

While I definitely had a normal right experience, we all had stuff, we all hated middle school, we all got our first F, all of those things, I was just surrounded and encapsulated with a love that really defies explanation.

[00:03:44] Nichols: What a blessing. I feel the same way. I was an only child too, I believe we talked about that.

[00:03:49] Forest: We have.

[00:03:49] Nichols: I completely get it that I was the center of the universe, [laughs] but my parents, they really did teach me at a very early age that it's really not about me, you've been put here to make a difference and there's so much I want to talk about there, Paris, because I see the difference that you are making in so many ways and I want to dig into that. I believe, though, your educational journey, you thought you were going to be an oncologist.

[00:04:18] Forest: I did. I was 11 and I'll never forget it. It was a Saturday morning, I was spending the night at my grandmother's house. I was watching *Soul Train* and after that, a commercial came on for the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. I watched the entire infomercial and at the end of that, through tears, I determined that I was going to be a pediatric oncologist. That's what I was going to do. Now, cancer doctor for kids, I was 11, so it was cancer doctor for kids at that point, but I figured out what that was and what to call it, and that was my mission.

From there, every step I took, going through high school, I made sure I took all of the right classes in the sciences to make sure I was ready for my undergrad. I wound up enrolling at Missouri Baptist University in their pre-med biology program and was one class shy of qualifying for the MCAT when my life changed.

[00:05:08] Nichols: What was your life change?

[00:05:10] Forest: I was home for the summer and I had an opportunity, probably my sophomore year, while I was just finishing up all of my requirements for my degree for the main part of my degree, and my mother was working at McDonnell Douglas at the time. She brought home a flyer for special summer hires to give tours in the history museum that exists here in St.

Louis at what was the old McDonnell Douglas headquarters. It actually still exists today, it's called-

[00:05:37] Nichols: The Prologue Room.

[00:05:38] Forest: -the Prologue Room. Absolutely.

[00:05:39] Nichols: I remember it well.

[00:05:40] Forest: She just brought the flyer home and I applied. I was one of the four people that were selected for that particular summer and I was so excited, it's my first real job at a big company. We get there and it was a strike summer, the bus drivers would not cross the picket line. I spent weeks learning the material to give these tours because they were pretty intensive in-depth, but what happened was, I got to spend that summer doing my studies next to a capsule of the Mercury capsule that went to space in the Mercury program that was really done here in St. Louis and I thought, "I forgot I always wanted to be an astronaut."

It was like, all of a sudden, the memory came back to me. I was sitting there and I fell in love with everything. I fell in love with airplanes, I fell in love with the space program, and at the end of that summer, my mom was like, "Babe, I have no clue what these people that I work with are talking about, but you've always been good with computers and I really think you should do this. I think you could do it. I'm going to get you an internship." This was back in the days when you still can do stuff like that. She literally talked her boss into giving me a chance and an internship the following summer. That changed everything.

[00:06:52] Nichols: You ended up going to McDonnell Douglas, I believe it was at 1999.

[00:06:56] Forest: It was right after the merger. I started my career as a McDonnell Douglas employee my special summer, and then when I came in full-time, I came in as a Boeing employee in May of 1999. Graduated on Friday and went to work on Monday.

[00:07:10] Nichols: [laughs] Not a lot of downtime there.

[00:07:13] Forest: Not at all.

[00:07:13] Nichols: You've always been a high achiever though, Paris, so that would not surprise me. Oh, my goodness, you've done so much in your-- Is it 21 years?

[00:07:24] Forest: It'll be 22 in October.

[00:07:26] Nichols: 22 years at McDonnell Douglas or Boeing. Obviously, you took every opportunity and you made the most of it and then people noticed and that's when you continue to get promoted or asked, "Hey, would you come over here and do this?" Tell us a little bit about the journey that you've gone through and then there's a lot of other things I want to talk about.

[00:07:47] Forest: Absolutely. One of the things that I've come to understand about myself over time is I'm just naturally opportunistic and some of that just has to do with being an only child and being really curious and always asking a lot of questions, and that just came with me my first day into work. Now, I will say one of the things that I had as an advantage, is my mother had been working in the group that I wound up going into since I was a sophomore in high school.

