

Growing up poor taught me frugality and this come in very handy throughout life, of course. It also taught me resourcefulness, being resourceful to make something happen. I would joke, but it wasn't so far from a joke that our cars that we rattled around in were held together with bailing wire and bubblegum. You were just resourceful growing up on a farm, you were taught a wide array of skills. My mom raised us primarily as a single parent. She was an art teacher, is still an artist today. I'm thankful to say that she's still with us. Being brought up on that farm in South central Kansas, just absolutely shaped who I am and shaped what I would become.

[00:05:20] Lisa: Kudos to your mom, to your parents, really for reaching out and adopting five of you. They put you on a trajectory that changed your life and you may not be who you are today. You wouldn't be who you are today if that had not happened. I want to talk about how that plays into what you're doing today but before we get into that, I know that you were a journalist, you were in television, radio. That's where you started your career, right?

[00:05:48] Theresa: I did. I started my career there. I thought I would also just add one little piece that's an important component about how I grew up and where I grew up on this, and then I'm going to get to the journalism piece because it all ties in together. The one thing that people who know me know is I also grew up with all these crazy animals around me. I grew up with a pet skunk, a pet raccoon, we had a pet crow, there were pet pigs, there were ferrets, there were geese, there were pheasants, that were horses, there were donkeys, there were cows, that were sheep, there were goats. That was the farm. It was a small zoo. Don't just picture, Oh, I just have a little field over here and that's what I do. No, it was a small zoo. People knew about it. We would have strangers visit from just out of nowhere and so just the management, managing all of that took all five of us, kids, which then led to that work ethic. I watched my mom from this farm tell stories because being on the farm and so even at a young age, people who knew me in the small town, they'll tell you that I could tell a story. It wasn't long before when I reached high school, I was a very good student and I got hired as a reporter for a small town newspaper, a weekly newspaper.

I was only 14 years old at the time. I was their sports reporter.

I became an assignment editor and it all came from that farm because you learn those work ethics. You learn that sticktoitiveness.

That was my first job in television and from there that led to a 20-year career in television and I would go on to win 13 Emmy awards, Mid-America Emmy awards, and just became really, really good at my job. I now use that skills in what I do today. That's a little bit about my story of being in television and radio.

[00:10:05] Theresa: So much packed in there, Theresa. First of all, being on the farm and having the zoo, you probably did, you could tell stories like none other. What the goat did or what the ferret did and telling these stories. Then secondly, you went in and tried to negotiate for yourself. You stood up for yourself and you got booted out. Now, a lot of people would be like, whoop, not doing that again. That would deter them from stepping out, but it didn't deter you.

There was that resilience in there, that grit, whatever you want to call it, that said, no, you know what? Just because you had one bad thing happen, doesn't mean there's going to be a recurrence of that. I think sometimes people get in that trap of thinking, well, I'm never going to try that again because that did not go well. It doesn't mean that your future things are not going to go well. There's so many lessons just packed into what you just said, but let's talk about this. You did get married at some point, right? You have two children. In 2002, you have what I call a life interruption.

[00:11:12] Theresa: Yes. Great name for it.

[00:11:13] Lisa: We all have them. Probably, some of us have had multiple ones. I'd love for you to tell our listeners your life interruption story and then that will segue into some of the things I want to talk about.

[00:11:25] Theresa: Life brought me to exactly where you said I'm now early twenties. I'm working full time at a television station in St. Louis, Missouri, KMOV, here in St. Louis and doing really well at my job.

I was investigative producer by this time. I was the one in charge of all the sweeps pieces and doing all of those things that bring in the ratings basically.

It was February 14th, it was on a Sunday and my husband at the time gave me two dozen roses, a beautiful card and it was a beautiful day and wanted to go to the boat show in St. Louis. I said, "Well, I don't really want to go, but if you want to go, just go." He said, "Is that all right with you if I go, because I know you don't want to go, but can I go?" I was like, "Absolutely, just go."

