

EPISODE 556

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Have you ever thought of quitting your job? Welcome to So Money everyone. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. You must have right at some point been, "I need to just get the hell out of here. This job is not for me," or "I've had it. The stress is just becoming too much." I've had those moments in my career. I don't think it's unusual.

We want to talk today about how to actually afford quitting your job without another one lined up? The common advice you hear is, "The best time to find a job is when you have one," because it shows that you still are marketable, that you're employable. Not to mention, financially, it's easier to transition from one job to the next when you still have an income coming in.

Taking the leap without another job lined up. It's a big risk. In the current April issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, I tackle how to best afford this move. How much money you have to have saved? How to really be secure with health insurance? How to make a great comeback when you're ready to work again so that your resume doesn't look like it has this gaping hole.

In the column, I speak with a number of women who've done this in all the different circumstances. One woman in particular, Kristen Field, is on the show today to really do a deep dive on her personal experience, what she did with her time off and how she found work when she was ready to come back. How do you know when it's time to quit?

How do you stay productive during your time off so that you can make a really strong return to the workforce? A little more about Kristen, she is now an independent consultant supporting the president and CEO of Lifeway Foods and she supports a nonprofit, Step UP.

Here is Kristen Field.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Kristen Field, welcome to So Money. How are you doing?

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KF: I'm good. How are you? Thanks for having me.

[0:02:27.0]

FT: Oh, yeah. This is going to be a really, really good episode to listen to, anyone out there who is interested in quitting their jobs. I think if I show of hands virtually, I would guess many people have thought about it at one point, are considering it. Of course, there's a lot that's involved with quitting your job. You want to make sure you have enough of a security cushion lined up. You want to make sure that maybe you have another job lined up. I don't know. There is so many considerations, and you've been through this, and I think it's a really brave step, and so I wanted to bring you on the show.

Kristen, as I told everyone in the introduction, I profiled you in the Oprah issue this month, because we wanted to talk about this in a more substantive way, how to actually quit your job if you don't have another job lined up. Let's start with your story. You're kind of at a crossroads in your career. You're a very hard worker, you're an overachiever, you're not lazy. It wasn't like the fifth you had quit. This was a very hard decision for you. Tell us where you were at when you came to this realization that the only option was really to quit.

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KF: You're right. Thank you again for having me. I was a newly 30 and I had been thinking about it for a while, but I am overachiever and I work in public service. I take public service literally and also devote my entire life to it. I was working long, but rewarding hours, dedicated

my life in working in service for others. I think that was also at the expense of my own health and pursuing other activities that brought me joy.

By no means was these defaults in my employer. It was more me and the way I learn to work from a young age. You just work hard and you keep working and striving for success. I was looking for more in my life and what did success actually mean, and I wanted to find a way to kind of — How do you stop operating out of fear and scarcity and putting it more into action?

I was working for an amazing organization, Step Up, which runs afterschool programs for girls in under-resourced communities. Really helping them become confident, college bound, and career ready. It was amazing, amazing work, and I loved the organization, but I didn't know how to work differently in myself. I think in order to do that, I had to actually completely walk away from my day job and have some space to listen to what my heart needed to do next and what really was going to drive me in my next line of service.

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FT: What I'm hearing is that, for you, the decision was really sparked by a realization that this pace that you were going at and the way that you are working, the way that you had designed your work-life balance didn't exist. That was a problem, and it wasn't so much your employer that was inflicting this upon you, but you yourself not really knowing how to go about your career in a healthier way. I believe, simultaneous of this, you're also experiencing some personal grievances, right?

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KF: Yes, about 29, or 28, my father was diagnosed with leukemia, and I spent 11 months at his side as he was battling a very aggressive form of leukemia. My dad was also a prominent surgeon, and to watch the once renowned doctor become the patient was a very painful experience, but what also made light of for me was that we're only promised today and we need to make sure we take full advantage of that, and what are we doing to bring joy for ourselves.

