





**Lambert:** So after college, I actually lived in Kirksville, Missouri, for a while. I lived there and I worked at the university. And believe it or not, I was actually a secretary, probably the worst secretary in the world. And I left there and went through - I was married at the time and had gone through a divorce, ended up working with a dentist. And the dentist and his wife just showed me everything of the practice. And I worked with him. He and his wife moved to St. Louis and they asked if I would move here. So I did. Picked up and moved. Soon after I moved here I met my husband, who I've been married to now for 31 years. And then I went into health care. I worked with a major health care system, SSN, and I worked with them locally with their Physician Relations Department. And then I worked out of their corporate office. And at the time, which was a long time ago, they set up their Physician Relations Recruiting Division for their system at the time. Then we had our son. Then I decided to stay home. And that lasted about two months and I was trying to do everything. And finally I was volunteering and I was doing all kinds of stuff. And my husband looked at me and said, "You know what, it's okay to go back and do something."

So I ended up actually starting a business with a partner in corporate training. And she taught me everything about color and style. I kind of did the marketing pieces of it, but we worked with individuals and corporations and helping managers to move up with their personal shopping. The executive presence and communication. But, you know, by the time I knew that, I loved it, loved working with my partner. But I just I knew I was supposed to do something more. After, you know, having our son and going back to church, I knew that there was this sense, this presence that I had, that I needed to do something and I didn't know. So I started really searching and praying, talking to people, looking for what am I supposed to do with my life? And one day I will never forget, I bought this magazine and I opened it up. I started reading an article about Dress for Success in New York. And I thought, all this is great. This has to do with the industry I am in with my partner.

But as I was reading the article, it was about providing interview clothing to women that were coming from difficult situations, whether it was homelessness, incarceration, generational poverty, and giving them a suit to help them to be on the same playing field as anyone else. And it was a nonprofit. I thought, you know, this is great. Really, I think also reminded me of going through a challenging time in my life when I left and I didn't have anything to wear. I remember going to the local discount - I think I went to like Salvation Army about a skirt and a sweater for an interview with five dollars. It really reminded me how important that was and how good I felt. So when I read that article, it brought back those memories. And then it also, though, triggered me to think we'd love to do this, but not now. I'll do it when I retire, when I have time. When I don't have to make money when I can just have the time to give things away. And I thought, I'm going to save this article, put it in my basement and I'll wait for that day to come. I did that. But what would happen - the wildest thing I would wake up in the middle of the night thinking about it. Have you ever had that experience? So you know what? It was as



if during the day it was as if somebody had their hand on my back and was pushing you. It is a wild experience. And it kept happening. I kept discounting everything in my head thinking, this is crazy.

**Nichols:** The timing's not right. You know, I don't even have the funds to start something like this.

**Lambert:** So I thought, you know what? I'll show my husband, who was a civil engineer at the time, and I thought, he'll think I'm crazy. He'll read it and it'll be the end. I showed it to him and he read the article and he looked at me and he said, "You have got to do this. You've been praying about this. You've been searching. And it's right here." And I'm thinking, oh, if he's telling me that, then maybe I need to kind of look into it. Short of a long story, I ended up going to our church and asked them if they would take it on as a mission and as a ministry. And I said, you know, if you would do this, I'll hunt, the person down in New York. Then if I do this, we can be a part of the church. And I'll just help to get it started. Somebody else can take it over. So I hunted down. And at that time, as before Google, before we could search anybody's name. Right? And so I called information. I think they thought I was probably like a stalker in New York trying to hunt down Nancy Lublin, who was the founder. And I got a hold of her, found her, and we talked.

And she was just amazing and said, you know what, you have to do this. There's nothing in Missouri. There's nothing in St. Louis. And if you do this, I help you. I thought, "Okay I don't know what I'm doing, but alright." So I did I went back to our church and they said they would welcome it with open arms. So I started out a little tiny church in St. Peter's as Dress For Success Mid-West, providing interview clothing to women and to helping them to go for their first job interview by providing a suit and shoes and accessories, everything they needed to go for that job interview and everything is free to them. And it's not a handout. It's more of a handout, but a hand up. We're helping them to see themselves at visual, to see themselves differently, to see themselves successful, that they can do something different with their life.

**Nichols:** So it really started more with the personal style or the clothing and accessories, that sort of thing. It was not really about job training or skills training or interview skills. It didn't start with that. It started with the interview suit. Right, now something very interesting about this whole story is about the same time. What did Brad do?