By the time that I got there as a college graduate, I had a pretty good built-in network, people knew me, so I didn't necessarily have to come in and claw from the absolute bottom. I leveraged the fact that there were already relationships built around me just to keep that sense of curiosity. I would show up at people's desk and ask them if I could just sit and watch them work. As I became more comfortable and confident in my own abilities because I didn't go to school to be a programmer, I showed up at work and they made me a programmer. Probably for the first four years, I cried every week because it was really hard. [laughs]

It felt like everyone around me was lapping me, but in reality, what was happening was I was going through the process of becoming trained from the inside. There were so many people that took me under their wings and as I would have problems, I wouldn't just go ask someone, "How do I solve it?" I would ask them to come help me solve it, solve it with me. I would say, "These are the six steps that I took and now I'm stuck." They would say, "Great, you did the right thing. Now I can help you unlock the rest of this," and I always sat and watched.

Whether it was someone solving a technical problem or one of our functional analysts looking at it from a business perspective, I sat, I watched them work and then I added those tools to my toolbox so that the next time, I could help solve a wide range of a problem, not just a very finite problem. I just think that some of my natural curiosity, my love for solving really difficult

problems and having strong challenges, put me in a position where when people saw me taking initiative, they just wanted to keep adding things to my plate.

Then it became about how do I balance the fact that I'm overwhelmed and do I let overwhelmed become a problem? Or do I figure out how to expand my capacity, and then when I can get used to it, then I know how much more I can take? It was really a lot of balancing between frustration and figuring out how to take frustration and turn that into power. Then make sure that I just was managing relationships and talking to people and reaching out and when I was bored, going to tell somebody. You'd be surprised how much the simple action of going to sit down at a lead architect's desk and say, "What's going on? I'm bored," how that translated into amazing work opportunities.

[00:10:25] Nichols: Right. I always say, "We can't read minds." For somebody to come and say, "Hey, listen, I'm ready to take on more work, I'm ready for more responsibility," that's a really important lesson. Just having the courage because I'm sure you had to master courage all the time because it's like, "I've never done this before. I don't even know what I'm doing right now," but having the courage and the belief in yourself, "I just need to get more things in my tool belt."

[00:10:53] Forest: Some of it was courage and some of it, honestly, was naivety. I don't think that I was one of those people that thought that it's bad if I go tell somebody that I'm bored. There are people that I've talked to and I'm like, "Okay, you sound bored." They're like, "I am, but I don't want to say that because then someone's going to think I'm not working, " when the reality is you're not because you don't have enough to do, you're not being challenged. A little bit of it was just an innocence that it didn't seem like it would be a bad thing for me to go say, "Hey, what you got? You need some help? I got some time."

[00:11:22] Nichols: How many jobs, how many lives have you had at Boeing?

[00:11:25] Forest: [chuckles] What's very interesting is I'm one of those unicorns that spent a really long time in one organization, but in that one organization, I had every job from intern to senior manager, everything in between there, including program analyst, functional analysts, testing lead, team lead, release manager. I probably had in that one timeframe that I spent in that organization, I probably had 12 to 15 different roles that just changed in size and scope and complexity as I was willing to change with it. Then now that I've been in leadership, I've been in I think, four distinct roles since I've been in leadership, which has been really awesome.

[00:12:07] Nichols: Yes, that brings me to another point. At some juncture, because we really aren't taught how necessarily to be a leader, but at some point you said you know what, I think I need to go back and get my MBA. So you went to WashU, and you have an Executive MBA from WashU. I think I read somewhere which I did not know about you that you even have the hopes of getting a doctorate.

[00:12:29] Forest: Oh, absolutely.

[00:12:31] Nichols: Tell me what you're doing today. What is your role today before we take a quick break?

[00:12:36] Forest: Today I am the strategy and operations solutions leader for Boeing Information Technology and Data Analytics. My job is to provide strategic and operational solutions based on the needs of our senior leadership team and make sure that we can flow those solutions in a common way through our organization. It gives me an amazing opportunity to stretch into that brand new MBA, shout out to Ember49, one of the greatest class to graduate from WashU's Olin Business School, and also gives me the opportunity to marry up my love of technology to strategy and business execution because we are a technology team inside of a manufacturing company. That means that we have to manage the business of technology in a meaningful way and how we execute that in terms of our overall enterprise.

[00:13:27] Nichols: Well, I want to talk about women in business but more importantly, is women in STEM. There's something else that's interesting about you. I think you were the first black woman to be on the executive team. Isn't that correct?

[00:13:40] Forest: Not the first but from the organization that I grew up in, I was the first African American female to be promoted out of that organization into the executive ranks.

[00:13:51] Nichols: You live in a little bit of a male-dominated culture.