The thing that I had a very hard time was, was putting myself first. I'm very good at taking care of everybody else, and I was realizing — Through that grieving period, and then my father did succumb to his disease, was that I needed to take care of myself too and very much so. When you lose someone in your life, like a parent, you realize the fragility of your life. Why wouldn't you want to be filled with more joy or have more time to do the things that you love and make a difference? It stayed with me, and it stays with me today too. It was a driving force, I think, and not just thinking about making a change, but having a more active approach.

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FT: It really does put things in perspective. Reminds you that life is too short. Doing the research for this piece, I discovered that many women at some point will, as they say, off-ramp from their careers, and it's not just because we're going to raise our kids. That's a big reason. Many women leave to take care of their families. Other women leave because they're looking for more meaning in their careers, and they're looking for a job, a career path that is in more alignment with their values.

When you're young, you don't really have time to think about, "What is it that I really want out of life?" because you get out of college and it's, "Boom! Boom! Boom!" Race, race, race to the top. You feel like you hadn't taken a break to really reflect on what was important to you. You were giving so much to your charitable work.

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KF: Yes, absolutely. I think that — I was on a coaching call, actually, this morning, and it's been a trend since I was probably very young. I just would take on leadership roles. You take on one, then you take on 20, and I was running organizations on my college campus and the associate dean, and then I worked for my sorority on 30 campuses across the county after college. Then, right into grad school, and nannying fulltime. I was an international public service, so you're just always connecting with people. I'm a big connector, so you're just going, going, and then I started working with Step Up and then going at a pace. I couldn't slow down the momentum and I didn't know how to.

It wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It created so much opportunity for myself. Also, what I was able to create for others is so profound, but I couldn't slow it down and I didn't know how to, because, for 15 years, I operated in the same way. I truly believe, as you reflect stuff out into the world, it comes back to you. I didn't have the capacity to manage everything that was coming back to me in a way that worked. I think the biggest lesson right there was I needed to ask for help and how to do that, and I actually sought a professional coach in doing that.

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FT: Some signs that you might be ready to quit your job, not just emotionally overwhelmed and stressed at work, but if this is actually taking a toll in your health. I was at a crossroads one point thinking, "Should I quit my job?" I was in the doctor's office every few months. I had stomach pains attributed to the stress at work.

What it really took for me to change that was to change the way I worked, going back to your lesson. I was just taking things a lot too personally at work. Every criticism, everything that wasn't going "right", it just really affected me. I think when you're first starting out in your career, that's easy to have happened, because you don't have a lot of perspective and you don't know what situations you should stress out about and what you shouldn't. I was stressing out about everything, and it was taking a toll on me. Sunday night blues, that's another sign. Hint; I don't want to go to work. It feels like a mini-depression and you don't know why are you feeling that way, why are you so anxious about these amazing opportunities you have this week?

[0:10:05.2]

KF: It feels like a mini-depression and you don't know why are you feeling that way, why are you so anxious about these amazing opportunities you have this week?

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FT: A good sign you're at the right job is when you work though lunch and you don't even realize it and you're just fine with it.

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KF: Yup.

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FT: Let's get to the practicality of all of these. Yes, you were overwhelmed, you knew you had to quit. Then, how did you actually afford it so that you could create a timeline for yourself that allowed you to do that exploration that you needed, that you didn't feel pressured to find that next job, whatever it was, just because you needed to pay the bills and get healthcare, et cetera?

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KF: One of the first things I was doing was working with a coach for about six months, and that was very helpful and kind of putting the plan in place and not just showing up at the office and be like, "I quit! I hate it here." It was more, "This is something I'm thinking about, and I want to explore this. What does that look like?"

One of the positive things that came from operating out of fear and scarcity was that I was working coat check at a nightclub on the weekends, I was nannying on the side. I just wanted to make sure that I had enough money to cover everything. By doing that, I actually had money saved, because I think maybe when we were younger, we were taught money, "You better save all of your money. Make sure you have money." As a woman, I wanted to be empowered around it, but it was kind of having a negative effect.