**Lambert:** I was learning, like you said. I didn't know. I didn't know about poverty. I didn't know what it was like to be a single mom and have to take a bus and right in our backyard. I did not know, but I was learning from the women and they would share with me their different stories. When I learned about transportation and I thought, you know, we started in St. Charles County where public transportation is nonexistent. And so I



thought, how can they get to their job? So I become home every night, slam my fist on the table and, you know, like somebody has to do something. And I don't know why and how why this is happening. And next thing I knew, my husband within the first six months looked at me one night and he said, "You know what? I think I'm going to do what you're doing." I'm thinking, no, you can't. And I said, you need to keep your job. I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I've been doing research. And he said, I found this program out in Maine. It's a program called, I think Wheels to Work or something like that." And he said, "I'm going to start a transportation program." And he couldn't do it under Dress For Success because it was trademarked out of New York. So he said, I'm going to start a non-profit and call it Wheels for Success. I thought he was crazy. I said, you know I told him, I said, you can do it at night on weekends, but don't quit your job. Three days later, he quit his job. I cried, I think for months, but yeah, I would never recommend having two start up non-profits in one family. But, you know, I always say God has a sense of humor and what he's done throughout this whole journey started with dress for success. And then Wheels for Success has truly been amazing and just keeps opening up our eyes all the time. That hand on the back doesn't ever stop and I always would think that it would stop. But it doesn't stop. It just keeps, you know, for a little bit it kind of lets up and it's like, OK, this is good.

**Nichols:** Because the more you learned, you know, the vision just got broader and broader, the more you learned and the more you got into this. So let's fast forward to today. So now it's not Wheels For Success and Dress For Success. Right?

**Lambert:** All of it is under the umbrella of Connections To Success. So through that journey and what we realized is that women would come in to get their suit and they would land their jobs. After they land their jobs, they could come back and get another outfit 90 days later after that, I would see them come back around again from a different organization to get a suit, to get a job. And I saw this time and time again I didn't understand and I would ask them kept hearing the same answer. Yes, I had a job, but I got a raise when my world a raise was good. So I quickly learned again from them as a single parents, this making an entry level job. And so if we fast forward to today. So making an entry level job, let's say it's \$10 an hour and it's a single parent that has two children, probably okay, making that wage and also making being able to what we call work supports, which as childcare assistance, housing assistance, she's being able to get food stamps. But what happens is that she gets a 25 cent raise those benefits - they go completely away, which today is known as a benefit cliff. The challenge then is how do you go from that entry level job to that, what we call family living wage and that gap in there. And so in 2001, Brad and I really just, number one we just started competing for funds because he was my grant writer - But we ended up we merged our organizations together and we really dedicated our lives and said, you know what, we're going to try to move this needle and think about those kids, because all I kept thinking of is those children.



We're creating generations of poverty instead of economic independence. And why? So we merged our organizations to form Connections to Success, to really address that gap between that entry-level wage and that family living wage.

**Nichols:** Right. Well, I want to dig into that, but we're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back with Kathy Lambert.

### **[Commercial Break]**

**Nichols:** So Kathy, now everything's under the umbrella of Connections To Success. And I know that even today, it's a much different organization. But we just talked about that entry level wage to family living wage and building that bridge. So it's not just the interview suit. It's not just the wheels. There's a lot more in there. And I know you have said education key. What are you doing today? I mean, let's look at everything, because it's a very different organization than it was in 1997.

**Lambert:** It is. It's very different. So today we have a holistic model. We have a 72 hour class. And that class is really on cognitive restructuring, helping them to think differently. And I always say do people have to have hope? You can do all the training in the world. You can do all this stuff. But if they don't have hope and know that their life can be different... So we start every day with a gratitude circle. And actually, in all of our locations everywhere.

**Nichols:** How many locations now?

**Lambert:** We have five locations under connections and then we have 10 other different replication sites in different places. But they do this, too. So we always think it's really important for all of us, not just them, but us, too to start our day with gratitude. So we have our 72 hour class. And through that class, they learn about what their passion is. They learn to see what can be possible and everything is done experiential. The average individual that walks through our doors disengaged with school. By the time they were 14 or 15, they have a third or fourth grade reading level. So education/school wasn't a good experience. So we really took a look at that. We worked with Maryville University. We worked with many others and put together our curriculum. Through the class they put together a life plan also to take a look at their life holistically. So it's not just employment, but it's education. It's their health is taking a look at their social life, their family life, their financial life. And where are they today? It looks at nine different areas. Where are they today? Where do they want to go? And then we help them to break it down into the tiny steps to get there. They put together their own life plan. And that really becomes a living document for them. Right. And so it helps them. Many of them, if you think about it, you know, you've had a birthday party for them, I'm sure? Well, many of the individuals we serve never



