



## Something Extra EP 001: Maxine Clark

**Lisa Nichols:** On today's show, we are excited to welcome Maxine Clark. Maxine is not only the founder and former chief executive officer of build-a-bear, but she is also known for her wide-ranging philanthropic work as CEO of Clark-Fox family foundation. Maxine also sits on numerous boards of some of your favorite companies.

Maxine, I'm delighted to have you with us this morning. I've heard your story a lot of times and you're just always such an inspiration to me and I'm glad to have you on the show today. Let's talk a little bit about how you started in business. Talk about your education, what was your first job, and then we'll get on into some other things.

**Maxine Clark:** I'm not sure exactly what my first job was because I've always been entrepreneurial even though I didn't know the word. I always sold the most girl scout cookies, I had a lemonade stand. I went to work with my dad to his office as often as I could with my mom. I always saw that there was something else going on besides just being a little girl. I was inspired by that, I was intrigued by it. My superpower, I say, is my curiosity. That gave me lots of places to go and look and see what's going on. Set up a typewriter and type, and answer the phones for my dad. So I think I was just always encouraged to be me. I don't think I learned it, it was just there and it was inspired by my environment.

**Nichols:** Right and I think your mom and dad had a lot to do with that too. right?

**Clark:** My mom and dad were first generation Americans. My mom was very smart. She graduated from high school at a young age. In those days, you could. She went to work for Eleanor Roosevelt in the state of NY. In Albany, when they were the governor and the first lady. My mother was really good at her job at this point, she was a stenographer and a typist and so she was picked by Eleanor Roosevelt to go with her to Washing DC to be in the typing pool. She ended up being her private traveling secretary because she could do shorthand like nobody's business. She could type and could transcribe everything in record time. That was her superpower. Alongside her, she learned all of these things about social resources and human needs. My mother was very active in all of that as a disciple basically, I would say, of Eleanor Roosevelt.



My dad was an electrician which he learned his trade in the military. His father and his brothers have also done that. They were all in the electrical business but my dad was an electrician and he then started his own retail store to sell it lighting. My parents moved to Florida after the 2nd world war and it was a prosperous place and my father started lighting showroom. There was a ton of building going on and people needing things. He was a hard worker and my mother wanted to live in the least expensive house in a really good neighborhood so we can have a good education. We moved out to Coral Gables, FL which was a lovely suburb. All development rowhouses, what a life to grow up there. To have that kind of parents, while didn't have they their own college education, they had the education of life. Most people in our neighborhood, unless they were a doctor or a lawyer, the parents didn't have a college education. That was just beginning. It was a wonderful, safe, environment to grow up and I wish it for all children.

**Nichols:** Absolutely. Let's jump into your start at May Department store - was your first job out of college, correct? Let's talk about that a little bit.

**Clark:** I graduated from the University of Georgia with a degree in Journalism and I wanted to go to law school. I moved to Washing DC because they had 11 law schools and I could go to school at night and get a job. I went to get a job at the May company. I applied to all the department stores there because, in college, I had a marketing professor who consulted for retailing. He got me really interested in Consumer Science. Not so much, did I ever think I was going to be designing clothes, bringing clothes in, and running a large retail operation, but I was really intrigued how merchandise got from one place to another. I personally love to shop. We couldn't afford much, but I love to look and to think about "where do people wear that?". "where do they take that luggage?". "Why do they need a trunk like that?". I remember thinking those crazy thoughts. Fun story on how I got to the May Company, they actually told me I applied and told me I was overqualified, I had graduated from college and was going to law school. I didn't lie about that. I went down to Woodward and Lothrop which was the competing department store. While I was in the interview, they told me, "Dell Blackwell just got fired from the May Company and they walked her out the door". She was the woman that told me that I was overqualified. So I just walked myself down there, I have an appointment with Dell Blackwell at 2 o'clock, it was about 1:30. They went, she no longer works here. I said, well, can somebody else interview me. They said, we don't see you on our calendar but yes. They had this man walk me down to the restaurant to have a cup of coffee. They were just appeasing me. And in walks the CEO of the company at that time, Allan Bluestein. He walked in to





**Nichols:** Great words of wisdom for the young women out there. Tell us about your love for children. Obviously, Maxine, you're the founder of build-a-bear. We all know build-a-bear, iconic, global brand. My kids loved it as well when they were growing up - still love it. Tell us about a little about your love for children and where that came from.

