone. I took, I took a coworking space down the street so I could not sit on the floor of this tiny farm living room, and just got on the phone and started talking to people and networking and calling and asking questions and was like, listen, like the only thing we've got going for us is that we don't, we know that we don't know anything. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. But like, like, you know, we are not under any delusions that we know what we're doing. We know we don't know anything, but we do know Palm Beach. Like we know Palm Beach and we know that this hotel is not reaching its potential. We knew that the asset had been mismanaged, and we knew that there was upside. Could we pinpoint like, what, what it was and what exactly was broken? No, had no clue.

Sarah Wetenhall ([25:17](#)):

This was largely a wing and a prayer, but we started calling and calling and calling, and I just started meeting with people, as I said, and I ended up getting introduced to this consultant. Susan Richie is her name, and she's absolutely fabulous. She was the first female hotel GM in Manhattan. Interesting. And her days of running hotels. And she parlayed her career into a consultancy now in her retirement years. And I, I couldn't even begin to tell you who introduced me to her in retrospect all these years later. But she's living, she lives in Greenwich, Connecticut. And she got on the train and came in and met with me, and we sat down and I was like, okay, she's my girl. Like, she takes on one project at a time, and she dives deep and she's tough and scrappy and smart. And she would probably say she's not a creative, but she's totally a creative.

Sarah Wetenhall ([26:10](#)):

And, and you know, she agreed to take me on and teach me. And Susan taught me pretty much everything I know about the industry today. Wow. She was with us for the first three years of our ownership up until Right, right around the covid time. And she took us through due diligence. I got her midway through due diligence. And so she took us through the end of due diligence closing, and then and then on from there. And it was about finding, you know, I used to joke that she's the little birdie on my shoulder that like, as I would learn the industry, I would, I would think that I'd get it right, or I'd have an inkling and then I'd call Susan and be like, okay, so like, I see this in the restaurant and I think it means that, am I right? And she's like, oh, totally. Right. It does.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([26:55](#)):

It's awesome.

Sarah Wetenhall ([26:57](#)):

But, but, you know, she was my, you know, I joke that I like could have gone to Cornell Hospitality School or I could just hire Susan <laugh>. So

Laura Cox Kaplan ([27:04](#)):

<Laugh>. Okay. So let's, let's jump forward a bit. And there, there there's a number of different layers to taking on this very significant sort of career and life pivot. One of them, I mean, in addition to learning how to run and manage a hotel, but also renovating it, rebuilding it, rebranding it in a way that was a, you know, significant nod to its history, to this sort of iconic structure that had, that had been there since 1947. But also nodding to the timelessness. And you mentioned the multi-generational appeal, that's a really hard thing to achieve. Let's talk a little bit and dive into the creative part of this project, which is not an insignificant undertaking and kind of how you thought about that.

Sarah Wetenhall ([28:00](#)):

It's not at all. And it's funny because, you know, diving into the operational stuff with Susan with is what we did first. Obviously we needed to attack trying to fix the business, but in doing that, it hammered home to me what potential we had on this creative side, and that we really needed to establish a firm brand and to establish a position in the marketplace. Because again, as we were fixing the business side of it, it was like, okay, you know, there's, there's tons of upside. There's so much to be done here. And that really, again, it just solidified wow, there's so much opportunity. And so that, you know, working, you know, I always say I, I kind of had two jobs in those early days. 'cause The early days, I would do the ops stuff during the day, and then, you know, at night and on my free time, which is non-existent as we all know as entrepreneurs, free time.

Sarah Wetenhall ([28:56](#)):

But in my free time, I would start trying to articulate this brand, trying to articulate what we wanted the colony to be. Because, you know, as we were evolving the operation and kind of repairing the operation, you know, you'd get faced with these questions, well, should we do A or should we do B? And like, not all of these questions had a straightforward answer, meaning like, yes, A and B would both be good for the business, but like, you know, do you want, you know, when you check in someone, are you gonna check 'em in behind a front desk? Or do you wanna have somebody get up around the desk and stand up and go meet him at the front door? Like, you get these questions and it's like, but wait, you know, neither are wrong for the business. Both could be great, but we need a, we need a brand.