In this case, I was able to have about six months of expenses to cover my cost of living saved up. That ended up being a very positive thing in making my choice. Also, being an independent woman and wanting to be financially sound myself, I have a financial planner, somebody who was my dad's age. I always kind of felt like I had to ask permission to do certain things, but I was more vocal in saying, "I'm going to do this. I need to figure out how we make this work."

He was actually very helpful. He knew I was going to do it anyways, and so he was helpful in helping me figure out how we would make my finances work and extend for me to be able to actually leave a job without another job.

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FT: Did you receive pushback? Because I can only imagine someone who is a generation above you. This is not what our parents did. They didn't quit their jobs if they had another one lined up.

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KF: I think because I had this innate need for approval, my coach also was a whole generation above me, if not, older than my parents. I think that that was helpful. They know me, and I think because they knew me and knew what I could be capable of, I didn't get as much pushback as I think others would have expected. Same with my own mother, she was like, "I'm not worried. If you wanted a job tomorrow, you could have one," when I shared it with her. I think I got pushback from people that maybe have fear around doing something like that themselves. That's where I felt the most pushback.

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FT: What did you do with your time off? I understand you took, in totally, a year off. You had six months of your living expenses covered. How did you stretch that out and what did you do?

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KF: When I first left, I think the next day I was dating someone, we left on a trip, and then we actually went through a breakup. That's what I did with my first part of the time. It's funny, but the universe knows when you're available to spend time on certain things. I think it's the world finally giving me that time to reflect on my relationships, my life, what type of work I want to do next. That first two months, I had a couple of friends get married. It's just spending time with them. I caught up on some very much needed sleep.

Like you, I was seeing a doctor every two months about some digestive issue, or something, which was all of me internalizing stress that I created. Learning to let that go, going to yoga, having lots of coffee, and meeting with mentors, and just talking. I didn't make time to have those meaningful conversations that kind of open the door for something.

Then, about two months after, I bought a one way ticket to Seville, Spain without a plan of really what I was going to do next. I could have probably gone for six months. I needed to financially figure out how I was doing that, but I knew I needed to go have a big experience where something really slowed me down. I chose Spain, and Southern Spain, because the culture is one where everything does actually still shutdown at about 1:30, or 2:00, and people go take a nap, where you have a cup of coffee with somebody for an hour and a half, where I walked through —

I had a little apartment in the Barrio Santa Cruz, which I found was cheaper than staying in hotels if you just found one you could rent for a month, and I would just wander around amongst the orange trees on a hot summer's day, and sit and read a book, and talk with people. That was just so incredible to be able to take those pauses that I take for granted as I — I'm in Chicago in a neighborhood kind of similar to that, and I don't walk around that way. I was relearning how to just walk around, and be, and sip a cup of coffee, and read a book, and met the most incredible people. I knew when I was meeting these people, I knew this is why I had to leave. I was supposed to have these relationships. I was supposed to meet these people.

One of the most incredible opportunities that happened as a result was I met with — I was having these coffees before I left for Europe and meeting with mentors, and friends, and champions, and one of my mentors had an opportunity for me to attend the Global Summit on Sexual Violence Against Women in London that William Hague and Angelina Jolie were putting on.

I attended as part of a global delegation to really work on these issues. I remember sitting at a table with the president of Australia and the president of Kosovo who were both women, and I was speaking, and I remember one of them Tweeted me and quoted me and I thought, "I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be right now, and I'm at the table." That was a big part of me

leaving was to extend myself even more, but in an area that allowed me to grow and something that I wanted to grow into. Just some of those profound moments occurred to me as I was travelling and I just realized, “I need to be open and trust perfect timing and not operate out of fear.” That’s what this journey allowed me to do.

From there, I actually traveled to eight other countries with some people I met, and I took a Spanish immersion course, and I met some incredible people and traveled with them, and a friend came out and traveled with me. Just being able to see places and open my eyes to new cultures and experiences.