**Clark:** As a child, I loved being a child, it was a wonderful place to be in. You're always trying to grow up. I always say to everyone, try to keep your childlike thinking, because then you'll be able to solve more problems because children always wonder why can't we do that mom? Why not? When we grow up, that gets beaten out of us sometimes. That part for me about being a child, I always felt that children could refresh you. If you stay in touch. Also, I think it's a little about my height. I was always eye to eye with children. My mother had a school for children with down syndrome. Every Saturday, my sister and I would get in the car with her and we were not always excited to spend our Saturdays down there but every time we would pull up, the kids would come running out to give us a hug to welcome us. This was after a time that the name for down syndrome was changed from mongoloidism and children were given the hope that they could have a long and prosperous life. My mother was instrumental in that when you can see children that might have everything working against them, turn and believe that they have everything working for them. And reach out to hug you, it's a childlike a spirit that stays with them forever. The friendliness and love. For me, that's found in all children. Plus, as a business person, if we don't inspire our young people to think about their possibilities in life. What their full potential is, then who's gonna run these companies in the future? Who's gonna be our doctors, nurses, scientists, retailers, technologists? We have to inspire them and there's so much energy and joy there. They keep you hopping. It's all my friend's kids that have kept me in tune with what's going on in the world.

**Nichols:** That's a great segue into what I want to talk about now. When you decided to step down as the CEO from build-a-bear, you decided what you really want to give your life to was the education of children. Tell us a little bit about that journey, tell us a little bit about your inspiration for a Blueprint For Summer. Just anything you want to talk about there.

**Clark:** I started build-a-bear when I was 48 years old. For those who are listening, it's not about being 22 or 32. You can start a business at any age. I really never thought about starting my own business till then. I loved working for the May company. I was the president of payless shoe stores. Teddy bears have shoes so that's kind of the perfect



role. I knew I had a limited amount of time to do it because I had other things I wanted to do. There's still this part of me that my mother instilled in me. My mother did not like capitalism even though she raised money for her school, she really believed in social services and in helping people and helping children. And still, have time to be my mother's daughter. That's really what I've been towards my whole life so that even though she's no longer with us, she watches over me every single day. She would know that I did use my capitalistic skills and talents to help people. Build-a-bear was successful because of children and families. It's most logical to give back to the people that helped you be successful. The other is, that, I would not be here today where I am, how accomplished I became, without my teachers. I loved my teachers, I loved school. I kept thinking how to inspire people to become teachers because that's an important ingredient in the future scientists, doctors, nurses, truck drivers, teachers - and I'm worried about that because I don't think we treasure our teachers as much as we should. I wanted to do something all of this was related, I wasn't sure what I would do. One day, I was out with my best friend, Katie, who was 10 years old at that time. She's in her early 30's now. We were looking for beany babies. I was talking to a lot of people about businesses to buy and businesses to start. We walked into the toy store and they didn't have the one that she wanted. When she said to me, these are so easy we can make these. I knew that we could, I saw the Willy Wonka toyshop in my head. It was like an explosion. We went home to look at the computer and see if they are any businesses in the space that we can buy. We found a couple and I called those people and went to see them. Most of them thought I was crazy, it would never work. She thought it was stuffed animals, we could do this. She was right. I don't know what I would've done had she not said it. She inspired me. We build a board of directors. Our first board of directors was children because they'll tell you how it is. They loved the idea and they wanted all kinds of animals that we probably still haven't made yet. All kinds of things that you could become lovable that might not be lovable in real life. That catapulted us to the success that we had. The kids got it. Parents would tell me, why do you want to start a place for teddy bears? Kids could buy them off the shelf. I knew that kids wanted to be engaged because one of my most fun things when I was a child was going on a field trip. It still is, when you ask children, they love to go on trips. They love to have the experiential learning. That's really what Build-a-Bear is.

