

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 ([00:47](#)):

Hey friend, welcome to episode 291 of She Said, she Said Podcast. Today we're tackling that nagging voice of doubt that can hold so many of us back. Here's the question. Have you ever wanted to start a business or solve a huge problem or maybe just chase that incredibly wild dream, but your brain starts making a list of a million reasons why that is impossible? Well, you're not alone. My friend Stephanie Lily felt the same way, but she didn't let it stand in her way. She went from lawyer to stay at home, mom to civic advocate, and then found herself becoming essentially an accidental global entrepreneur. How? By solving a problem, one beautiful handwoven bag at a time she didn't let having the perfect business plan or getting all of her ducks in a row first slow her down one bit. Stephanie's incredible bags have even landed her company, the Lilley Line on Oprah's list of favorite things.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([01:58](#)):

Get ready to hear about how Stephanie found the inspiration that sparked her incredible business. Why sharing your brand story? And this is true whether you are selling a product or whether you are promoting yourself, why having a brand story makes all the difference in connecting with your customers or your future clients? How to get started even when you don't have all the answers. As Stephanie talks about in this episode, why being brave means asking for help and how doing so actually strengthens our connections with others. I love that part of this conversation. Stephanie also shares a special promo code just for you, my amazing listener at the end of the episode, so be sure to stay tuned for that. You will not want to miss it. For now though, here is episode 291 with my wonderful and inspiring friend, Lilley Line, founder and CEO Stephanie Lily, enjoy. Stephanie, welcome to She Said. She said,

Stephanie Lilley ([03:07](#)):

Thank you so much, Laura for having me. This is such an honor. I really appreciate

Laura Cox Kaplan ([03:11](#)):

It. We have been talking about doing this, my friend for some time, and I am absolutely thrilled to have you here to talk about your incredible journey and the building of this fabulous company, the Lilley Line. So I know the story, but I want you to share with my listeners how and why did you start this company?

Stephanie Lilley ([03:35](#)):

Well, it wasn't really a big long-term plan at all. It kind of fell into my lap because I became motivated by circumstances. So a friend of mine gave me a couple of the bags. She's from El Salvador, and when she comes up here to visit, she always steps by and brings me something from her country. So everywhere I went, when I used the bag in the grocery or elsewhere, people always said, oh, that's such a cool bag. Oh, I love it. The people checking me out in mine said, look, it has a flat bottom. It doesn't collapse. It has

strong handles. It won't break in the parking lot. The people behind me in line at the grocery would say, oh, that brings joy to an everyday chore because it's so pretty. And so I was getting a lot of compliments, and then there was a lot going on at the border.

Stephanie Lilley ([04:28](#)):

There were these caravans, and when people were interviewed, they would say, if only I had a job in my country, I would stay with my family. And I thought, gosh, that's a bad circumstance and I can't change the world, but I could just change a couple lives, maybe even one. And so I asked my friend Guadalupe to go to the market and go to a stall and buy all their bags, just buy them all like two dozen bags and get them up to me, and I was going to sell them. So all of a sudden I had 24 bags in my doorstep and I said, woo, now what do I do? So I just packed them in the back of my car. I took a tablecloth, I threw it on the ground at a neighborhood farmer's market, and I tried it out and they were popular and people really liked them.

Stephanie Lilley ([05:20](#)):

And so I stood at farmer's markets for a year just selling the bags. But quite honestly, when it rains, when it snows, people are not interested in buying a bag. They want to get their salmon and their greens and bread and they want to get out of there. And I realized, oh, wait, this is no business plan. I didn't have one before. So now I'm like, well, maybe I should get one, and it's not going to be me standing at farmer's markets every week. So I sat back and I got this friend who's a beautiful graphic designer at Lely Tonga, and we sat down and created a website and realized that wholesaling was the way to get to a broader market. And so we created kind of a showpiece website to shop around. I called two friends who were in the business and asked them some advice, and then we just started cold calling.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([06:16](#)):

Amazing. You did not have a background in retail necessarily? No. Maybe describe a little bit, Stephanie, of your journey up to this point and what you were doing before.