We'd been married about 13 years at that point and he never came home. This was back in the early days of the internet, but he had met a woman in a chat room and they had turned that into a physical event and he was having an affair and it just-

[00:12:24] Lisa: Crushed you.

[00:12:25] Theresa: Yes. I'm not wired in that way, absolute blindsided. If you'd asked me if I could have thought-- I just couldn't. I absolutely did not see it coming and so that untangled all of the horrible things that would then continue to happen. Suddenly now a two household income goes down to a one household income and I'm trying to hold my home together, keep my children in the same school district.

[00:12:51] Lisa: How old were the kids at the time, Theresa?

[00:12:53] Theresa: Five and seven. I hung onto a house that I shouldn't have and I look back and that is a regret I have. I kept saying, I just don't want the children to have to lose their rooms, I don't want to have to lose their neighborhood and-- That was a home that was purchased with a two income family and we were not that anymore. Affording that house every month, even though I had a good job at KMOV, it was a good job, it still was not enough to make ends meet. I had too many bills at the end of the month because it had been built on a two income family.

They came in cards, they came in letters, they came in person by person. At some point, I had so many cards. I had been putting them out and around on like a fireplace mantle. I thought, well, I can't keep it-- they've taken over the room. I gathered them all up and I tossed them into a basket one of those same team members from KMOV had given me-- Jodi Club was her name. What I wouldn't realize is in that moment, what became known then for the next 15 years as the blessing basket project was born.

It was this idea that a vessel can hold things that represent blessings to you and are important to you in your life. On the really hard days, I started going through those cards and letters at the evening times when I didn't feel like I could get to the next day. I was thinking thoughts, Lisa, "Maybe my mom can raise my kids", but then I'd reread a card, "You can do it. You've got this. You're amazing." If you ask those people today, they wouldn't even remember writing the card, Lisa. For me, it was everything.

I just said one day. "I cannot ever pay these people back for what they've done, but I can pay it forward". The organization that I know we'll get to here shortly that I now run today is me just paying forward what others have done for me in my life from the moment I came onto this life, we didn't talk about this, but I'll mention it briefly. Why was I an adopted kid? When I was born, my mom was in prison. The minute I was born, I was taken into state custody and I'm the product of a prostitute encounter. From the moment I came onto this planet, people have made sure that I was okay and what are you going do-- just take like that your whole life? You can't.

What I do now every day is just paying forward what people have done for me in my life to honor them and to honor their legacy. Many of them don't even remember how critical those moments were in time, but they were everything to me.

[00:18:04] Lisa: I absolutely love everything about that story. I think about the cards that people have written and sometimes, I think it's the small things. I always say your words matter. Doing a card, you don't know what that's going to do for that person, everybody coming to your house from KMOV.

We talk about loving people, that's love in action. Love is an action. It is a verb. It is not just a word that we say, right? They were showing you their love for you and their care for you by their actions. We need to take a quick break and then we'll be right back with Theresa Carrington.

[00:18:46] Speaker 3: 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. One of our expert recruiters will be happy to connect with you.

[00:19:22] Lisa: Theresa, I had just written down, it's like are seasons, but there's also seasons in our life. Sometimes there's times of darkness and gloom, but if you will just hang on, the sun will shine again. I think about your story and you were in this season of darkness and gloom. It was a dark place and I'm sure you really didn't know if the sun would shine again, but here's the thing I've learned as I've gotten older, the dark times are not fun, but let's not waste them because there's learnings. There's things that we can learn in those dark times that we may never learn in the sunshine.

[00:20:00] Theresa: Oh, that's so wise, really wise thinking on your part, Lisa, for sure.

[00:20:04] Lisa: Let's move out of the darkness and let's move into the sunshine of what was placed in your heart and what you're doing.

[00:20:14] Theresa: Those cards and letters of support that we talked about, they were like little breadcrumbs just leading me out of a very, very dark place. For that, I am super grateful and on the cards and letters that put me back together and would launch what today is known as Ten By Three, never underestimate your touch on another person's life.

