

EPISODE 906

“SR: He would have me balance checkbooks, first his own and then when I was old enough to get a checking account in my own checkbooks and this is pre Internet pre all of this, right? And I remember this lesson that he would say to me, he would say, “Samantha, if you get to the end and you're one cent off and balancing this, don't excuse that. Don't say that. That's close enough.”

[INTRODUCTION]

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SM: Do you have any fond memories of summer camp growing up? I went to Worcester Academy Camp for about four weeks one summer. It was a day camp, and it was really expensive. My parents put all their pennies together to send me, and it was the only summer I got to do it because it was just that expensive. We couldn't keep doing it. But I remember it was a formative four weeks. I packed in a lot of punch in those four weeks. I remember there was violin lessons, soccer.

It was so hot. That's one thing I really, really remember that it got so hot one day I was in middle of a violin lesson in this un-air conditioned addict and I was, you know, holding my violin in my pose. I pretty much passed out to the point where they — I passed out. They called my parents and my mom had to come pick me up. That may have been my last day Worcester Academy Camp. Anyone who's from the Worcester area, you probably know the campus. I collapsed on that campus. That was my camp experience.

All this to say that we have a special guest on today who is the founder of a very, very unique and important camp for young girls called Curious Jane. Curious Jane is probably the camp that I would have loved to have gone to when I was a young girl. By the way, welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi.

In 2009 Samantha Razook was finishing a program in industrial design and searching for something for her young daughters to do while she was getting that “real job” and meanwhile,

the economy was struggling, it was the recession. Samantha decided to start a camp, initially just for her daughters and their friends. But that first camp idea concept turned into a business that has grown now into Curious Jane, a summer camp and print magazine that has projects revolving around science, engineering, and design.

In 2014 Curious Jane became the recipient of the Chases' Mission Small Business Grant, which awards \$250,000 unrestricted to 12 businesses from, get this, an applicant pool of over 35,000. Today Curious Jane, as I mentioned, is a camp, but it's also classes. It's workshops year round. It also collaborates with like minded organizations to share content with girls nationwide. Its partnered with Confidence Code for Girls, Amy Poehler's Smart Girls and Live Girl Inc.

Samantha opens up about the beginnings of the business, the struggles as well as her divorce and how she and her husband worked on a so called collaborative divorce how it was not only affordable, but kept them sane. So grateful for her storytelling, for her openness and her inspiration.

Here's Samantha Razook.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Samantha Razook, welcome to So Money.

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SR: Hi. Thank you so much for having me.

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FT: I'm so excited to have you on the show. We had the great fortune of sitting next to one another at a small dinner that was put together by a lovely team of women, a duo that, well, they will be on the podcast later this month. But it was basically a little dinner bringing together

female entrepreneurs. And a lot of us are moms. and so what was the name of the group?
Hustle and?

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SR: Oh, yes. Oh, I was thinking of like the Hustle Dinner Party. I can't put my finger on it.

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FT: Yeah, hustle way.

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SR: We do need to give them a shout. They're wonderful!

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FT: Integrated Hustle.

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SR: Integrated Hustle. Yes, thank you.

[0:04:43.5]

FT: Yeah, everybody. I think they might have a website? But Integrated Hustle. It's a dinner series and I — it was sort of like a last minute thing, and I was like, "Absolutely." Like, I feel like, I don't know when you got the invitation, but I got it like that afternoon.

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SR: You know, I came via a friend, and so I didn't really know anything about it. And I felt like I had walked into a magical evening as of deliciousness, intimacy, smarts. It was great.

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FT: Yeah. And I had no idea who I was going to meet, I didn't know what was — I knew the restaurant. I thought, "Well, I want to go to a La Vara. That's a really hot restaurant in Brooklyn." But I, you know, the fact that I got the invitation, you know, basically at the last minute was kind of my kind of my pace right now in my life.

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SR: I understand.

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FT: And you are also a very busy, busy person. You're running a company called Curious Jane, which I want to learn more about and you're also a mom of two girls who are in there like formative years, right? Your girls are, they're growing —

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SR: They're teenagers, yeah.

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FT: Teenagers? Okay, so let's maybe start with Curious Jane, which is your business that you started? It's been what now five?

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SR: So it's actually 11 years.

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FT: 11 years! Okay, during the recession, that's right, you started it.

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SR: Right. So there's two components of it. One started about five years ago, but yes, 11 years.

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FT: 11 years ago. Who starts a business during a recession?

