

EPISODE 742

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: We got a special treat for all the Star Wars fans out there today, welcome to So Money everyone. I'm your host Farnoosh Torabi. Our guest today is Ashley Eckstein. You might recognize her voice. She is the voice of the character Ahsoka Tano in Star Wars and she's here today to talk about her career as an actress and entrepreneur but mostly as an activist, a thought leader and bestselling author.

Ashley has long been a fan of science fiction and fantasy, so she started her company, Her Universe to change the perception that science fiction fantasy is just for boys. Her Universe has joined forces with some of the biggest names in the sci-fi fantasy world to create fan girl apparel and accessories for Star Wars, Dr. Who, Star Trek and Marvel.

She has her first book out, it's called, *It's Your Universe* which features iconic life lessons from well-known characters. If anyone out there thinks science fiction is just for boys, you are mistaken. Here is, Ashley Eckstein.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Ashley Eckstein, welcome to So Money.

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AE: Thank you so much for having me.

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FT: This is huge, my husband is a big Star Wars fan.

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AE: Cool.

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FT: So by relation, I'm also a Star Wars fan. I think my first movie was actually Return of the Jedi when I was – I'm embarrassed to say, my parents took me I think when I was three years old. Don't tell anybody. I think that was not probably good parenting on their part.

But I remember, just you know, obviously, Star Wars is a huge part of a lot of people's lives, how did you get involved in the series?

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AE: I actually kind of fell in to it. But it was a dream come true because similar to your story, I was introduced to Star Wars as a toddler. My earliest memory was actually watching it on VHS in my living room and we had this glorious, orange shag carpet and we would play Star Wars in my living room while watching it on VHS. We would pretend that because of the orange carpet, it was the desert sands of Tatooine.

I would pretend to be R2D2. We would just, we loved it, I've been a Star Wars fan since I could remember. You know, honestly, by the time I moved to LA, it's a dream of mine to be an actress and I was regularly auditioning. At that point, you know, they were already coming out with the prequels and George Lucas had said that he was done making Star Wars.

Never in a million years did I think I'd have the opportunity to be an actress in Star Wars. Until one day, I got a call from my agent saying that I had an audition to be the voice of Padme Amidala on the new Star Wars animated series.

I was so excited but unfortunately, super bummed at the same time because I had to be a voice match for Natalie Portman and my voice sounded nothing like her. My agent encouraged me to audition anyway even though I told him that I didn't think I would get the part.

Thankfully, I took his advice because they secretly were also auditioning for this super top secret, brand new character named Ahsoka Tano. When I went into the audition, sure enough they said that I sounded nothing like Natalie Portman or Padme Amidala, but they said, we think you're perfect for this new role.

Sure enough, I was able to get the part of Ahsoka Tano and you know, it changed my life forever.

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FT: So much so that it inspired you to launch Her Universe which is a fan girl fashion company and lifestyle brand. I am so impressed because first of all, breaking out in Hollywood is a feat unto itself. Then, that happens for you and then you're like, "You know what? I'm also going to try being an entrepreneur and a role model for young girls and I'm going to be a thought leader and I'm going to be a designer."

I mean, was this also part of the plan secretly for you?

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AE: No, it wasn't actually. I have self-diagnosed myself with what I call insane naiveté, because when I see a need, I just look at the end goal and I say, "Why not?" I dive in head first without thinking about all the things that it's going to take to get there.

You know, no. I had no idea what I was getting in to but really, how it happened was, I found myself, my life changed overnight. I was all of a sudden just immersed in the Star Wars universe and Star Wars is a fandom that's worldwide. All of a sudden, I found that I was a part of a community where I felt so connected to fans all over the world and as a Star Wars fan girl myself, I kind of had a selfish need.

I wanted more Star Wars T shirts made for me. When I went shopping and came up empty handed, I quickly found out that you know, Star Wars merchandise for women and girls didn't exist.

I started doing my research and I found out that I wasn't alone, that this is at the time, this is back in 2009, 45% of all Star Wars fans were women and girls and we got that number by – we got the exact attendance numbers by the top five conventions from around the world and averaged to be 45% all women and girls and at the time, 85% of all consumer purchases were being made by women.

I'm not a mathematician but I'm like, you know, these numbers are not adding up. If you make us merchandise, we will buy it. I also found in my research that women and girls were being bullied and bullied terribly for liking Star Wars because you know, society had deemed this kind of sci-fi and fantasy genre to be for the men and the boys only.

I thought, "You know what? As a Star Wars fan girl myself, this is no way to live our lives." You know, being a fan girl and especially being a Star Wars fan, it's bigger than a trend, it's a part of who you are.