[00:13:55] Forest: Absolutely. A lot of it. A lot of it. [chuckles] Absolutely.

[00:14:00] Nichols: I read a quote of yours. I really would love for you to unpack this, "Forgive on purpose and trust on credit."

[00:14:09] Forest: One of the things that I've learned, especially in my journey and leadership, is that every single day you have to show up positioned ready for whatever the challenge of the day is going to be. That challenge more days than not is not your technological issues. It's not even your business issues. It's human issues. Human issues are caused by the fact that none of us show With our robot intact. Now, we all put on a professional face. We put on our masks and all of those things, but all of the influences of the things we carry with our daily lives, they show up sometimes in our work.

In order for me to come to my job every day best positioned to do what it is that I'm called to do, I can't be harboring ill will in my heart or contempt towards anyone in my heart. I say every day I have to forgive yesterday, I have to forgive on purpose, and I have to re-extend lines of trust to people who violate that trust, and they can violate it every day. Now, there comes a point where enough is enough, but most of the time people don't intend to cause harm or hurt or danger or anything, it's just an outcome of the realities that their human being is dealing with.

In order for me to show up with the empathy that I actually would like to have from other people, I live by the mantra you forgive on purpose and you trust on credit, and that trust is infinite. When it's broken, you address it and then you come back tomorrow in a new place of forgiveness with a full line of trust extended.

[00:15:28] Nichols: Such great advice. Well, there's a lot more than I want to talk about, but we're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back with Paris Forest.

[music]

[00:15:38] Ad: We at Technology Partners understand the difficulty to find work that is engaging, yields high pay, and facilitates a work-life balance. Over the past 25 years, we have enhanced the IT teams of over 244 client companies and placed more than 3000 IT professionals with them on short term or permanent basis. Our staff includes over 300 experienced IT professionals. If you're looking to take the next step in your career, visit jobs.technologypartners.net, apply for a job, and one of our expert recruiters will be happy to connect with you.

[00:16:13] Nichols: Paris, I want to continue this conversation about women in business, women in STEM, all of this. I was thinking about you last night as I was preparing for my time with you today. I know you recently got married.

[00:16:27] Forest: I did.

[00:16:28] Nichols: You now have a blended family, you've got Jamison, who is the center of your universe, right, but you've got a blended family of five kids now.

[00:16:36] Forest: Ranging in ages from 26 to 10. It's hard to believe some days. [chuckles]

[00:16:41] Nichols: I know. Then you got this big job at Boeing, the things that you do in the community, seriously, you do so much Paris. I'm reading all this, and I'm thinking, I'm tired.

[laughter]

I am tired, just reading everything that she's doing and this woman wants to go get her doctorate. Just amazing but the balance is so important. How do you manage it all?

[00:17:09] Forest: First things first, I fundamentally believe in integration. I believe that your work and life have to be integrated in the ways that make sense for you. The way that that starts is by making sure that per the airplane instructions, you put your mask on first. Everything that I've learned about balancing the chaos and crazy has come from trying to determine how to live in an airplane because I spent a lot of time traveling for work and I was really afraid to fly. I figured out that if I did not figure out how to conquer this fear of flying, that it was going to hold me back from the things that I really wanted from a career perspective.

What happened was, I actually started listening to the speech at the beginning of a flight. I thought about it. I'm like, you know what, this is life. We don't expect turbulence, but it happens. Sometimes that turbulence is bad. A mask is going to fall down out of the sky and I got a choice. I'm either going to run around this plane and panic. I'm going to run around this plane and try to put the mask on everybody else, or I'm going to take the advice, put the mask on myself and then I'm going to help the people that I can help with my mask on, and that's really how I achieve the integration of my life.

Now, is it balanced? No, my husband would be like if you sit there and tell people that you have achieved some perfect balance and you don't wear yourself out, I will tell them the truth. [chuckles] Because I do get tired, but at the same time I stop and I put my mask on and I recharge and I rejuvenate.

[00:18:37] Nichols: Rest is okay.

[00:18:39] Forest: Absolutely.

[00:18:39] Nichols: To do self-care and self-care is self-love.

[00:18:42] Forest: Absolutely.

[00:18:43] Nichols: I always say the people around us, whoever is entrusted to us, whether that's our family, whether that's our co-workers in the community, they deserve to have the best version of us. If we are not doing self-care, there's no way that we're going to bring our best version to those relationships.