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SR: Oh, I had a fire under my tush. It wasn't something that I was giving a lot of thought to. So really, because of the recession, my husband at the time, we're now divorced. I'm very fond of him, but my husband at the time we had two young children, he had lost a couple of business contracts and we needed to be pretty creative about how we continued raising our children in Brooklyn. I was getting my masters at the time, so I was both working and in school. So that was the fire. It was, you know, we have to make this work. There's not really a choice to it. It wasn't a premeditated thing, yes.

There's actually a number of advantages to starting a business in a recession and a couple — I think this is important to share. A couple of them are that, you know, if the business thrives then and there's certain components of our business that we, that I, you know, cut off that didn't actually grow. But if a business thrives then, it's a good proof of concept and then also, you can find your own costs are lower. You can find really smart, talented people that fit your budget at that time, yeah.

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FT: And guess what? If you can make it during the recession, you are now recession-proof.

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SR: Yes, exactly.

[0:07:31.5]

FT: And recessions are a bit cyclical. So you're gonna be ready for the next one like nobody else.

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SR: Yes.

[0:07:37.5]

FT: So it started in the recession 10 years ago, Curious Jane, as a summer camp for girls. This was a space that you wanted to create for girls to be creative and inventive. You — it's different because you might go to camp, a lot of camps like you go and you swim and you make, you know, like bead necklaces. And this is a little difference. So tell us how this is different and why you wanted to make this special space for girls.

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SR: Sure. So, Curious Jane did start as a camp. We continue to run camps um, today working with about 1200 girls over the course of the summer and I was getting my master's in Industrial Design at the time. We were here in Brooklyn, I was pursuing my Masters at Pratt, and I really enjoyed working with my hands. So that is what had led me to do my Masters and Industrial Design, and as a girl I had gone to sleep away camps. I have spent my whole summers in sleep away camps in the Southeast. I was a pretty introverted child, so I didn't really connect with people.

So it wasn't that camp itself had some strong formative place in my background, though I do find that a number of staff who worked with us have had these amazing camp experiences, and that's certainly something that we hope to provide to our campers and our staff. But it was more about I had, you know, these two young girls at that time they were ages three and six, my

husband ran residential academic camps for teens. So, in my own way, I had helped out a lot with that as we were growing our family in a new city on, and that was familiar to me and I — the summer came, I needed something for my daughters to do. I actually started a completely different type of camp. It was a teen girls camp held at a college, residential, because that was a space I was more familiar in, but I needed my girls to do something at the same time.

So I started Curious Jane, and I think it was just a very natural outgrowth. Yes, different from a sleep away camp or a typical outdoors day camp. It's a classroom-based program and girls sign up for a week, two weeks, three weeks, whatever suits their schedule, and they're taking classes that revolve around science, engineering, and design. So they could take a week of "Spy Science", a week of "Wired 101" and a week of, you know, "Design Your Room", and those types of projects in that approach, I think, just felt very natural to me that something that I would have loved as a girl, as a young girl is something that I wanted for my own girls and that's where it came from.

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FT: For girls who like to make things.

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SR: Exactly.

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FT: How accessible is this camp? I guess that's a very basic question, but worth answering because I'm sure there are people on this podcast listening going, "How can I enroll my daughter? Is this nationwide? Are you rolling out camps all over the country?"

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SR: Sure. So, I can talk about accessibility on a couple different levels. I mean, you know, camps themselves are not a high profit margin businesses. So they are, unfortunately is, you

know, it's a tuition-based program. Right now, our largest programs are in New York City. We have some programs in San Francisco in the East Bay and then also in Denver. And, we've been in other states before, and we're continuing to look at ways that we can grow our programs. So accessibility being geographically. Right now, the bulk of our programs are in New York City. For people who want to access our projects, and I think we can talk about this a little bit later as well. So five years ago, we did launch an imprint magazine. It's ad free and that is a way that we share our projects with a a wider audience for girls, families, Girl Scout troops. You know, schools and classrooms to make the projects either at home or with friends or at school.

So we try to make our projects accessible in that way and then something that we're doing currently, which, you know, I invite anyone who hears this to certainly investigate and be in touch with, is working with other organizations and a larger way. So, for example, we worked with the large nonprofit here in Brooklyn as a way to bring our projects and programs to a new audience in new communities. So if there's a way that we can share both our staff training, our curriculum in our projects and bring it to a new group of students, we actually find that both boys and girls really enjoy the projects that we offer. Then I'm my role in the business right now is really looking or those large scale growth opportunities and into working with new audiences.