I came back and I think it was about six months, and I met with another mentor when I came back, and I was so relaxed. I specifically remember this day. We were in the John Hancock building that overlooks Michigan and I’m wearing some big flappy hat, and she’s in a suit at work. I’m just totally zoned out and just feeling that peace. She told me that — This is a mentor and one of my grad school professors. She told me was running for office, a local city government here in Chicago. I’ve always worked in public service, like I said, and I had told her a long time ago, if she ever ran for office, I would work her campaign. There I stood all relaxed and zoned out and I happily said, “I will help you with your campaign.”

For the next six months, which was still kind of my time off, I worked with her on her campaign, because it was an opportunity that came. Since was my fame was trusting perfect timing, I knew that a campaign has an end date. It wasn’t a long term commitment for me, but it was a huge opportunity to grow, to learn something new, to serve in a different way that I always wanted to serve.

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FT: That’s the other part of this, right? Which is not just, of course, taking the time off to take the time off. You have to also make the most of that time for yourself so that you’re marketable when you are ready to find that next opportunity and really be serious about next job.

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KF: Absolutely.

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FT: That was going through your mind, wasn't it? It wasn't just like, "Oh! This sounds fun. Let me do this."

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KF: No. If we would have won that campaign, or if I ever want to run for office, which I do have aspirations to do, I looked at it like, "This is an opportunity to learn." That's how I started looking at things instead of, "Oh! I have to go to work today." If you're stressed at a job or something, it's what are you grateful for in that job today? What can that job teach you? Maybe it's what you're doing right now, but I just started looking at work so differently.

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FT: When you were ready to really update your resume, how did you go about the job search following all these volunteer opportunities that you were taking on? What were you learning about yourself along the way?

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KF: A big thing I learned was I kind of don't volunteer traditional, "Okay. Here is my resume. These are the jobs that I've done." I kind of knew when I came back from Europe and maybe before that, that I probably wouldn't find my job in a traditional way, and I think that's just because you opened yourself up to different things, to different connections.

All of my job opportunities going forward since I left all kind of happened that same way, that when I met with my mentor when I came back and she was running for office. I kind of created an environment that allows me to create where I want to contribute and what opportunities fit. I kind of just project that out and I share that with people.

I think a big lesson for anyone considering doing this is continually share who you are with others and telling them kind of, “This is what I’m really passionate about doing.” I feel like those opportunities, and at least those champions, will be out there for you.

What I did immediately when I left my job, because I think I operated in the old way of I need to make sure I have a position. I was actively doing other things. I was working with this campaign. I was volunteering. I was on other boards. People are always asking me “advice”. I made myself Kristen Elizabeth Field, public service, global affairs, and community engagement professional. I put that on my LinkedIn, and ever since then, things have fallen under that. Whether it was a certain board service I was doing, or I executed a large scale fundraising event, or worked on the campaign, or today I’ve had two clients as an independent consultant. All of that kind of fell under these are the areas that I’ve done professional work in.

Taking those parameters off of yourself, anyone that I’ve ever had interned for me, I’ve asked them to give themselves a title. What are they looking to do? One of my interns was going to law school. We gave her a name more of like events and community engagement associate, because that would be name she wanted later. Feel empowered around whether you’re being paid for something or not, knowing you’re valued, and that’s still experience, that it’s a valuable experience.

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FT: It reminds me of the same dress for the job you want, not the one you have.

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KF: Absolutely.

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FT: Create the title that you want, not the one that you have. Actually, when I was in journalism school, we had little business cards. It was actually smart back then to have. Some of us put student on there. Also, we were active reporters. We were out there. We were pitching. We were

selling our stories. We were reporters by enlarge. Don't underestimate the kind of work that you're putting out there, for sure.

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KF: Yeah, I would tell any of interns — Even myself, I also made business cards right away, because at the time, I'm very much a networker, always at events, and if someone ask me, I wanted to have something. I made business cards, and I had a little tagline on the back. It was like, "Connect, engage, empower." It was more — I didn't have to say, "Kristen, this is my job title." It was more, "This is kind of who I am." It was redefining the way I looked at work.