had a birthday party. They didn't know how to plan. And so it's helping them to break it down. And we celebrate every little step of the way. And another part through the class is they learn about interviewing. We do personality profiles. We do skills assessment. We take them on field trips. We take them to a college campus. We take them to manufacturing plants. We take them to see, you know, what can be possible so they can actually see for themselves through that whole process. Then we end up we do mock interviews. They all get suited up, obviously with dress for success. And then we invite employers then to do the mock interviews. At the end of the 72 hours, everyone is assigned a life transformation coach. We have employment specialists to help them. Either they're going into a job, they're getting into an apprenticeship, a certificate program or continuing with education. That's our goal when they complete the 72 hours. And we also walk along beside them. We have lifelong engagements. We have mentoring. We walk with them to go from that entry level job to that family living wage. And what does it take to get there? And when we go through that, we process that with them in the class so they can see why many times they've been generationally on the system or they've been in and out of incarceration. So we know and research shows that with incarceration, the real cause is poverty. So if we can help them to see things differently and understand why and that why is employment. Research also shows somebody coming out of incarceration and becomes employed, the likelihood of them going back – it's incredible. So employment is really key. And education is key. So we really work with employers. We work with other entities to help them. And our educational systems with community colleges and technical schools to help them to get the skills necessary. And as they're going from that entry level job to that family living wage and really making that difference for themselves, and they become better role models for their children or their children.

**Nichols:** It really, truly is a generational thing. It is. I mean, I know that you say somewhere that one in three women live in poverty, if they can break that cycle, the chance that their children will not follow in those same footsteps.

**Lambert:** Absolutely. We have we had started a professional women's group and it was designed for the women once they land their jobs, to help them to continue to move forward, because also there's two causes of why they stay in poverty. It's isolation and depression. And so the women were telling me early on they simply don't know how to move forward with that job. How do we how do we get who we go to the next love? How do we show up so that we can keep this job ones we have.

And you think about your network. And I thought about my network and all the different women's organizations I was a part of. I asked myself what if we started our own professional women's group but geared for entry level women? What the goal of building leadership skills with the goal of helping them to really be their organization, not ours. We could be supporting it. It took five years to get there. But today, our professional women's group is led by all the women themselves. And it's such a



wonderful, phenomenal group. And now they're teaching their children and they're involved with their kids schools and they're helping them to move forward. It's amazing. Now, we've been doing this long enough. Families have started with us when their kids were little. Today, their children have not only graduated from high school, but they've started businesses. They've gone on to college. They're homeowners. They're getting married and having their own kids. But they're not in the system.

**Nichols:** There's a lot in there. And we haven't really talked about this today. But I know, too, that women that have been helped by Connections have actually launched businesses because we've bought some of those! So, I mean had there been several of those Kathy.

**Lambert:** Yeah, we've had others and I'm sure you know also, too, that others that have started speaking businesses, they've advanced in their careers and launched often doing all kinds of things. We actually have one young woman who was she started a sickle cell foundation right here in St. Louis. Rosemary Bretzke was absolutely amazing. Where says Washington University and started her own nonprofit. So I can tell you story after story after story of the women.

**Nichols:** But I think the major difference, Kathy, in what you're doing and maybe what some other organizations are doing is that you are approaching this holistically. It's not just one piece. It's trying to look at the whole picture. What is needed? It's not just the wheels or the transportation, not just the interview suit, but its connections.

**Lambert:** It is. It's all of these. And then looking at where are there gaps in services? I feel like we do that. There's housing. There's food. You know, we work with so many incredible, amazing organizations throughout the region. I think we're very, very blessed here in St. Louis as well to have so many nonprofits coming together to work together. So we work with so many. We definitely couldn't do it without other support.

**Nichols:** Right. I'm thinking as you were talking about the life plan. So you said there's nine different areas. You're kind of the quarterback. Yeah? You're kind of the quarterback there looking, OK, here's these nine different areas. How can we help in this one pool in the appropriate organization?

**Lambert:** Absolutely. You're exactly right. And we have a saying at Connections, "We'll do this with you, but we're not going to do it for you." So we're helping them and teaching them how they can do this. And just like that lifeline, it's their plan. It's not our plan. Right. We'll help support it will help provide mentoring. We'll, coach you along the way.

**Nichols:** But it provides that framework. And that's why they may not have taken the time to develop. So I just love what you're doing. I just love what you're doing. And I



hope there's a lot of listeners out there that get their hearts pricked as well and can get involved. But let's talk about. So you had something on your bucket list? I'm sure you have a long bucket list. But one of the things that you wanted to do was be a speaker?