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FT: Well, I remember reading that in 2014 Curious Jane got the Chase Mission Small Business grant, which is something like \$250,000 that give it to 12. Business is the applicant pool was over 35,000. Take me to that competition. What do you think it was about Curious Jane and the presentation? Or however it was that you applied that you think really differentiated you because that's that seems — the odds of that just, just someone might look at that and go, “I’m not even gonna bother applying. That’s 35,000 competitors.”

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SR: So it was a pretty short application process. So, yes, it's the — it was the Chase Mission Small business Grant. Um, we are a for profit company. So the word grant, it was four for profit companies, but it was an unrestricted quarter of \$1,000,000 given to 12 recipients. At the — program itself is no longer in place, but we certainly appreciate and value that it was there. We

had actually applied the year before and, hadn't received it clearly. And we thought, Well, throw her hat into the ring again. I don't think that we knew the size of the applicant pool and you're not privy to the other applications. I think there were five questions and the answers were quite limited. Word wise. I think the things that differentiated us, um, was that it is a positive social impact business. Um, so we're a for profit company capable of scaling and with a very socially positive end product and end experience. And that was something that Chase wanted to support. And I will use this chance very really right now to say that we have received a lot of support from Chase in a variety of ways, and I'm appreciative of that. It's a small business.

I think that that was the standout. And then, in addition to all of the students, that scaling what we do could serve, we also employ. So, for example, this summer we will employ about 120 young women to work for our programs on, and that's a pretty significant opportunity for someone who is a lot of times. It's the first time job we take the role of having them from the interview process to the training to what their experiences like working with us, we take that very seriously in that role that we can have in a person's life, who's between those ages of you know, 16 and 24 so I think that in that way we also stood out as an applicant, both what we serve for the students and then how we serve a community of young people who were interfering the workforce.

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FT: I'd love to shift gears now a little bit, Sam Samantha, to talk more about, like the behind the scenes of you. As you know, a woman, a mother, a small startup entrepreneur and some money questions, too. And you mentioned Chase. They sponsor this podcast totally coincidental that you are recipient of their grant. But this is actually a question that we're asking gas this month in partnership with Chase as our sponsor, and it concerns financial planning. So maybe to kick off some of our questions around money when it comes to financial planning, what's one thing that for you equals financial security, like something that you do, or a system that you have that gives you that feeling of security?

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SR: Right. So currently, and this is a pretty recent development, having a cushion of the money that I know is there, this is both personally and professionally, so that it is there is a security, and that is something that I hadn't had for a very long time, very transparently. So I started Curious Jane with \$500 that I could open a bank account with. Those the first five years of growing that company and then also growing our family we were financially in quite dire straits and it took me a while to come around too, because it felt so emotional to address the money and the numbers portion of it.

Also, during that time, about five years in, I was also getting a divorce. So I am a single person household and when I had the opportunity to start saving or putting aside chunks of money, if money came in, I did not look at it. I wasn't going to, you know, deny myself or my children or my staff important things. But if money came in, I put it aside, and the security of that being there is significant to me.

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FT: And how did you decide how much to put aside? Was it just, what did you commit to like a goal? Like, "I want to save this much money because that's what makes me feel secure."

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SR: Right? So on the personal side, there were a couple of — there were two separate sort of chunks of money that came in and because I was able to sustain my lifestyle the way that I was currently operating, I didn't, I really wanted to not use that to change my lifestyle. Like I'm doing well, I have a small apartment that I enjoyed very much, I've sort of situated myself in a way that is in no way luxurious, but it's it's very enjoyable and it and it suits everything that I need. So I didn't want to use that money to, you know, make a change in the way that I lived.

And then for on the professional side, having mentors and excellent board members and also just often asking questions of people about how to sort of look at and manage those numbers I have become very comfortable with it. There it is more about knowing the the seasonality of the cash flow so that I know when revenue needs to be put aside and then what costs it will go

against. I mean, a pretty basic model. But just having that familiarity with what our cash flow is, helps me plan ahead.

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FT: You've been very open to talking about your divorce and I think I read an article about, in Authority Magazine, just about, you know, five things you need to know to survive and thrive after a divorce. It was an interview with you and in that article you talk about collaborative divorce and, you know, I'm curious from maybe just even, because this is a money podcast we can talk about it from that perspective.