Sarah Wetenhall ([29:42](#)):

Like we, we need a document that's gonna help guide these decisions. Because again, they were coming up on a daily basis, and it was just impossible to answer each one and to know which was the right answer and where did we wanna go. And it struck me that we, we needed an a mission statement, and that we needed, we needed a document that articulated who we are and who we wanted to be and what this kind of, what the town even deserved as a hotel. And, and it was that sort of document that, that I, I followed at Calvin Klein for all those years that I followed at Dolce Gabbana for all those years. And, and we needed to articulate that because that would then serve as the cipher to answer all of these questions that we were being pounded with on a daily basis. Like, what do you want your new website to look like? Right. Well, heck, if I know, like, be better than the better than the present one.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([30:33](#)):

It's a low bar <laugh>.

Sarah Wetenhall ([30:36](#)):

It's exactly. Yeah. Like, I want you to be able to book a room online, which you couldn't currently do when we bought the the Colony. So like, but again, there's all these creative questions and all these, you know, and again, they're operational, but they're not operational and they're coming at you from right and left. And so it became really obvious that like, while we did need to fix the business, we, what we really needed to do is, is create a brand and to fix this brand. Yeah. And so like I said, I, I started just trying to kind of, I always say word vomited out on paper, and I just started typing and started writing. And it it came from all of these pent up years that Andrew and I would stay there. And, you know, here we are at this hotel that was steps from the ocean and steps from North Avenue, but it had no connectivity to the beach Uhhuh.

Sarah Wetenhall ([31:23](#)):

You know, I would, I would go to the concierge when I was a guest all those years ago and say, oh, you know, we'd like to go to the beach, you know, are there beach chairs or can you give us a beach? Tell, oh no, we don't do that here. <Laugh>. Like, but like I, I can see the ocean. Like, really? Oh, well you can go to this other store down the street and you could buy a lounge chair and you could buy a beach towel, but we don't let our towels go to the beach. Oh, okay. So, you know, like there was a lot of things like that, that these pent up years of like, wow, if we ever owned this, or if we could only, so a lot of that was the easy part to articulate. I think the more challenging part to articulate was something that my father-in-law had always said that, you know, when he owned this hotel in the sixties and seventies, that it was the center of the community.

Sarah Wetenhall ([32:10](#)):

That it was the locals hotel that, you know, there was a phrase, it's not a Friday or Saturday night if you don't begin it or end it at the colony. He also used to always describe it as a bar with rooms attached <laugh> that, that the bar scene and the restaurant scene and, and the liveliness of the ground floor of the colony was often what people came for. They didn't come to the rooms. Yeah. You know, and in those days they didn't even know, they didn't have air conditioning. There no ac you know, it wasn't about the decor. It was about a really good bar scene and hanging out by the pool. And, and so, you know, that was the more challenging part, was taking those pearls from my father-in-Law about how it used to be. And, you know, and seeing what it had become, which was sleepy and somewhat irrelevant to the community.

Sarah Wetenhall ([33:02](#)):

I mean, a lot of people when we first bought it, I, up, up in New York where I live would be like, oh, I hear you bought a hotel. Oh yeah. Would you buy I bought the Colony. Oh, never heard of it. And so it, it's just, it, it was funny. It was like, well, you know, how do we, how do we take what it used to be? How do we take and distill the community's hotel Palm Beach's Hotel and, and bring it back to the forefront of the community Yeah. And bring it, bring it back as a, as a cornerstone. And so, you know, it, it was really trying to hybridize all the things that we wanted as a guest together with what we knew it used to be. And then the third kind of leg of that stool was, was Palm Beach itself.

Sarah Wetenhall ([33:46](#)):

How do you take a town that can often be tricky for outsiders? It can often be kind of a closed community, you know, private clubs, high hedges, all of these things. How do you how do you run a business that fundamentally welcomes outsiders? Like, well, our whole job as a hotel is to bring visitors into this town. How do you do that in a way that makes the visitors feel incredibly welcome and helps give them, it lowers the veil of Palm Beach mistake. How do you do that in a way that makes them feel like they're insiders and they get what Palm Beach is all about? And so those were kind of the three things that we really focused on as I was writing this mission statement and kind of trying to articulate what, what we wanted the brand to be and what, what did we want the experience to be like. That's what we, that's what we founded. Yeah. You know, founded it. Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([34:39](#)):

It's so fascinating. Do you have any specific advice for someone who's taking on something like that in terms of where do you start as you think about both your mission statement and then ultimately the values that underpin it?