Stephanie Lilley ([06:30](#)):

So I was a lawyer and I was practicing law, and then I stayed home with my kids. And during that time I did volunteer work and my passion was education in the inner city here in dc. I just felt like all these kids were not, were great kids, but they weren't getting a decent education. So I worked in charter schools, I was on the board of a couple charter schools, and then I even ran for office. And you were such a great supporter. I really appreciate that. And I ran for DC school board. I lost, but I feel like I did change some of the platforms of my opponents for sure, which was important that they started focusing not on better testing in the privileged neighborhoods, but they started thinking more broadly about just making education better for everyone in our city. So anyway, so I did that and I did some other projects for children of our city, and then this just happened. This just came, and I didn't really have a plan. I didn't plan to run for DC Board of Education either, but I kind of respond to where I see there's something that should be done or I get passionate about something and I just jump in.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([08:05](#)):

Yeah, that particular piece of your story I think is especially interesting and fascinating because a lot of times we can talk ourselves out of a really great idea by saying, I don't have the business plan. I didn't go to business school. I don't know anything about X1, whatever. You had an interest and a particular focus on a need that existed and you just responded to what happened, which I think it's such an interesting way to get started. Let's talk about though the challenges of starting a business when you're literally starting from scratch and you're learning as you go. So if you were going to give advice to someone listening who says, oh my gosh, this is such an inspiring story and I see this problem in my community, and I would love to do something about that. What advice can you give her as you sort of look back on the journey that you've had so far in starting this business?

Stephanie Lilley ([09:13](#)):

Well, jumping in I actually think is a great idea because I've talked to people who have said to me, I've always had that dream. I've had that dream. Somebody said, I wanted to start a Guatemalan boot company because I lived in Guatemala, and I know that they have the most beautiful boots, and I can't believe that you just did it. And then another woman who said she was in fashion and she wanted to start a bra company, and she has a business plan and she has an accountant and all of this stuff, but she just can't. She has a design, she just can't make that leap. And she was actually giving me advice and helping me, and she said, well, wait. It's really helpful to hear that you didn't wait for that right time. You just did it. And I will tell you, I've made so many mistakes, but the one thing that I do know is that when you are doing something like this, you're just jumping in.

Stephanie Lilley ([10:16](#)):

You have to make mistakes. It's better to just keep on moving forward and have a fatal error. I've made fatal errors and I just put my head down, take 10 deep breaths, maybe even wait a day, feel sorry for myself for maybe a day, maybe a little less. And then I'm like, okay, we're going to resolve that. We'll find a way. So I mean, this company has had at least four deaths and four resurrections, and that's really, I don't think that there are any startups like this that don't, whether you're experienced or not, you are going to have some fatal blows, fatal mistakes. And I mean, I could have a master, an MBA, and I could have worked in fashion for 20 years, and I would still be making mistakes that would almost kill the company and then rise again. So I wouldn't be afraid of that. And it's not like it doesn't feel devastating when it happens, but you just take those deep breaths and I'm like, okay, we'll find a way. We'll find a solution, and then we move

Laura Cox Kaplan ([11:29](#)):

On. Can you give us an example of maybe one of the fatal mistakes that you're comfortable sharing? Okay, we didn't prepare for this in advance, so

Stephanie Lilley ([11:39](#)):

That's okay. This one was pretty bad. I have a fatal mistake, and then I have a real cultural error that I made two different things that you just get up and you keep on going. But so El Salvador has a lot of gang. They have gang problems as everyone knows. And so I felt one of my weavers, my main weaver was living among the gangs, but my understanding was that they were leaving her alone. But during Covid, she had a little studio in a town called Sante, but during Covid, she couldn't leave her village. So

she had weavers her neighbors weaving her sisters or cousins. But when my driver went up to pay, and he has thousands of dollars in cash, and he gives it out, all of a sudden after that, she started asking me for money all the time, and I started getting nervous that the gangs around her were extorting them.