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SR: Sure.

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FT: Divorce can be expensive and I know that you guys were very conscious, you and your ex husband about how you proceeded with the divorce. There could have been a scenario where there were lawyers involved and it got really, you know, sort of strenuous, but also expensive. How did you navigate that? And given that, like, you know, perhaps you didn't want this to become another financial burden, what were those conversations like and what would be your recommendation for people listening who are like, you know, "How did she do it?"

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SR: Sure. So and I will speak to the money portion of it. But our decision around going the route of a collaborative divorce I think he and I, which doesn't mean that it isn't acrimonious or that it was a joint decision, which it can be. But those pieces can still be there. I think we felt, you know, we are two people who chose to enter into this marriage and family, and that was our responsibility and now it is our responsibility and we're both willing to take that responsibility together to restructure our family and take ourselves out of this.

And one thing I do often say is, you know, certainly getting married to someone else, very intimate. Having family with them, very intimate. Going through a divorce with someone in this way is a very intimate experience and the way that you have to trust the other person. Specifically to the money portion of it, pursuing a collaborative divorce is much less expensive. You have a single lawyer who represents the wishes of the two of you and then basically guides and translates that into the legal structure that needs to surround the divorce.

So it was my husband and I the way mechanically that we did it is we chose kind of a lunch period once a week where we would meet and we would go through some of the aspects of the divorce, and that was extremely hard work. We limited ourselves to 45 minutes, you know, in a nice public place and we kept notes and all of that work on our end that was between the two of us, it was certainly beneficial for our family. But then on the money side of it also kept, you know, when we were paying for professionals, which we did when we needed and then also continued to see a couples therapist as well then that — our costs overall were very low.

The other piece of advice and she mentioned that, that I would that I would share with listeners is not everything in a divorce has to be tackled all at once and I think that this stress of that can actually have ramifications on the money end, the cost of it. So it's such high stress you're paying for so much time to figure out something, but you can pace it out. You know, you can talk about property. You can talk about what the schedule will be with the children, and you can spread those things out a little bit and it helps give it a little bit of breathing room and then actually costs less.

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FT: And then there's the aftermath of divorce with when you're co-parenting like how to communicate around the money then What has been some of the learning there?

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SR: Well, I would say that we go about it in a pretty unconventional way. I keep the books. I keep the books in my job in my work, and I keep the books for our family. At This point I'm six years out. I think the first few years were pretty rough as far as communicating. Everything is

50/50, right? So we don't have — there's not alimony and then the joint expenses for the children are shared 50/50.

So that's my very specific perspective that we're coming into it with, and then at this point, you know, he trusts me to keep the books. We kind of review them. I just use Quicken. We review them maybe on a quarterly basis. "Oh, this really wasn't a joint thing. Oh, I'm going to take care of the health expense, you know, the health insurance," and we go over in that way. I would say that at this point, without a formal contribution structure into the joint account, it amazes me that at the end of the year, when we sort of do our tally and even up, that we're within a couple thousand dollars of each other as far as our expenses.

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FT: Wow.

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SR: Yeah. So it's just a way that we've fallen into. I would say that that's probably not the norm.

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FT: Yeah, unfortunately. it I can describe.

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SR: But that's the one I can describe.

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FT: Yeah, no, you — the way that you're both handling it is so admirable and such an aspiration. I think that, unfortunately, you often hear too many of the opposite stories, which is that one parent feels more on the hook or one parent is not doing their share their fair share, and it becomes battle. You sound really like you have your head on straight when it comes to money

just in general hearing you talk about building this business with a lot of, I mean, starting with \$500 to where it is now is really impressive. Hearing you have the — hearing you talk about how you're managing money in your life as a single mom, but also, with your ex husband and so I'm wondering are these tools and strategies that you feel like were seeded in you as a kid, or that you can just learned on the go as an adult because you had to?

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SR: Right. Well, they were certainly attempted to be planted in me as a child. I remember my father, he would have me balance checkbooks, first his own and then when I was old enough to get a checking account, my own checkbooks and this is pre Internet pre all of this, right? And I remember this lesson that he would say to me, he would say, “Samantha, if you get to the end and you're one cent off in balancing this don't excuse that. Don't say that that's close enough. Because you could be \$10,000 off in one direction and \$9999.99 off in another direction and it's only gonna be one cent.