**Nichols:** Build-a-bear is a whole experience. You've taken to another level. I'm just thinking about the something extra in the build-a-bear bears with a heart that you put inside.



**Clark:** The heart is really something special. It came from a conversation with a friend of mine, Dr. Sarah Russell. She was a professor in Washington University who's also an artist. I brought all my bears over to show my friends on the 4th of July in 1997 and she loved them. She hugged them. She told me that these bears need hearts. She sat down and she sketched for me this little heart. I thought it was a brilliant idea again, another AHA! moment. I went and called our supplier and asked for the heart. I asked if he could get them in the store, he did and we put them in the store. At first, people they were all putting the heart in but they weren't going through the real passion of it. I hired a school teacher to work for us part-time, Jeff Marks, and he got into it. And he created the heart ceremony. People then weren't just putting one heart in. It's a whole family, everybody put a heart in. Finally, we realized we were running out of hearts. We had to go around and buy them in every craft store. They weren't exactly like ours. We had to order more overseas. We had to cut out felt hearts ourselves. We were doing all kinds of crazy things but the customers quickly told us that was the magic moment. That was something extra that no one else could copy. Actually, we patented and trademarked it and no one else could copy it.

**Nichols:** That is so awesome. I love that. So talk to me a little bit about Blueprint for Summer.

**Clark:** Blueprint for summer is a web-based tool, that can be used by anyone on mobile, computer, any device, that helps the family find summer activities for their children. One of the things that I discovered right after I left build-a-bear, in working closely with children in our charter schools, and public schools in St. Louis, suddenly kids were more successful than others. It seemed to be almost like a second innate thing and I asked them, my mom sent me to the library every day. I had to sit in the library in the summertime because she worked or I went to a summer camp at the YMCA, I went to the Boys and Girls Club. It was clear that it was a consistent pattern and so I started looking into it and I realized that the people that know about summer camp are the people in the more affluent neighborhoods because their schools have camp fairs, they have events on the weekends that bring families together. I thought, what if we could bring this to the children in the city in North County and their families, exactly the same way. We reached out to Technology Partners. We actually gave them our dream that we wanted to do and it kicked this better than our a dream because the people that worked in the company the got it. They knew that this was an

important thing because related to their own children in a way that I would've never expected. It was, we get this and we're gonna help you make this successful. We launched it in the first year and we had about 3500 camps in the system and this year



we had well over 8000 in the system. We had hundreds of thousands of people using it. They call us now in January and ask, “when does it go live?” “When do the new camps come on?” We're excited how it's become part of the summer planning of the family, all over St. Louis. 53% of our users come from the city in the North County which we're very proud of because that's where we really marketed much more heavily. It's for everyone, clearly with the 8000 camps, it's for everyone. Two years ago, we added summer college programs. Parents told us that their older children that don't want to go to summer camp but they do want to think about college. Colleges all over the country have summer programs so we put that in there. We also have up the ante on special needs camps. We got a call right away from parents in the first year saying, “We need more special needs and the ones that you have on there are good camps but they're not really what our children need. They need more than that.” This year, we had a huge increase even still, more and more people I think we're helping become more sensitive to the needs of this too because people are calling them and saying, “wow, I didn't think we could have four sessions instead of two.” I think we've filled a really big void here. Parents used to do it on spreadsheets and all kinds of ways, plus we actually expanded to Colorado. A family foundation in Colorado found out about our program and it was way better than what they were doing and so they licensed the program from us and they've had a successful first year. And hopefully, it'll be all over Missouri, at least, in the not too distant future.

**Nichols:** That's very exciting. We'll take a quick break and be back with Maxine Clark

I want to talk a little bit about the something extra in your mom. I know your mom was incredibly influential in your life. I also want to talk about Ms. Grace, your first-grade teacher. I'd love you to talk about a little bit about that to the listeners. What are those something extras?