Literally being a fan of these franchises, it's a descriptor, it's how you would describe yourself and you know, not being allowed to be yourself and show off a part of your personality is awful. I mean, you know, it's like hiding a part of yourself.

I felt like as the voice of this Star Wars character, I wanted to be a reflection of her, she's a very powerful Jedi. Ahsoka Tano is actually the very first female Jedi that was a lead in the Star Wars universe.

Her character was ground breaking and as a reflection of her, I kind of asked myself, "What would Ahsoka do?" Ahsoka would start a company and start making merchandise for female fans.

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FT: I understand what you're saying about the bullying. Even when I was in high school and growing up. You know, it just wasn't what girls paid attention to. If you were a good girl, if you were like following the straight and narrow, you liked dolls.

It's taken a while but our world is now realizing that different is good. It's interesting. I'm seeing a lot of high profile women in Hollywood are also wearing the hat of entrepreneur.

They're starting companies and they're starting companies outside of the Hollywood realm. I wonder if that has something to do with wanting to take more control over your financial destiny?

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AE: It definitely has everything to do with that. You know, for me, Her Universe was actually born out of rejection. You know, I was a full-time actress in LA and you know, that was my dream, that was my goal and you know, I always had an interest in fashion design. I mean, I designed my first dress with my mom when I was 10.

All of my homecoming and prom dresses I designed myself and when I would finish my homework early in class, I was always sketching in my sketch book. In high school, I had a drama teacher that told us that we had to pick, that if we wanted to be an actor that we could only be an actor. I kind of put my dream of fashion design on the side and said "Okay, well, I'm going to choose acting and I'm going to just focus all of my efforts on that."

You know, I moved to LA and made a career out of it and you know, was very fortunate to be able to be a full-time working actress. Then, I met my husband and my husband used to play baseball and when we were married for the first couple of years, I was able to keep up my acting career and just – wherever he would play, which at the time was the Saint Louis Cardinals, I would just fly back and forth.

You know, I'd fly to LA for auditions and fly to wherever he was for baseball games. Well, he ended up signing with the Toronto Blue Jays and it really took me away from LA and the commute was just getting too far to do on a regular basis.

I decided to move to Toronto with him and my agents and managers actually dropped me. They said, "If you can't be in LA, you can't make us money and therefore you're no good to us anymore."

It was a harsh kind of reality check and so I found myself in Toronto with what was a blossoming acting career with all of a sudden, you know, nothing. Except, a very powerful thing which was I was still the voice of a Star Wars character.

I was very inspired by another actress at the time, Alyssa Milano, and Alyssa was a huge sports fan and she had started her own company called Touch.

Where half of all sports fans at the time when women and girls, and they weren't making any sports merchandise for women. She started her own company where she started making everything from jerseys to T-shirts to sweaters, to cardigans to everything you can imagine for women and girls.

I was so thankful because I no longer had to buy a men's jersey to wear to the baseball games. I bought one of everything that she made. I found myself in Toronto, realizing, "Okay, I don't have to give up on my dream." I wanted to be there for my husband, I needed to be there for my husband. He had a lot of injuries at the time.

I found myself going with him to doctor's appointments and I thought, "You know what? As the voice of a Star Wars character, I have an incredible platform. What can I do with that? How can I control my own destiny and just make the most of the situation that I'm in." I decided I was inspired by Alyssa Milano and I decided to do that. I came up with the idea of Her Universe and kind of the company was born.

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FT: Tell us a little bit about what you're hearing from little girls? I'm sure some of them are writing in or emailing in?

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AE: You know, they are. I have to say, from day one, my goal with her universe was two parts. It was 50% of merchandise line but more importantly, 50% a community. Once I realized that there is a terrible problem with bullying, I thought, “Okay. I need to create a safe and positive community where fan girls can be themselves and step into the spotlight and be celebrated and rewarded for being who they are, and you know, being and showing off what they like.”

I said to fans, I said, “Look. We have a stereotype to debunk” and two, I didn’t know how we were going to do it but I said, “United we stand, divided we fall. We have a major stereotype to debunk and let’s do this together.”

I said, “I don’t care if you ever buy a single T-shirt from us, but I want you to come and join the conversation and feel comfortable with being who you are.” I was shocked with immediately, the floodgates opened and that’s when social media was really starting to just boom.

I mean, Twitter was brand new. There’s this thing called Twitter that people said would take over the world and so I used free social media to build our community and to get the word out there and I really went grass roots. I used social media and I went to conventions all over the world.

It was incredible and that’s exactly what happened. Not only did women and girls speak up but men too. Men that said you know, “I celebrate Star Wars with my daughter or with my girlfriend or with my wife or with my sister.”