So I have these certain things that were impressed upon me all during my growing up, and I was terrible with money. I was afraid of it. I didn't want to look at a bank account. I wasn't really sure how things work that felt very stressful to me and then at a certain point in my life, which is in the more recent years and it's certainly when I was going through my divorce I really had to take a long, hard look at it. And in one way, you know, numbers are very black and white, but they also tell this story and there's a lot of different ways that people read stories. Some people read them through pictures or words or descriptions, and some people see a story, for example, a story of a business or a story of a family in those numbers.

So I think for me, sort of allowing the, for lack of a better word, sort of the emotional part or the story part to be part of the numbers and to let those numbers guide me, warn me, excite me that that has helped my relationship with numbers and money.

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FT: How did you take your bank account from \$500 to the next level? What was the first “So Money moment” that you experienced with Curious Jane?

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SR: Yes. Oh, that's a great question. So the first So Money moment was in our second summer. So the first summer, the way you quantify, you know, camp is in camper weeks. So the very first summer I was working from home, I was working another job with my with my husband, opened the bank account, rented a van, drove the girls around, taught the classes. So that — there weren't really a lot of costs associated with it and certainly there was the other income of my husband at the time. And that year I believe that we ran, I ran 72 weeks of camp.

Then by the second year, and this would be the so money moment, I think it was almost 600 camper weeks that I ran at Curious Jane. So those first girls, they were my first audience and the word of mouth marketing spread extremely well. It actually started that teen residential program as a way to make money, it had a completely different name and then what families responded to was Curious Jane, and it was a big signal by that second year, my So Money moment that said, “Okay, this is the thing that you should put your time and energy and to and to cultivate and grow.”

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FT: So you gave yourself — did you give yourself like a grace period? Because I think sometimes startup entrepreneurs, they're so hard on themselves. Like they want — they see all these headlines like “Overnight,” — They think that the success is overnight, but it's always so much longer.

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SR: Oh, I'm still fighting the hard fight and I'm 11 years in, right? Did I give myself a grace period? Well, at that time again, you know, very fortunately, I wasn't relying on just myself for an income. So that certainly, you know, I had a husband and he was making money. So that certainly provided for a grace period. I think that I wasn't — I probably wasn't so hard on myself because I I didn't even necessarily see that I was trying to start this business until after I had

started it, right? I desperately needed something for my girls to do during the summer and It was something that was fun and exciting for me.

It was a lot of hard work. I mean, I certainly look back at those years, and I even still have almost a physical reaction of stress and panic around what the work was. But I, you know, I think also, there was so much else going on in my life. My husband was in and out of the hospital so much, I couldn't even necessarily give my time and attention to, "Okay, is there a grace period?" By the third year I believe that I started paying myself a salary and that was a relief to me and yes, as far as being a little bit gentler on myself I think that that was the turning point.

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FT: And I've got to ask your daughters and their reaction to all of this. I mean, sometimes our kids are our biggest critics, whether we like it or not. But what have been what has been the best feedback from them as they are that your target audience?

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SR: Yeah, well, they both went to camp, of course. So my two daughters, my younger one just finished ninth grade. She's 15. My older one just is actually graduating from college. I mean, from high school on Monday. She's 17 and she is the one — she works at camp. The younger one is Libby. The older one is Eleanor. Eleanor works at camp every summer and is a counselor there, and I hope that I don't put pressure on either of them to participate in a certain way. But my, and I think it's pretty natural for a child to not want to be part of the parents' business or organization or whatever it is.

But what Eleanor said to me, because at this point, I really don't have contact with the campers. My role in the business is different. I barely have contact with the staff. I focus on growing the magazine and the media portion of it, and she said to me and then a young woman, actually, who I hired to be my replacement, who started with us when she was 14 as a CIT and Eleanor said to the two of us, she said, "You know, you do all of this work all year round to prepare for these programs, and it's a lot of work and it's a lot of stress and then because you're

not at camp, you don't necessarily see the outcome,” and she said, “Camp is, it's still magical. It's still a wonderful place that all of these fantastic things are happening for the staff and for the girls who attend,” and that was a very lovely thing to hear, and especially from my daughter.

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FT: It's so lovely to hear about a business that isn't necessarily an app or, like, you know, just another tech something or other that is actually driven by community and engagement and education and experience that is scaling and that is being really well received. And, you know, Camp 2.0 for girls. I love it.

Samantha Razook, thank you so much for joining us and happy summer. Happy summer!

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SR: Thanks you very much. Thank you. You too.

[END]