Stephanie Lilley ([12:57](#)):

So I mean, not an easy problem. And so, look, I just had to come up with something, a way that I was going to handle it. And I said no to every time she asked me for money, I said, no, you finish your purchase order and I will pay you. And I was very strict about that. I felt like it was the only way that she could handle the gangs around her. She ultimately said, I quit. Well, now I had one other weaver that I didn't even really think had good quality, and I thought, oh, if I don't really have much weaving going on, how do I have a weaving business? This is a problem. This is a problem. So

Laura Cox Kaplan ([13:46](#)):

Because, let me pause you for a second. I do think it's important for people to know, I already know this, but people listening may not, that you don't have, as of yet, a manufacturing facility, you are employing individual weavers in their towns and communities in El Salvador.

Stephanie Lilley ([14:05](#)):

Well, that's the point of my business. The point of my business is to help these individual weavers. So like I said, the first run, Guadalupe went to the market and bought the bags. Eventually we realized that we could sell more bags if we designed them ourselves and made them have appeal to a US consumer. So make them more sophisticated, not have them look like a central American bag, but have it a sophisticated, attractive, useful bag. And so we had already evolved to designing our own bags at this point. And so I needed weavers and I recruited Weavers to design our bags that were capable of following our directions and designing, weaving exactly what we were designing. So at this point, I really needed people who were trained to weave our baskets. And when she quit, I didn't have much. So there was no production at this point.

Stephanie Lilley ([15:15](#)):

So anyway, I thought that was one of the times where I put my head on the desk, took like 10 deep breaths, took a day off, thought somehow we're going to work this out. And I used another weaver for short term. I had enough stock. But then she came back and I think part of it was that she could leave her town and go back down to the other town and she was away from the mob. And the mob. She could tell them, I have no more work because she quit. I have no more work. Because she didn't. It was an honest answer. And so they couldn't extort her. And then we got back on track once she left. And I think the real beauty of this story is that she ultimately made enough money weaving for the Lilley Line that she was able to buy a house her first house and in a nice neighborhood, like in a rural area, but not a mob infested area.

Stephanie Lilley ([16:25](#)):

So she then invited me to her house and it was just the most incredible day because its corrugated aluminum side and corrugated aluminum roof, dirt floor, no electricity, no plumbing. But she had raked the dirt from the gate to her house, and she stood there with so much pride to show me, look at my

house, that I earned the money to buy my own house. And I am so proud of this. I mean, we were in tears just hugging each other. I couldn't believe it. Since then, the next trip I went, she had electricity. She's improving the house. It's just really exciting. And I think part of the empowerment of what happened with her is that I never said, you are an employee of the Lilley Line. I said, you have your own weaving business and the Lilley Line is going to buy from you. So she was her own boss and she was a vendor to me, and I purchased from her. And so it wasn't that she just worked for somebody else, she worked for herself, and she really did it herself. And I mean, that's really been a satisfying and humbling part of the business. Yeah,

Laura Cox Kaplan ([17:55](#)):

I absolutely love that. I know that that's only one of so many stories that you have of the direct impact that this business is having. I'd love for you to talk about out as folks listening who may be thinking about starting a business. Talk about the power of those stories. When you go to markets, you've just been to a market over the weekend, which is a big one that happens here in Washington DC called Flower Mart, that's at the National Cathedral. You stood out in the rain for a couple of days and loved every minute of it because you get to tell these stories. Talk about the reaction that you get from customers or potential customers when they hear these stories.