**Lambert:** I just got a call, asked if I would think about doing it and if I would do it, and I said I would do it if I had a coach. And I said, I know nothing about how to do this. So I did get a coach from New York and she was tough. But we did these coaching calls every week. I felt like every week I was redoing it like, no, that's not right. She was so good that by the end of the time, I was really prepared and timed. And she really made me think like she dug. And she kept lifting things out. And I shared my own experience. In there, which I've never I don't talk about like my own experience when I was married before. And she dug that out of me. And I just remember I thought was like the scariest thing I ever did. And I just felt like out there, naked, vulnerable.

**Nichols:** But I'm sure, though, can't be that is how you connected to the audience, because always say you have to have some level of vulnerability because the audience of your audience first. When you're speaking, you want your audience to say, oh, she's like me, you know, not entirely, because everyone has a different story, but I got to see that. No, this is an authentic person. They've got struggles to. So it's important to have that vulnerability.

**Lambert:** And I feel like that it was also great to be able to share. So I think in there, too, I shared about going inside the prison for the first year and to helping to really educate people, because that's something that I didn't know. And when I was asked actually by the state of Missouri, this was so many years ago, if I would if I would go into maybe talk with them about how to do something differently, I thought no, because all I could think about was television. And what we see, as always. But I ended up I went inside and I just remember going in for the first time and I was scared to death

But when I got in and I met with this group of women and listened to them talk about what they wanted to do with their lives and talked about the kids and their dreams that they have for their kids. I thought they're just like we're more alike than by the grace of God. And so when I walked out of there, I just remember thinking, what happens to the women when they leave? And this was clear back in like 2002, I went and I found out that there was a halfway house for women. And at the time, there were two. And so I went and talked to the woman that was a director of a halfway house. And I asked her to explain to me what happens. And she said, well, you know, Kathy, when they come, they usually either wear their prison uniform or they wear the clothes they were incarcerated in. She said, I throw them a phonebook. They have to get a job in two weeks. They have to go and see their probation officer within 72 hours. They have to take a bus... I mean, she kept going on with this litany of things. And I sat there. I was thinking of the women. And I thought, how can they do this? She said, they can't. She





**Nichols:** Right. But I think it's good to step back and look at it and, you know, because you want to celebrate that. And that brings me to another point. You can read about Kathy. She's received so many accolades and she and Brad have received so many different awards. And I know that, I know that, I know that, that is not at all why you do what you do. But I do believe that you have impacted 90,000 children, 30,000 women - I mean, that is a Chesterfield. That's true to Chesterfields. I mean, the amazing and the thing is, with you impacting that group, I mean, it is I call it the gift of multiplication because it's just going to continue grow because you pick that group and then that group has children and then they affect that generation. Right. I mean, it's beautiful. I'm so glad that you answered that prick in your heart.

**Lambert:** Thank you. And it's been really a blessing. And we've been really blessed throughout the years to have a couple different outside evaluations on our model. So we've been able to prove the results. And now we're getting ready to launch our training and our model on a digital platform. So we've actually - our goal for the future is not to have connections everywhere, but if we can teach other organizations and other communities to get the same results that we've had and helping them to have that it's really an economic investment. Right. Is in their communities. And so we've we have several now replication sites. And that's our big hairy goal that's out there helping to train other organizations and communities.

**Nichols:** It is a B Hag., as you said. But, you know, we've got lots of listeners. And if a listeners out there and they're like, this is precisely what I've been looking for, this is I want to invest. How can they get involved? I mean, you guys, lots of ways to get involved. We do.

**Lambert:** We have a lot of different ways that people can get involved, find us on our website we have so many different volunteer opportunities with mentoring. We have a professional women's group, men's group every Monday night. We also have Connect group, which that's where the families come together. We provide a meal, always looking for people to help out with meals. Food is a big part of what we do. Yeah. Breaking bread together is like a big a family. Also, people can donate clothing to us. We also take men's clothing as well as women's clothing and your vehicles! We will gladly take your vehicle that we can regift and donate it to another family and you can take it as a tax deduction because we don't sell it. We award it. So we're always looking for people to donate vehicles as well. And then in March, we have our big celebration and we do one celebration a year in St. Louis and also in Kansas City and it's called our Tribute To Success. So we honor women and inspiring stories throughout the St. Louis region. And that is I believe I hope I have my day right, I think it's March 7th.

**Nichols:** Very good. Well, thank you again for being here.



**Lambert:** It's been so much fun. Thank you for having me. I've loved it.