I got messages from all over the world, thanking me for creating a safe environment and a bully free zone where women and girls could just be themselves. You know, when I get those messages today, I’m so grateful because that is the reason I started Her Universe. It was never for the money.

I thought, “You know what? If we build it, they will come.” But more importantly, I need to create a bully free zone and hopefully by doing that, I’ll have the money to continue to build it.

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FT: I think that it is so special that you talked about making the dresses with your mom all those years ago as a kid and maybe that was where the seed is planted. Speaking of our upbringing, I ask this of guests all the time to talk about their upbringing and their parents and how that influenced their perspective on work and money.

There was actually a recent survey that found by my partners at Chase Slate, that over half of parents say they've had a conversation about money with their kids. So, what was your most impactful experience related to money as a kid?

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AE: Well I would say it was two-part. I grew up in very much just a middle-class family. My parents, my dad worked two jobs. My mom at times worked two jobs and we lived paycheck to paycheck. There was four kids and my parents made sure we never went without and any of our extracurricular activities, they poured all of our extra money into that and we never had extra, but we always had what we needed, and they didn't hide that.

I remember one year like we had no money, all of my friends went on summer vacations and we had no money to go on a vacation but we went to the beach for the day and we didn't even have enough money to go out for lunch and my parents packed a cooler lunch and that was it. We got a one-day trip to the beach where we drove 45 minutes and packed our lunches, but it didn't matter. The fact that we were there as a family and my parents made all their extra efforts to make that happen.

And I understood how much we didn't have the money to do it but how hard they worked to just even make everything possible for us. At a very young age, I really understood the value of a dollar and then on top of that, the second I was old enough I was in middle school I started making money on acting. I didn't do a lot but in Orlando, we had the theme parks. I hosted a little show for Sea World.

They took me to Bank of America and I set up my first bank account that was mine and they really taught me what that meant to have my own account and how to read my statement and balance and deposit money. I started to pay for my own things and when I wanted to give

someone a present, I paid for it myself. If I went to the movies with my friends, I paid for that out of my own bank account and it was such a sense of pride.

I remember feeling so proud to be able to pay for myself and at such a young age in middle school to have your own account and your own bank card and pay for your own bills per say. You know I remember for my birthday one year I told my mom, I said, "I want to go to the grocery store and I want to buy my own groceries." I was a bit of an odd kid but to teach that lesson of, "Okay, I have \$20. What am I going to get at the grocery store for myself for \$20?"

And she really walked me through the grocery store and told me how much everything cost, I still remember that to this day. So my parents worked really hard to teach us the value of a dollar and how to spend it and use it wisely.

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FT: I am curious though, when you started to make the Hollywood money or your first big paycheck, what did you do with it?

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AE: Ooh, when I started making my first paychecks, I really just saved. I think as an actress for me, my career has always been a rollercoaster. I was very fortunate to be able to pay my own bills pretty quickly, but it was never consistent. So, I would make what to me was a huge amount of money but then I would go three or four months without another job and so it taught me the value to save because even though it would seem like I would make several thousand dollars, I could go several months with nothing.

There was even a period of time where I got a show that was on prime-time television and it was huge at the time but I learned very quickly the realities of Hollywood because it was cancelled and then I went six months without another job. I actually had to go on unemployment and to go from being on prime-time television to unemployment and really having to learn to save was a huge lesson.

I think the first big purchase though for me when I was able to save and know that I had enough income to last me for a while, I bought my first car which even though after starting my own company and selling it, I still have that car to this day and I still drive it around LA. I am not really a fancy car person, as long as it gets me from A to B, that's all I need. So it is a 2004 seafoam green Honda Civic and it still has a little over a 100,000 miles on it.

I still drive it all over the city because it works perfectly fine and so I was so proud of that purchase because it was the first big thing I ever purchased myself.

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FT: We haven't even gone to your book. You have a book which is *It's Your Universe*, it's called and it came out – well it's coming out. We'll let's see, I am not going to date myself. I am just going to say that it – when is this airing so I don't date myself? I think this is airing – sorry, it came out on May 8th, Disney Books, what does it feel like to be an author?

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AE: It feels surreal to be an author I have to say because writing my own book is something I said I would never do and it is not that I didn't want to. It was because I didn't feel that I had the talent to do it. I was okay with that, I thought that the most I could ever write is an essay and that was enough for me and when I was able to have a conversation with Disney about doing some books for Her Universe, it really spun from my character, Ahsoka Tano from Star Wars.

They had written a book about my character and I was able to do the audio book and so I went on a book tour with them and the book was met with a lot of success and so we were brainstorming about what we could do for the fan girl audience and somebody asked if I would write my own memoir. I said, "Well you know I don't think I have lived enough of a life to write a memoir."