Sarah Wetenhall ([34:54](#)):

You know, I, I, I think you have to look back to look forward. You know, I'm a student of history, always been a history yk. I'm a preservationist at heart. But I'm a preservationist in a way that it has to stay relevant for the future. You can't preserve something just to preserve it, you know, under glass tucked away. It has to be vital and alive. And so I would say, you know, a as I, if you are looking, whether it be distort a new business or to revitalizing an existing business or existing brand, you've gotta look back. And if you're starting a new business, even if there is no history, look at a parallel industry or an ancillary industry or, or a business that's similar in a town that's similar to yours. And look back and use those roots to draw parallels. Because that's really, you know, where we've found foundation is trying to say, what was it like in the, you know, in the past?

Sarah Wetenhall ([35:50](#)):

And then how do, how do we evolve that and transform it to make it relevant for the future? You know, and a great way to look at that is, you know, this, this hotel has always had a history of music, music and live music. You know, in the, in the big band days, there was a five piece band and dancing in the middle of the restaurant. Obviously those days have passed. And then in the eighties and nineties, there was a cabaret space where we have retail now, a literally a, a dinner, a dinner theater cabaret, and then that waned. And so now what do we do? We have a DJ by the pool. So, you know, we honor that past by looking back and say what worked? You know, what made a lot of sense? Okay, we're not gonna obviously have a five piece orchestra and dancing in the middle of our restaurant.

Sarah Wetenhall ([36:37](#)):

Right. That doesn't make sense for today. But a really cool DJ with like a saxophone accompaniment walking around that totally makes sense for today. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And people are gonna love that. So, you know, that's when we talk about honoring the past, but making it relevant. You know, that's an example of, of what that looks like for us. You know, there used to be these fashion shows that would happen around the swimming pool, and boutiques would come down from New York and they would set up at the Everglades Club and, and do these beautiful trunk shows, and then they would host luncheons at the colony. And at one point they even, there's a famous slimer photo of where they put an arched bridge over the swimming pool, and ladies would walk around and do fashion shows. Well, you know, that's not necessarily viable on a day-to-day basis anymore, but what can we do? We can host our own trunk shows and we can have our own retail boutique and we can invite Dolce Knik to come and open with us. And so there's ways that we can tap into those fashion roots and have it be an experience that our guest can consume in a reasonable fashion, but also be tied into the history of

Laura Cox Kaplan ([37:47](#)):

That. Yeah. I absolutely love that. Okay. You talked about the consultant that you hired when you, when you first bought the Colony and started out on this project, but we haven't talked about some of your other creative partners like De Gourney and Aaron Lauder and so, so many others. I, I, I won't even begin to name them all because you had so many, but those were a couple that really spring to mind. Maybe talk about how you went about that process of picking those creative more, more creative, traditionally creative partners.

Sarah Wetenhall ([38:17](#)):

Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. Exactly. Well, you know, we, you know, after we got the business stabilized and we found a gm, Mr. Bruce Siegel, who helps run the business on a day-to-Day basis, we brought him in-house. And, and we really got to a place where, okay, we felt like the hospitality offering was stable. You know, we weren't necessarily where we wanted to be, but we were evolving there. We could see the finish line. Whereas before it was so far away we couldn't even dare to dream it. We felt like the operation was stable enough that, okay, we, we can start really enacting these, these, the mission statement and these brand tenets and invite some partners to come in and do so with us. Because, you know, one of the tricky things about hospitality and Palm Beach in particular is also one of its biggest blessings.

Sarah Wetenhall ([39:10](#)):

We have a lot of repeat guests. People come to Palm Beach 'cause they're often tied by some sort of generational component. Maybe their grandparent used to go there, maybe their mother grew up there, maybe their godmother lives there, whatever it may be. But it often draws them back over and over again. And so one of my challenges, again, as someone who is creative and who builds brands, was like, well that's great, but like, how are they gonna wanna stay with us over and over again? If you come back to Palm Beach, you know, twice a year every year, you know, why are you not gonna wanna go try some other hotel or go somewhere down the street or maybe go to West Palm Beach, or we're gonna stay in Boca this time, do something different. How do we keep it new and different?