Everything that you might be going through right now, whether you're in the light of times, as we've already talked about or maybe you're in a dark time, just know that you are uniquely equipped. If I had not, in my case, grown up on that farm, learned that work ethic, learned how to hold those cars together with bubble gum and bailing wire to teach me to be innovative. You can't be raised with a pet skunk and not see the world differently. I needed to bring new and different approaches to this age old issue of poverty.

If you had asked me in the middle of all of those dark spaces, "Are you building a skill?" No. It sure didn't feel like that felt like your whole life was falling apart or told me, "Oh, this will lead to a whole new life for you. You're going to travel around the world. You're going to have dinner with kings and you're going to meet African chiefs and become a queen mother." I would've just said, "Oh yes, well, you have something illegal in your system", but it goes to show you that the dark times just remember you are being uniquely equipped for something. You just have to be brave enough to embrace that. The easy answer would have been for me to crawl under the covers and stay there, but I made a different decision and I just said, I'm not going to let this define me. I'm in charge of that

[00:24:00] Lisa: You started with these gorgeous baskets and I told you that my EA, my executive assistant, she texted me yesterday and said, "Hey, I'm bringing your mail to you." I'm like, "Oh great. I'll see you in a few minutes." She walks into my house with this. I've got a prop here with this beautiful basket. I just about jumped out of my shoes. I was so excited. It's beautiful. I'd love for you just to tell our listeners just a little bit about even connecting to the artisan, because I know that you've won awards for this. It was a unique thing that you did there.

[00:24:39] Theresa: What we do is find artisans living in extreme poverty, pay them more than anybody in the world for their goods in exchange for that being in our program, they also have to start three independent streams of income and together, in about three years time, as we sell their products throughout the United States and Canada, that generates enough revenue in their life, that in about three years' time, they can sustainably exit from poverty. We've had about 8,000 people do this already.

What makes these baskets special? Why are they special? First of all, they're incredible works of art. They're heritage crafts coming from all points around Africa, in Asia, in developing economies. As you mentioned, we're also powered by really strong technology that was developed in partnership with our technology partners Syntech.

What this technology does is it allows us to put the very face of the very artisan on the very product that they made. When we tell you that in **[unintelligible 00:25:35]**, in your case, made that basket, he is the exact person who made that basket. The minute that they release the basket to us, an identity tag is put onto it and that identity tag is attached directly to the artisan. As the basket moves around the world to get its way to here and to get his way out to that store, that identity follows it.

We took the idea just a little bit further. If we had just been dealing maybe in one country with a few artisans, the idea of putting the face of the exact artisan on the basket might not be such a big deal because of scale, but we're talking about six countries and thousands of artisans and tens and tens of thousands of products. It is a big deal to be able to put the very face of the very artisan on their very basket.

Not only that, on a growing number of our products, you'll also actually see their signature, which is so important. We used to put the signature inside the basket, but we've now using technology figured out a way to actually associate it with their photograph and put it directly onto the card. This process of gathering signatures from our artisans brought into sharp focus how many of our artisans had never been to school, could not read, could not write.

One of the reasons we started this signature project is we noticed that some of the products coming in would just have a check mark or a line or a scribble. I was like, what signature is that? They're not even really signing it. How do I even know that that's really their signature? When we leaned in, we realized we were actually causing an issue for the artisan. Let's just say that they present 10 baskets, we made them sign their name on every single basket, but yet if they didn't know how to sign their name, it became this very embarrassing moment for them that we did not intend to create of course.

I cannot walk into the doors of my building and not see their beautiful artwork, not see their faces going out on every single product, every single product. It's just a part of what we do here. Every day it really humbles you. It's like, yes, I'm looking at a card in my hand by her signature looks like it was created by a child, but I know that by creating a space at the table of humanity, we're going to make life better for her. She's got all the skills she needs. She just needs a place at the table. That's all we're doing.