Stephanie Lilley ([18:38](#)):

Well, I think right now especially, but people want to have, we consume so much. We buy so many things day after day, especially women who are running households. You buy everything from the groceries to the furniture. I mean, rugs, bikes, clothes for your children, whatever. And so it makes, it brightens your day when your purchase actually is impacting someone else. It makes that purchase special. And when I tell the story and people are about to buy it, whether it's for themselves or a gift, it just gives it a little more meaning just, I mean, my God, it's a plastic woven bag that you use to go to the grocery. It's beautiful, and I think it makes you smile when you use it every day, but this makes it more special. You're changing someone's life. I mean, actually, you really are. I'm not working with co-ops. I'm working directly with people. I've recruited them. I've gone through the villages and through word of mouth, have recruited about 25 to 30 weavers, and there I go to their homes.

Stephanie Lilley ([19:56](#)):

I actually looked into working with co-ops and things like that, but I found that it is not easier. I can't say that it's easier, but I could talk directly to them and I feel like I had a bigger impact. It will be harder to scale out when I'm managing people individually. I mean, they have little teams, and I have a manager of the teams that I interface with. I mean, I know all the weavers when I go down there, which I was just there last week and I go to the homes and all the team members come and I talk to them in my broken Spanish. That is really comical. And so it's very direct, the impact. There are no administrative fees. It's me and them working together. And Guadalupe, the person who started it, is really, she's amazing with me and Gabriela, who's from Guatemala, who's a great friend now who has her pompom business that's very similar to this with, it's a social impact that she started for similar reasons. We have direct relationships with these people. Yeah.

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

Let's talk Stephanie for a minute about, we've talked about the fact that you just jumped in. You didn't have a plan necessarily, didn't really know that much about retail, knew that this was a problem that you wanted to have an impact on. But in the course of learning how to do what you're doing, you've reached out to friends, mentors, acquaintances. Maybe talk a little bit about that piece, right? Because you're a big fan of something that the fancy pants people call reverse mentoring. You just call it reaching out for help, but you talk to people that are younger than you, older than you, like anybody who's doing something that you're like, okay, I could learn something from her that would be beneficial in this business. Maybe talk a little bit about your philosophy behind reaching out for help, because you're fearless in that,

Stephanie Lilley ([22:17](#)):

First of all, I've got to thank my husband because the last podcast, I didn't even mention him

Laura Cox Kaplan ([22:23](#)):

Hurt his feelings. I know

Stephanie Lilley ([22:24](#)):

I'll say, there is an article that I read by Anne-Marie Slaughter, I mean, a decade ago in The Atlantic. And she said, I mean, the old adage is behind every great man is a great woman. And I think the reverse is true for

Laura Cox Kaplan ([22:45](#)):

Those of us who are lucky. Yes,

Stephanie Lilley ([22:48](#)):

Those who are lucky. I will say, having my husband behind me, supporting me, cheering me on every day. He went to Guatemala with me last week, he tolerates bags all over our house, and he is still cheering me on every day. I have to shout out to him first. But as far as women there, absolutely, you have to just, people are flattered when you ask them for advice. So don't say, oh gosh, I'll be bothering that person when I ask them for advice. Are you kidding? It's like setting people up. Nobody says, oh, wow, I'm really insulted. She wanted to set me up on a date with someone. It's the same with advice. Nobody says, oh, I'm insulted. She asked me because she thinks has respect for me. So I mean, always know that. I kind of say, you're almost doing somebody a favor by asking them advice because you're making them feel good that day.

Stephanie Lilley ([23:49](#)):

So that's how I see it. But regarding reverse mentorship, I met this young woman, Lucy Dean, who's about, she could be my child, and she is a powerhouse. She has her own business, Lucy Grimes. They have these great paper place mats and gorgeous stuff, base covers that she designs, and she's brilliant at marketing, and she gets the job done. And my goodness, I asked her, oh, could you give me some advice on how to do whatever? I mean, honestly, write a spreadsheet. It was like that basic, and she just lends me her time constantly. And she's the person who said, you need to go to the gift show in Atlanta. You're ready. Let's do it. Let's do it. So she made sure that my booth was near her booth and she checked on me

the whole time, and then she would send me people who are buying from her, oh, you should go around the corner and see the Lilley Line. She's that supportive, and it's granular. It's big and it's small. She's been amazing. And other people like you, I call you, I ask you for a

Laura Cox Kaplan ([25:10](#)):

Request. You and I trade advice all the time on all kinds of things.