Sarah Wetenhall ([39:52](#)):

And so we had the idea of starting to bring in these partners and and doing so in a fashion that we kind of create a slate each season of different partnerships. So while the brand itself is consistent, the physical plant in this space is consistent, it's always gonna look the same. The type of hospitality you get when you walk in will always be the same. We will always say Welcome home. We will always strive to anticipate your needs. There are certain elements of the hospitality experience that are going to change season over season. And that also like, you know, to lower the veil a little bit. It was also a really creative way to solve some of the problems that we had at the hotel. I mean, honestly, you know, you've stayed with us before. It's a lovely, lovely hotel. I would never put her down.

Sarah Wetenhall ([40:41](#)):

But she has a limited physical footprint. You know, we, it's not a giant space. The rooms are not giant. It's a 1947 build as you mentioned. So, you know, there are certain challenges we have. We don't have a, we don't have a fitness center, but yet today's travelers wanna work out. So how, you know, how do we marry those two? Oh, will we invite Tracy Anderson to come down and pop with up with us for the season? She doesn't require dedicated space. She just requires a mat and some mirrors and some music. And so that was a, a way in a evolving fashion for us to fill the need of, wow, today's travelers want fitness, but we can't dedicate space to it and let's commit season over season to a different person. And so we kind of started looking at all of these disciplines, health and wellness, fitness, the arts, both visual arts and, and music, fashion and design and decor, and how can we invite different people to come in and participate with us? So again, this, the, the season over season experience evolves, but it also helps solve some of our challenges. Yeah. Operating

Laura Cox Kaplan ([41:53](#)):

In <crosstalk>. Oh, Sarah, I mean, what an amazing, what an amazing experience. And just the way that you bring this together I think is so incredibly fascinating. I guess if you think back to your public relations experience, is there one clear through line for you? I mean, you talk about brand consistency, but I'm thinking more about the work that you were doing specifically. Is there a through line that connects what you were doing with what you're doing now?

Sarah Wetenhall ([42:22](#)):

Details, details, details, details, details matter. And you know, I, it's interesting because we do operate at a, a unique type of hospitality experience at the Colony. And, and I would say if you were on the phone with, you know, whatever the head of the Ritz Carlton, the head of the Four Seasons, the head of Belmont, some other hotel, you know, big massive chain, they would of course tell you details matter. No one would argue that details matter. But we at the colony take it to a unique level because of the type of hospitality that we offer. And it goes back to Calvin Klein and like the black rubber paperclips, you know, it is that sort of, we pull through the brand all the way through to the matches and the matchbox to the pencil by your bed to the scent that you get in the lobby.

Sarah Wetenhall ([43:14](#)):

The fact that you're always greeted with welcome home. We talk about ourselves in the Pink Paradise. We sign all of our emails, you know, warm regards from your pink paradise. You know, there's a level of pull through in the brand that you often don't see in the hospitality space. You do see it where Mm-hmm. <Affirmative> in the fashion space and other creative spaces. And that, I think that is what that line of consistency is. It goes back to that training ground at Calvin and Dolce in those early days where it, it, it was every one of your senses was inundated with



this brand on a day in, day out basis consistently. And it's that sort of consistent platform for these brands that allows the collection individual seasonal collections to change year over year, but yet they're couched within this environment of detail that is all a hundred percent consistent. So the message reads through, and that's, that's what we've tried to create at the Colony. It's all these other details, you know, every one of your census is inundated by them. And it's so consistent that it does allow our brand partners to evolve and change, but our brand message still, you know, still

Laura Cox Kaplan ([44:23](#)):

Reach true. Yeah. Oh, I love that. I absolutely love that. I can't wait to get back to the Pink Paradise. Sarah, thank you so much for the time today. I really, really appreciate it.

Sarah Wetenhall ([44:32](#)):

It has been such a pleasure. We can't wait to welcome you back because again, it's, it's different year over year, so you'll have to bring your daughter again for another month and daughter weekend. And we can't wait to welcome you back.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([44:47](#)):

Hey friend, I'd love to know what resonated most with you from this conversation, episode 283 with Sarah Wetenhall. Please be sure to let me know, and if you have an extra minute, I would be so grateful if you would share your thoughts and your feedback with me in a review. Those reviews really help us by signaling to the algorithm that she said she said, podcast is something that you value, plus I would be incredibly grateful. In the meantime, friend, have a great rest of your week. On behalf of She Said, she Said Podcast and The Southern C. Thanks for joining me this week. Take care and I'll see you again soon.