[0:22:19.1]

FT: It sounds like quit your job, and you may not know what's around the corner, what's going to happen for you in the next four, six months, a year in some cases, but be intentional about whatever it is that you do and think always along the lines of, "What is the story here for me so I can really explain this to someone in the future down the road to show that there was meaning in what I pursued."

The good news is, for everyone listening. When you do that, employers love it. Was that your experience when you were talking to future employers and perspective employers, that they got it? They weren't looking at it so much as a whole on your resume, or, "Kristen is indecisive."

[0:22:58.2]

KF: No, absolutely. It's been so profound to see people's reactions and to where I've ended up today. Actually, the mentor who I went to the conference in London, because of her support, I actually am her chief of staff. It wasn't a job that existed. Again, we were seeing each other, just having a conversation. He was talking about some need she had. I said, "I have a little time after working on this campaign. Let's see if something like this would work."

I went home and reflected on it. I did some research on what chief of staff in a private company would look like, and gave her a little proposal, and that was two years ago. Now, I am chief of

staff to a CEO of a very large company that I respect who uses her platform to make the world better for all of us.

What's interesting too is the way that I left my job. I think this is important too. I had a great relationship with Step Up when I left. I had a transition plan in place. I hired my intern for the interim, because I was operating at such a pace that I would get hundreds of email a day. How would that be managed when I left?

A year and a half later after I left, they ask me back. There was an opportunity, finally, there for me to grow into a different position. Knowing what I learned from my time away, I renegotiated that offer to come back and I actually have been consulting with them kind of on my terms on the side ever since. I've been back working with them for the past year and a half actually. I worked just with the CEO on our expansion to new markets. I'm bringing our programs that empower young women and inspire girls to different cities around the country.

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FT: The advice is don't leave your employ high and dry.

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KF: Exactly.

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FT: Interesting that you have now this new role, do you think you would have realized that you would benefit from taking on this role that the nonprofit would benefit from you taking on this new role had you never left? Would it ever have occurred to you?

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KF: Maybe, but probably too late. I think that me stepping away really helped and them seeing an opportunity for me and me seeing one for myself as well. I think if that job existed, their

expansion director existed at the time, I would have thrown myself into it, but I probably wouldn't have found my joy, if that makes sense.

I think that it was important for me to step away, because I needed to teach myself how to work differently. Now, I can work a lot more efficiently and effectively and not work 100 hours a week and kind of have the same result. There are weeks that you'll work through lunch, we sat and you won't even think about it. Then, there's times where you get up and you went for a run, and maybe you'll check your email at 9. You just learn to set your own boundaries and parameters.

[0:26:10.7]

FT: It sounds like you were looking for a career where you were your own boss. Is that fair to say?

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KF: Yes. That's very fair to say.

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FT: Now, how do you afford things like health insurance.

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KF: I'm from a medical family, so before I ever left my job, I purchased a plan, an independent plan. I don't have children and I don't have a spouse, so there was just me to think about in that equation. That is something to think about too if you're this, if you are the primary breadwinner in your family, or you have children that rely on your insurance. It's something very — You need to make sure that you pay attention to and bring into account.

I bought a policy right away, and that was a nonnegotiable for me, because I am a medical family. It's a big expense, but I didn't have any huge medical issues, because that's what I was taking care of. The self-care definitely helps in the medical bill area.

Then, going forward, once you're a little bit more established, I kind of fell into working for myself, which is what we just talked about. I think that I like to be my own boss. Even if I do work for some other people, I do like to have that, because I think that that gives me my autonomy and my space to grow and be creative.

It was learning to ask for what I was worth and asking for money, and I think women have a hard time doing this sometimes. Researching; what do you do as a consultant? How do you ask for an appropriate salary? I still had to do those normal things you would do in a job. It was very empowering. It gave me joy in doing it. It was also nerve-racking. Negotiating and giving yourself that power around money and not giving money — Money doesn't have to be scary. I think it should be empowering.