It's easy to stay inspired when you walk in to the building every day. You also have this incredible team that I have, that's here and doing what they do every day. It's easy because of the faces and the product that we have. There are days that it gets hard and in those days I take a deep breath and I just say to myself, what is in the best interest of the artisans? It's that mantra that guides me, what is in their best interest? Do I need to take a day and just restore myself so that I can be the best for them? What is in their best interest right now? When I get those days where I'm just, oh, why am I doing this? I just have to take a deep breath. I say, what is in their best interest? I'm here. I'm serving them. What do they need for me to be doing right now? It helps bring clarity. Just this mantra to remind me every day helps ground me.

[00:31:02] Lisa: I love that. Theresa, people may not realize where we are with poverty. Stephen Covey says, "Start with the end in mind". The outcome that we want is to in poverty. I feel like we were making some strides to that. We still got a lot of work to do, but where are we right now? What do our listeners need to know about poverty?

[00:31:25] Theresa: You need to know the poverty is in every community where you are, that it lives in the shadows, that it is on country roads of the names that might not be on a map. The last mile of poverty as I call it is in the countrysides. It is in the countrysides of Sub-Saharan Africa. It's in the countrysides here in our own country. However, there are two things to know.

One, ending poverty is the number one sustainability goal. There are 195 countries in the world and they all agree that ending poverty is necessary for the continuation of the human race. This is something that affects all of us.

When we can end poverty, we end so many of the other ills that face humanity. Where are we today with the statistics? We got them down to just under two digits. They were at about 9% and that was after a 25 year decline. We'd had a lot of progress. A lot of people doing amazing work.

Our organization included for what little micron we contributed, we got a lot of people out of poverty, but together as a society, as a human race, we got poverty down over 25 years but as of October of last year, for the first time in 25 years, poverty rates are now back on the rise. Now is not the time as you've well put it, Lisa, do not grow weary in well-doing. We have a journey ahead of us and make no mistake, when we can end poverty, we can end malnutrition, we can end hunger, we can end a lack of education, we can end issues with equity, issues with human rights, because you can't rule a people if they are no longer in poverty, you can't crush them down.

Many of the issues that we face as a human race are answered by one single answer, which is an end to poverty. Poverty affects us all. It's the first time that it's on the rise as I said, in 25 years, we've got work to do, but it can be done. Every single person has a role to play.

[00:33:21] Lisa: This is called something extra. What is the something extra, Theresa, that you believe every leader needs?

[00:33:28] Theresa: For me, it's compassion. Every leader needs to be compassionate and it's compassion in the most difficult of situations. As leaders, we face all kinds of personnel issues, all kinds of very, very difficult decisions. In my case, I am able to use that mantra, that compassionate mantra of what is in the best interest of the artisans? That makes my decisions really clear because that question comes from a place of compassion. I care about this higher purpose that we have of what is in the best interest of our artisans? That question alone, like I said, it's surrounded by compassion. I think we all have to be compassionate leaders and having this mantra helps keep me grounded in that way.

[00:36:07] **Lisa:** Well, Theresa, I seriously think that we could go on for hours and hours. I know we could.

[00:36:15] **Theresa:** I know we could. I'm having so much fun.

[00:36:15] **Lisa:** We need to sign off here, but I just want to say, thank you so much. Thank you for being on the show. Thank you for telling your story. Thank you for being vulnerable and sharing your own personal story. Then I just want to say thank you for what you're doing Godspeed to you, my sister.

[00:36:30] **Theresa:** Thank you so much, Lisa. As I was telling you and your team, what you do here with the *Something Extra* podcast, it matters. It's hard for me to take a moment to do the promotion and the publicity that it takes for people to know our name. What you've done here today, giving me the opportunity to speak into this microphone and share with you, not only it warms my heart just to see you, but just know that this matters. Thank you for the opportunity.

[00:36:56] **Speaker 3:** Thank you for listening to today's show, *Something Extra*, with Lisa Nichols is a Technology Partners production copyright Technology Partners, Inc 2019. For shownotes or to reach Lisa visit tpi.co/podcast. Don't forget to leave a review on apple podcasts, Google play or wherever you listen.

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