"But the book if I would write if you would give me the opportunity is I would tell my story but more as an advice book and inspirational book for other fans," because I said I wouldn't be here today, I wouldn't be talking to Disney, I wouldn't even be on the So Money Podcast if it weren't

for Disney and if it weren't for Star Wars. You know the world of Disney inspired me and influenced me to make my dreams come true, to dream it and do it.

I said I would love to pay it forward and share the lessons that Disney and Star Wars taught me to another generation of dreamers and so thankfully they said yes and they said, "Don't worry about the writing the book part, we'll give you an author you could just talk with her and share your story and she'll write it for you," and so they paired me with an amazing author named Stacey Kravitz and she's written several other books.

A very accomplished writer, so talented and she helped me come up with what I realized was my obstacle, was my brick wall. I didn't know how to structure the book. I didn't know how to take everything that was in my mind and do the chapter outline and the structure and so after speaking with her for two months, she came back to me and she said, "Okay, I've been listening to you talk. Here's what you are trying to say".

And once she gave me that structure, she did give me a rough draft and it was great, but it wasn't in my voice and I realized that if this was my book, I needed to write it myself. I needed it to be in my voice. So I took the structure and I locked myself in my apartment for five days and I just started to write and that's what I did. Literally I wrote for five days straight.

I was able to come up with – eventually I got to 31,000 words, which is still a short book compared to most authors. But it was more than anything that I thought I could do and so this book is really a testament that if I could write a book, anything is possible.

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FT: Well I just think that in listening to you what I am also learning is that Ashley, you do not waste an experience, like nothing is lost on you. That even though you go in with a certain mindset or expectation around something, even if it doesn't work out you leverage that experience to get to another place in your life where you find fulfillment and happiness. Thank you for that, that's so inspiring.

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AE: Oh gosh, thank you. I say in the book, “Disney did not ask me to write this book. I asked Disney if I could” because I joke, I grew up in Orlando, Florida. My dad was a Disney cast member. He was a meat and seafood buyer for the Walt Disney World Resort and Disney is just in my DNA. I joke that if I got my DNA tested there would be a Disney chromosome and Disney doesn’t do anything small.

They do everything big, everything is over the top, everything is big and I think seeing that and growing up around that as a young girl to me, that’s kind of just my personality. I’m like, “You know it’s not just how can you do something, it’s how can you turn it into an exploding firework in the sky,” and so that’s how I look at it. If I am given a platform for something, how can I leverage it to the best of its ability?

And so definitely like I said, that’s why I wanted to write this book because it’s like Disney taught me this. I just want to pay it forward to a new generation.

[0:25:58.8]

FT: Incredible, so let’s get some So Money mad libs in before you go. The first question or first sentence is, if I won the lottery the first thing I would do is?

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AE: The first thing I would do is donate it to several different charities. There’s so many different charities that we work with between me and my husband, between whether it’s mental health awareness or donate life and I would divvy it up to several of the different charities that we work with and give it to several different people.

[0:26:34.8]

FT: That’s awesome, I was going to ask you later about your favorite charities, but you already addressed that. That’s awesome. One thing I spend on that makes my life easier or better is?

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AE: I would say travel. I travel all the time, I basically use an airplane like it's my car. So I will use my sky miles to upgrade to a more comfortable seat.

[0:27:00.7]

FT: Nice, I mean these days it's hard between the airport and the lines and security and getting on the plane and de-boarding, it takes a lot out of you. So, whatever you could do to make that experience more joyful it's worth good money.

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AE: Yes it is.

[0:27:18.8]

FT: How about this, one thing I wish I had learned about money growing up is?

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AE: Is that it doesn't last forever. I think I was taught that but you know, when I got older and met my husband as well, it's a good reminder that some people think that when you get this big check, it's just always going to be there and money goes fast. So you have to use it wisely and realize that it has to last you a long time. So you know that money does have an expiration date if you keep spending it.

[0:27:55.2]

FT: Oh yeah, you don't want to end the month – what is the expression? “More days in the month than you have cash.”

[0:28:06.0]

AE: Yes.

[0:28:08.0]

FT: And last but not the least, I'm Ashley Eckstein, I'm So Money because?

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AE: I'm Ashley Eckstein and I am So Money because I feel like I am rich with dreams. This world and the Star Wars Universe and the Disney Universe has allowed me to go out there and help make dreams come true. So, if I had a dollar for every dream that I was able to be a part of, thanks to the world that I live in, I feel like I am a very rich person because of dreams coming true.

[0:28:40.8]

FT: I think that may be my best answer to that question. That was really on point and so true. Ashley Eckstein, thank you so much for joining me on So Money and sharing all of that with us. We really appreciate you.

[0:28:54.9]

AE: Oh, thank you so much for having me.

[END]