What I learned in the last two years is — And I'm still learning it. I have my struggles with it — But to not feel like money is so scarce, operating from a place that it's abundant and that it's not such a negative thing. Go out there, make money, and be responsible with it. I think that it doesn't have to be such a negative and scary thing. Go spend some of it too.

[0:28:24.9]

FT: To read some of the statistics about what happens to our incomes when we, as I say, off-ramp, or take time off from work, going back into the workplace after a year, you could see a substantial dip in your earnings potential. That's the average. I think, like you, if you have a clear story, a clear journey that shows your growth, shows how you're far more qualified to do whatever it is you want to do. You should definitely embrace that and bring that to the negotiating table and not feel that you're in a disadvantage just because you were "out of the workplace", the traditional workplace.

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KF: Absolutely. I think it's — It's scary when you first go in, but it will come back to you tenfold from just what you put out there, and the experience that you gained from taking a much

needed stop, I think self-care will be — Is becoming so much more respected, especially in a work environment, because I'm so much better for my job when I'm taking care of myself.

[0:29:26.3]

FT: Go get that massage.

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KF: Yeah, get that — it's huge. Get that massage, go to yoga. If you need a day off, just be open and honest about it, because you're more to the bottom line when you're healthy.

[0:29:38.7]

FT: I bought you on the show, Kristen, because I wanted you to share your story, and thank you for being so transparent about all the steps from why you quit, to how you afforded it, how you make the most of the time off. I do want to ask you a couple of So Money questions before I let you go.

[0:29:55.0]

KF: Absolutely.

[0:29:56.1]

FT: Starting with; what was your exposure to money growing up? Do you have a story as a child that was very much kind of money story that that's the moment when you first learned about it, or got a really great lesson in it, and how it ultimately shaped your character as an adult, and your relationship with money.

[0:30:16.1]

KF: To be perfectly honest, I think mine was — I did have a single mom for some time. There was like that kind of fear and scarcity. Then, it morphed into more of, “I’m a woman, and I want to be this financially independent woman,” and probably operating off of that single mom scenario of, “I want to make sure that I’m okay no matter what.”

It’s empowering today. I think when I was younger, it felt a little bit more scary, but I’m so empowered by being financially independent today from the early lesson of, “We still have to watch out ourselves.” Not in a selfish way. If you only have one parent that knows about money, or what happens if that one parent is not there? That was kind of the early lesson there.

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FT: Yes, that you always have to be mindful of managing your own money yourself.

[0:31:09.3]

KF: Yes.

[0:31:09.6]

FT: What was your So Money moment so far? I would imagine that quitting your job felt very heroic and there was a lot of pride in that, but was there a real concrete financially amazing moment you felt like all the hard work and efforts had aligned?

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KF: It just happened, and I just met with my financial planner, and I had to do my PNLs from last year from working for myself. It was my most profitable year independently, but ever as a person, and it was more than I knew I was capable of and allowed myself to be capable of.

The big lesson there was let yourself shine. If you’re doing well and you’re being compensated well for it, let that continue to shine. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s powerful, and it can be good. Just feel empowered around money, I think. It was like a big moment where I’m like,

“Wow! I think I’ll buy a house. I’ll do this.” It felt very good, especially because I am a single woman and in her early 30s that it just feel like — I told my mother this too, that, “You won’t have to worry about me. I’ll always be okay.” Mothers worry about their kids.

I think that — She’s like, “Oh! I’m not worried about you,” but it felt very powerful to be able to support myself independently. I’m now on staff at one of the companies. For that time to make a decision, that without something there, just to leave — Like you said, you have a plan every day. How are you being seen by the world.

[0:32:47.3]

FT: Right. Kristen, thank you so much from quitting your job with not a whole lot planned, to now experiencing your So Money moment, earning more than you ever have in a short period of time. Such an inspiring story. We really appreciate you sharing it with us, and the transparency, and we wish you the best of luck, continued success.

[0:33:06.7]

KF: Thank you so much.

[END]