Stephanie Lilley ([25:14](#)):

And then you brought me to the policy circle, and then I met all these fantastic women at the policy circle who were very supportive. And actually, you all let me sell the bags there because it kind of dovetailed with the message of community and working in your community. I mean, that was such a privilege, and there've just been so many people along the way that have really reached said, sure, I'm happy to help. And I appreciate that the power of our women's network can't, should never be undervalued, and it's where you should go, number one. I also feel like getting help that is out there on the internet isn't the same as calling someone and respect. So I kind of believe hiring people, it's easier to hire someone when somebody knows them than just going cold. So I am always, as in yesterday, texting everybody I knew I need to hire someone. Do you know anybody? And we had four candidates by the end of the day.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([26:32](#)):

I love that. I

Stephanie Lilley ([26:33](#)):

Absolutely love that. So reaching out to your own network and really stretching it makes a difference. Yes,

Laura Cox Kaplan ([26:40](#)):

Absolutely. So the Lilley Line had a really magical thing happen last year in being included on Oprah's favorite Things List as part of their, I believe it was for Mother's Day last year, right? Right. Talk about what happened and what impact that had on the business.

Stephanie Lilley ([27:00](#)):

So we were at Market, the gift show, like I said, that Lucy encourages to go to, and now we go to in Atlanta, and we were just standing at our booth, and honestly, we had one of these moments where it was a lot of people came to our booth all at once. Everybody wanted to buy our bags. It was incredible. And I was finishing up an order, and the woman that I was selling to a store I think in Alabama, she looked at me and she said, you need to go over and talk to that lady. She's the editor of Oprah Daily. And they had just wandered into our booth. She was a wonderful lady, and they said, wow, this is cool. I told them this story just like I told you today, and they said, that's neat. They asked us to send us some samples, and they chose a couple and they published it. I mean, it was very easy. I sent them some information and they asked me a couple of questions. I responded, but they were very, it wasn't something that was a big process. It was very personal, and they did an amazing job. And since then, it

was not that what people expect that the sales just started coming in. It was more that we have been able to use and they've encouraged us to use the brand, the stamp of approval,

Laura Cox Kaplan ([28:35](#)):

Validation,

Stephanie Lilley ([28:36](#)):

The validation that we are a good product. And so since then we use it quite often. In fact, mother's Day is coming up and we are putting that Oprah seal of approval on all of our promotional information right now. That's awesome.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([28:54](#)):

That's absolutely awesome. Stephanie, what have I not asked you about that you think is especially important for someone to think about as they potentially think about a career pivot or building a business, maybe it's a second or third career shift? Any advice that you have for people beyond what we've already talked about?

Stephanie Lilley ([29:19](#)):

Well, I think I want to emphasize being fearless. And some people have asked me along the way, how did you do it? How did you believe in yourself enough to make that leap? You're putting yourself out there, you're vulnerable, you can fail. How did you overcome those fears? And I think that's probably what holds people back the most. That fear of failing and that fear of being judged kind of. It's about you when you just say you call people cold. You're like, Hey, will you buy this product or believe in what I'm offering you? And so you can't think about that. Don't even give it a thought. Just say, it is what it is. Just going to go. I'm going to try. And that first call is unnerving. When you're dialing that, those first numbers on a cold call, I mean, you're thinking, oh, they were going to reject me.