[00:19:02] Forest: You bring up a powerful point that I would be remiss if I didn't add to that, I am an introvert. Every time I say that people are like, what? The reality is I am and so part of that self-care means that I have to go into a cave by myself in the quiet and be done peopling because if I don't, then I do not have the energy or the light that I need to bring to any situation. Whether it be my home situation, whether it be a work situation, a community situation, if I don't pause and go sit in the quiet and do nothing, and say nothing, then I'm not who I want to be when I have to be in those public spaces.

[00:19:37] Nichols: Absolutely. Well, I know you and I, we've talked about this a lot. You're also anchored by your faith.

[00:19:42] Forest: Absolutely.

[00:19:43] Nichols: That plays into it too, and I always say you cannot pour out what you don't have. You cannot give what you don't have and you've got to take that time like you said to go away, socially distance yourself-

[00:19:58] Forest: [chuckles] Yes, absolutely.

[00:19:58] Nichols: -and recharge and fill up your bucket so that you can go out and pour out. Paris, let's talk about this. You call it the critic in the corner. I call it the Gremlins. Sometimes we sabotage ourselves. You and I've talked about that a lot. You grew up with a mom and a

grandmother that gave you incredible love, incredible self-confidence. You can do anything Paris, you can be anything, but you said that there was a certain point in your life in those teenage years where you kind of forgot that?

[00:20:31] Forest: Yes, and it's been a journey to making the critic in the corner and the Gremlins go sit down and be quiet. Because it is the bells and the alarms that go off in our head when we are facing into something that is probably our greatest challenge and next big opportunity, we as women, we generally tend to not want to take those risks and chances unless we feel like we're absolutely ready. That's really what sets us apart.

When our critic starts to get on the microphone, or our Gremlins jump up, and they go from being cute and fuzzy, they get a little water on them and they turn in nasty monsters, then all of a sudden, we're trapped and we don't understand why we're not progressing, or why the things we want in our life are not happening.

For me, it was around my junior-senior year in high school is where I really started to develop the sound of that critic in a way that was going to potentially become a problem. I didn't even know that was what was happening. I think it's really important for us to talk about those experiences, so that especially those that are coming behind us, they can learn to acknowledge when in fact they are holding themselves back because they're not sure that they can actually step up to the challenge.

[00:21:41] Nichols: We've talked about this gap. There's a huge gap in women in STEM. I happen to believe parents, that we have to start at an earlier age, exposing them because I think, they make this judgment about themselves that, "I'm not good at math. I'm not good at science. I can't do this."

[00:21:57] Forest: The first thing that I had to think about for myself was I've always been a technologist. I didn't know what to call it, I didn't know that's what it was. I was the only kid in my second-grade class who could figure out how to put the floppy disk in the computer and start Oregon Trail without the teacher's help, so I was a kid in STEM before I even knew stem was a thing. It wasn't a word, it wasn't attached. As I was going through my processes, right, I always had a computer that I was playing with at home that nobody knew about but my mom, and it's those kinds of things that we have to highlight for all of our children put the capability in their hands.

We put iPads in baby's hands and they pick it up instantly, and once we put the technology in the hands of our kids, we can't take it away, and we need to keep encouraging them, especially our young women, that as they become fast learners on whatever the technology is, let's just keep promoting that for them. Keep telling them that technology is an option. Show them, women who are rocket scientists, show them movies like Hidden Figures, keep encouraging the thought process that technology looks like me.

[00:22:58] Nichols: Well, and the deal is technology, it is cool because technology really can improve the world.

[00:23:04] Forest: Absolutely, and it's in every discipline. There's nothing right now that isn't enabled by some kind of technology, so you can be an artist and a technologist, you can be anything that you want to be and have a thread of technology attached to that because our world is digital, and it's going to continue to get more digital, so we might as well have as many people as we can help me to promote them.

[00:23:23] Nichols: Right, and to your point, I just feel like we need to connect the dots for them sometimes because as a young person, you really don't know because you haven't seen as much of the world, right? Paris, I'm going to probably embarrass you here a little bit. You have won so many awards, but you were given the executive Walk the Talk Award, which I think is so cool. I love that. You were given that award from Boeing. Is there anything you'd want to say about that? Why were you given that award?

[00:23:53] Forest: It's such a humbling experience to have an email arrive and say congratulations, you were nominated and selected for any kind of award. This one is really special and close to my heart because I was nominated by a group internally into our St. Louis Site Diversity and Inclusion Council for this award, and it's given to one executive at the site who demonstrates not just with words, but with actions, what it means to stand up and be a champion of diversity and inclusion for our company at our site, so it's just an amazing honor. I'm super humbled and grateful to be able to represent that.