**Clark:** My mother was definitely a champion of the underserved and she felt strongly that children were not disabled but differently abled. She fought tooth and nail for children who were underrepresented in so many ways. In fact, in those days there were no handicapped rules or laws. You just had to fend for yourself. My mother was a pioneer in that. It taught me that not everyone really can take care of themselves. They want to. You just need to give them a pathway so that they can be as independent as possible. That's really what we really try to do even with Blueprint. If parents know the information they can make better decisions for their children. Ms. Grace was my

1st-grade teacher, she was the best. In those days, you didn't know everything you read. You really couldn't write very much. Parents were under the pressure they are today. You just had a good childhood and got to come to school and start growing up.



One of the things that she taught us that was amazing, when I look back and how gender neutral it was also in a time when they weren't really necessary educating women to be successful business people. She had this sort of game that she played with us. Every Friday she would take a red pencil that she used to grade our papers. She would sharpen it and would look around the room and give it away. It was a prize at the end of the week. At around 2:15 to go on the bus to go home. She would give it to the student in the class that wasn't perfect at attendance, wasn't the smartest, wasn't the best behaved, but the student that made the most mistakes that week. Now think about that. You're six years old and you're raising your hand because you think you know everything. She wanted to encourage that, but she knew that sometimes people would get the word cat wrong, or read another word wrong. She didn't want you to give up because you were rejected, or you thought you were rejected. And so it was a prize. That was the status symbol in our crayon box, our little cigar box that I had with my scissors and glue and crayons was, how many red pencils you have. I usually have a red pencil in my purse and I use it and give it away to somebody at every presentation that I do because I want people to remember that from mistakes come great big ideas. You shouldn't be afraid to take a risk. Obviously, there's different levels of risk but a risk can bring a gigantic reward and it's a 50-50 chance. So, go for it. Out of that, we've had many great products that have been invented. Sometimes that means that you got laid off from your job, and it gave you time to think about a new job and you went to a whole new field. That's kind of that red pencil moment as well. It doesn't have to be one where you literally have to make a mistake and had to cross it out. Something happened to you that changed your life and you took the right path after that.

**Nichols:** I think that's such an amazing lesson for children. You grew up being totally comfortable with raising your hand and wasn't afraid of saying the wrong things. I just think what an amazing lesson. I think it's kind of funny because her name was Ms. Grace, what I really feel like she did was she extended Grace.

**Clark:** Students who had no idea the world was totally our oyster at that point. She taught us that it's okay to be wrong. It's also okay to ask a lot of questions and take risks and learn from every single mistake that you make. It's not a mistake, it's a learning opportunity.

**Nichols:** Did Ms. Grace ever get to come into a Build-a-Bear workshop?



**Clark:** No, she's the one teacher I had who we've been unable to find. I have found almost every one of the other teachers that I had, but I couldn't find her. I was really sad about that. I think that she might have passed on before I was able to wherewithal.

**Nichols:** Tell me a little bit about if there's a story that you can think of where there was maybe something extra missing in someone, or a teammate, or yourself even.

**Clark:** I think that missing is a funny word. I think that most of the time everybody has something special and it's our job as leaders to help them bring it forward. I look for people that are interesting. That is curious. That know that they don't know everything and want to learn and aren't afraid to try a new thing, be on a new team. For me, I'm trying to get them to bring forth their talents and I find that that is an amazing way. In build-a-bear, we started with a few really good people. They weren't necessarily the smartest or the most talented in their field. I don't know that we were a small startup. Getting people to come work for little money and a dream is hard to do but we got great people and what they had was the heart. That's what I think we have to find in all of our employees. The heart and help children who have heart find that passion for themselves because there are so many job opportunities out there. There are so many career pathways that people could go on. I happened to have a small good staff now in our family foundation and they have this something extra. I would say that they have curiosity, they definitely dig in and find the answers they loved it. I don't have to direct them very much because they have this passion for our community and they go for it in ways that I could have never imagined. At this point in life, I'm probably not gonna change some of my bad habits, so they support me and compliment me in that and help me stay organized and on schedule. The curiosity is something that I'm always attracted to. I call it a superpower and when you see it, you should go for it. That kind of worker will become an athlete, in a way, of digging in and finding the answers, not being settled for the easiest pathway.