Stephanie Lilley ([30:37](#)):

What am I going to say? How am I going to open up my conversation with them? And honestly, just keep on pressing those numbers and get that phone call made. And once you do it, it's fine. I mean, the worst they can say is no. And everyone is really polite. Nobody's a jerk on the phone. I mean, they're into selling themselves. When I'm selling wholesale. They're salespeople themselves, and they are going to be polite and gentle with you when they're rejecting you. And you have to realize, well, they already have another bag, or you just have to go for it and just get that feeling that you have in your stomach. Like Es, just push through it. Just push through it. It's okay. And it's okay to fail. I failed, like I said, four or five times, and then I'm like, and I think if you read about other companies that have been successful, they fail four times before they've made it. So know that you're in good company when you fail.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([31:45](#)):

Yeah, you're an overnight success, X years in the making or whatever the statement is, right? No one ever sees the struggle. They only see the backend. I also think too, because

Stephanie Lilley ([32:00](#)):

I'm waiting, yeah,

Laura Cox Kaplan ([32:02](#)):

You're very purpose driven. You have a clear social mission. There are people who are relying on you for the success of this business. And I think too, that must be very motivating as well in helping you plow through those times when you want to put your head on the desk and be like, oh my God, how are we going to recover from this? You do, because you've got people depending on you.

Stephanie Lilley ([32:30](#)):

So it's motivating, and sometimes it creates anxiety. I saw the founders of Tuckernuck speak one time, and they said, somebody asked them this question, how do you keep it real? How do you not get carried away and get, and they said, well, at the end of the day, we look at each other and we're like, we're just selling clothes. At the end of the day, it's a dress. But I thought, yes, I'm going to have that attitude. And then I thought, again, no, I can't have that attitude because I mean, people are depending on me for their livelihood. And so when I wake up in the morning and I am motivated to help them, I've not made a fortune hardly. And so it's not, oh, I'm making so much money I'm not making, let's not talk about that. But I am motivated by helping these people, and it sometimes is overwhelming, like how I feel a lot of pressure to succeed because I can't let them down. I don't want to let them down. People have let them down before and I don't want it to be me.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([33:40](#)):

Yeah. Such a beautiful story. I'm so proud of you for doing this. I mean, you and I obviously are close personal friends, as people can probably tell, but I'm so proud of you for taking the risk. It really is a brave thing that you're doing. Thank you. I appreciate you joining me today.

Stephanie Lilley ([33:55](#)):

Thank you, Laura. This has been fun. I really appreciate you having me.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([33:59](#)):

I loved it, of course. Oh, and before I let you go, where can people find you? Where can they buy the Lilley Line

Stephanie Lilley ([34:05](#)):

Bags? Well, we have a website, the Lilley Line.com, and Lily is L-I-L-L-E-Y. And on our website, you can buy directly, but we also have a list of stores that we're carried in across the country. And so there may be a store in your town that's listed there, and you can go find our bags there as well.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([34:27](#)):

Yeah. Love it, Stephanie. Thank you. And Happy Mother's Day.

Stephanie Lilley ([34:30](#)):

Thank you, Laura.

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

Wow, friend. Stephanie's story is such a great reminder that sometimes the best way to tackle those nagging doubts is simply to start not with the perfect plan, not with having every skill in the toolkit or every box checked, but with passion and determination and a real focus on solving a problem that's important to you. After listening today, I hope you feel inspired to chase those dreams that you might be putting on the back burner, and I'd love to hear about them. If you would be willing to share with me, I'd love to hear about them. Remember, you do not have to have it all figured out to take that first step. And hey, if you need a little inspiration and a beautiful, practical and functional bag that will be the envy of all of your friends, I have many of them in my closet, so trust me on this.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([35:28](#)):

Be sure to check out the Lilley Line, and don't forget to use the special promo code that Stephanie so generously shared with you. Just enter the words **SHE SAID** at checkout for a full 25% off your purchase from now until May 31st, 2024. Let me tell you, if you haven't picked up something nice for your mom or for an amazing woman in your life, this is the perfect gift. Finally, friend, if you enjoyed the episode today, please let me know. I love hearing from you, and I also love a good review, so please consider jumping on and giving me five stars or shoot me an email. You'll find me at info at she said Media. Until next time, thanks for listening and I'll talk to you again next week. And remember, she said, podcast is a weekly production of She Said, she said Media.