[00:24:27] Nichols: Right. Sometimes the word are easy to say, but the action behind it, it's harder to do.

[00:24:35] Forest: Absolutely. It can be very challenging, but it's worth it.

[00:24:38] Nichols: Yes, very good. This is Something Extra. Tell me about maybe a leadership miss-step for you or where there was something extra missing? Do you have something anecdotal that you can tell our listeners about?

[00:24:51] Forest: I absolutely do. Speaking of diversity and inclusion, and being a champion for it, I just recently had the opportunity to lead one of the most diverse teams, and when I say diverse, I don't mean by the things that we can see, in terms of location, religious orientation, sexual orientation, male, female, all of the things that you can imagine being into a team of 12 people, I had. My misstep was I was caught by the utopia and the promise of what diversity and inclusion can bring to the table, and really was not keenly aware that with that diversity comes so much difference that you got to negotiate the differences.

As a leader, my miss-step was I was really not adequately prepared for that environment to set the stage for, listen, all of the disagreements that we are going to have actually are to our benefit, and so we have to disagree in the most meaningful ways, and we have to understand that everyone's intention is for us to succeed, and it's going to be when we can take a little bit from here and a little bit from there and a little bit from there and add it together, that we're going to come up with the best and most powerful solutions.

Because I didn't have that language on board, we struggled, and I was like, "Wait a minute, this was supposed to be amazing. I've got everybody represented in the most amazing ways, and it's awful. How come nobody told me?" [laughs]

[00:26:09] Nichols: Right. You've kind of had to be prepared with the right language in rallying the troops and letting them understand that, "Hey, we are going to have differences because guess what? We're different, from a lot of different experiences, a lot of different perspectives," but it's the language around that and it's not something to be feared, it's something bright embraced, and let's take a little bit like you said, a little bit from here, a little bit from there, and that's when you're going to have a better service, a better product.

[00:26:38] Forest: Absolutely. Once I had the epiphany and was able to bring that to our team as perspective, then all of a sudden the magic happened, and we went from a space where we were really struggling to try to figure out our identity, and we went from storming to forming, to storming to forming, we never got to norming. We were able to able to make our way through and we wound up doing something that was absolutely spectacular as a group.

[00:27:01] Nichols: Very good. Well, what do you believe, Paris, is the something extra that every leader needs?

[00:27:06] Forest: Vulnerability, especially in the times that we live in right now in the world that we live in, it is not just important for the people who are in your span of leadership to be able to understand what you know, or what you see or what you hear, they have to be able to relate in a real way to what you feel, and it's the hardest thing because as leaders, the expectation is that we bring a presence where we've got it all together, and we're impervious to the things that are happening around us in the world, but honestly, there's something extra that leaders especially right now have to have is a sense of vulnerability because that will allow them to create the spaces that their teams need in order to feel accepted, supported, heard. There's a lot happening in the world all at once, and if your teams don't believe that you are living in that world with them, then they will retreat from you.

[00:28:01] Nichols: Oh, that's such wonderful advice. Paris, this has been so much fun, but I want to give you the opportunity and you're-- Seriously, you are involved in so many different things, it makes my head spin. Is there something that you want our listeners to know about? Why is it important? Why are you excited about it, and tell them if they can get involved?

[00:28:24] Forest: Thank you first for the opportunity, and I want to shout out my great friend, Dr. Hadiyah-Nicole Green. She is a young lady from St. Louis who is a physicist who has absolutely come up with a remarkable technological advancement in cancer research. She has created a solution where she uses nanotechnology and lasers to target tumors and obliterate them. It is shown to obliterate these tumors in mice and 15 days with no observable side effects, and we need to rally behind this great work and help her get to human trials.

I cannot say enough about the Ora Lee Cancer Research Foundation, about the amazing work that Dr. Green has done. For those that are interested and want to learn more, please go to Ora, O-R-A, Lee, L-E-E .org, and just look at the research, look at the work and figure out how you would like to contribute. We need dollars to get to human trials, absolutely, but we also need support, we need recognition, we need opportunities just like this to be able to share that message to the world.

[00:29:22] Nichols: Very good. Well, Paris, this has just been such a delight for me. Thank you for being on the show today.

[00:29:28] Forest: Thank you so much for having me.