**Nichols:** That's a great point. They're not afraid of the preparation that it takes to go forward. I wanted to talk you about - what do you think is the something extra that every leader needs, but I definitely think that is one of them. Wouldn't you think?

**Clark:** I think patience - everybody is not gonna be always on your speed. They have to be able to see the canvas that you're trying to paint. That may take some people longer than others. When they get it, they really get it. I think that depending on how people are raised or educated - they might come from less risk and you have to help them feel comfortable taking that risk. It takes time sometimes so your patience is one thing that I

probably didn't have the most of when I started Build-a-Bear, we had the idea in January and opened in October, we opened up. On other projects that I've worked on since, Blueprint was pretty fast. Technology Partners helped us get there just in time for the launch that we wanted to have. Not everything is that way, it takes longer because it is more complicated, legal systems or government possibilities, but if it's worth it. It's worth waiting.

**Nichols:** That's a great point. Very good! I wanna give you an opportunity if there's something exciting that you're involved in that you would like to tell our listeners about. Talk to them about how they can find out more if they're interested.

**Clark:** Thank you, Lisa, for that opportunity because it really is something that I've been working on over the last 3 years. It's something that's taken longer than being able to start Build-a-Bear but in all of our works, since I retired from Build-a-Bear and the community work, I've met so many incredible organizations. I've been to incredible places like Cortex and seeing how people work together and how they could work together in a real environment that's suited for that. My current project is what I'm calling the Delmar Divine which is a reimagination of the old St Lukes Hospital on Delmar between Clara and Belt which was built first in 1904 and it was always a caring place. It went through several ownerships through years and it closed about 5 years ago. Now is being repurposed into a collaborative working space for non-profits, and also to have 150 apartments. Really cool apartment for teachers, nurses, social workers, public health workers, public safety. Those young people that we must have in a community, they're usually young and diverse. They are very smart but they need an affordable place to live. They want to live in a cool place. This is right between the Washington University Campus and the Medical School Campus. In the process of building this, we're adding greatly to a wonderful historic neighborhood, the West End. Bringing people and business opportunity all the way. Because all the people living there and working there will be at least 1000 will need bakeries and pet shops and doctor's office, all the things that don't exist down on our side of Delmar. We're very excited about that for the reasons and we're looking for tenants. We want non-profits, we have a lot now but we still have room in the non-profit space that is working with families and children. That's a broad base. We have thousands of

organizations here in St. Louis that would fit that bill. And we're looking forward so that we can work together to make St. Louis a much better place. Leverage the talents of the organizations and the human capital and as well as the financial capital. So it goes further into the work rather than into the rent or activities that don't really add much value. We're gonna be able to share spaces, share workroom, share podcast stations,



share all kinds of things that you don't to pay the rent on. You can use when you need it. I think that's gonna go a long way to help our non-profits be leveraged. Most of them don't have state of the art technology, office spaces, I can promise you that. I've been to some where there's rain coming down and there's a pail catching the rain. God bless them. They're working their hearts out but I think we can make it much more productive and exciting and bring attention to how important this sector of the economy is. It contributes about 10% to the St. Louis economy and I think most of us don't think about that. We don't realize that there are actually 16,000 non-profits all over St. Louis, 12,000 in the county, and 4200 in the city. That's a lot. Probably some we don't really need but our goal is to make what we have stronger and help people work together to make St. Louis the best place to live, work, and play.

**Nichols:** That's so exciting well you're bringing best practices, the best of everything to those non-profits which are going to be amazing. Is there any way that if people are listening right now and they want to get involved in that, what are some of the things that they can do to help you in your Delmar Divine?

**Clark:** The website is [delmardivine.com](http://delmardivine.com) and look at the site and there's a place to send an information request and I will follow up right away with you, I will send you a quick little survey and we'll meet and see what we can do to get you settled in the Delmar Divine. We're planning to open in the spring of 2020. We're really close.

**Nichols:** How many tenants, non-profits can you house?

**Clark:** It's uncertain at this point because it depends on how much space they want. Ultimately, hundreds. In the first phase, probably 75-100.

**Nichols:** Maxine, thank you so much for being with us. I am a better person because you're my friend. Thank you so much and we'll talk to you next time.

