

EPISODE 1343

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FT: So Money is brought to you by CNET, the site that shows how to navigate change all around us. So Money episode 1343, becoming the sole breadwinner in the pandemic, with Lee Bonvissuto, Founder of Present Voices.

*“**LB:** As for so many people, so scary at the beginning, right? We had no idea what was happening. We were in New York City and Brooklyn. We had been in the same apartment for over 15 years. And in the lead up to the pandemic, we actually lost that apartment. We had rats eat through the walls. And so we were already in real disarray. And in this moment, I have my own business. My partner, he was going to a hospital all day. And so it was a very stressful moment where he was in one of the hardest hit hospitals and being pushed to the front lines as an administrator. And so we made a very challenging decision very early on in the pandemic.”*

[INTRO]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. Today, we're going to hear about the behind the scenes of one household, where the couple decided to go from two-income streams to one. Who was going to be the stay-at-home parent? Dad. Lee Bonvissuto is our guest today. She is an entrepreneur and Founder of Present Voices, where she helps people access and articulate their best ideas in their most important moments through communication coaching, consulting, and community.

In our conversation, Lee and I talked about her business helping people harness, in many cases, their anxiety to communicate more effectively and to articulate their value. Also, she speaks candidly about the decisions that she and her partner made in the pandemic to reorient the economics within their marriage, to have her husband step away from his career and become the primary caregiver to their daughter. How was that decision made? How did it work out? How is it continuing to work out?

Fun fact about Lee, she was raised in the theater. Her father was a mime. Fast forward to today, she is a communications consultant. So that's got to be an interesting story, and she takes us to her childhood and some of the money memories that she has growing up in an artist community. So much to discuss with our fabulous guest. Here's Lee Bonvissuto.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Lee Bonvissuto, welcome to So Money. It's a pleasure to officially connect.

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LB: I'm so happy to be here with you, Farnoosh. Thank you for having me.

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FT: I'm so thrilled because once in a while, you have a guest on this show where you're privileged in that you can talk about a number of relevant topics. You are an entrepreneur in your own right, and we want to talk about all of the talents that you're bringing into the world, helping your clients become more effective communicators and explainers of their value, which is something we definitely want to dive into on the show and how it can help us in our careers. Talking about our value, our worth is something that is an ongoing challenge.

In addition to that though, Lee, you mentioned as we were planning for this episode how you have personally gone through some transitions during the pandemic, which are economic and family-oriented, where, like many families, I think you had to sort of reorient the dynamic. You went from dual-income to a single-income stream because you have constraints at home. So I want to explore that with you because I know that's something that you have done. I want to know how you made the decision and how it's working out. You are the sole breadwinner now in your marriage.

Then you were also raised by artists, which you include in your bio. So I know this is something significant and impactful in your life, and wondering if we could go there too and talk about how that has helped or hindered your own financial independence and narrative. So first, just welcome, and thank you for coming on and exploring all this with us.

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LB: Yes, very happy to talk about this all. Thank you.

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FT: So where should we start? I wonder if maybe it would make sense to maybe talk a little bit about the behind the scenes and how life has been for you. I often have been asking guests, if I haven't seen or talked to you in a couple years, like what's going on. How has life been? You have had quite a transition becoming the sole breadwinner. Maybe take us back to those days, early days in the pandemic and what you and your partner were grappling with.

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LB: Absolutely. As we're coming up on this two-year milestone, we're all really digesting the past two years, right, and feeling how momentous this has been. It was, as for so many people, so scary at the beginning, right? We had no idea what was happening. We were in New York City and Brooklyn. We had been in the same apartment for over 15 years. In the lead up to the pandemic, we actually lost that apartment. We had rats eat through the walls. We had bedbugs. We were given a temporary apartment. So we were already in real disarray.

In this moment, I have my own business, where I happen to help people communicate, and I specialize in virtual communication. At the same time, my husband, my partner, he was going to a hospital all day. So it was a very stressful moment, where he was in one of the hardest hit hospitals and being pushed to the frontlines as an administrator. So we made a very challenging decision very early on in the pandemic to really choose my career. We were both making the same amount at that time. Looking at my career and how I help people with virtual communication, we took a bet, and it paid off in that my business has really grown a lot in the last two years.

We also had to leave that apartment. The problems continued. We actually lost power mid-May, and that was just a few months after things started, right after Tim left his job. We put all of our belongings into storage, and we walked away with our toddler. Our toddler who we were so afraid at that moment to even go out on the streets of Brooklyn because we didn't know. Our supers were both in the hospital with COVID, and so we couldn't even have them in to fix the massive problems. It was this incredibly scary and confusing time, as it was for so many people.

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FT: Wow, wow. I mean, nothing like that to test you. I love what I heard, what you said that you took a bet on your career. I want to highlight that because I find that often in the pandemic, especially, it was not that. That was not the case, where it was like, "Well, you're the woman, and you're better at caregiving. So we're just going to have you be the one who takes a backseat professionally." The negotiation doesn't always go the way that I think I'm hearing you and your husband taking it. Did you think about that? Did you think about how maybe you were unique in that a little bit?

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LB: Absolutely. Of course, we saw so many women and femmes lose their careers during this pandemic period. We've seen horrifying statistics about this. I know that we are the exception, and I know that I'm an exception in having such a supportive partner who has taken on all of the caretaking duties. He has spent every minute with our kid over the past two years, until she started school just a few months ago. It is significant.

I have to mention that at the time of making this decision, nearly everyone in our life told us not to do this, that it would be too much of a risk that you can't depend on a business owner or a small business to get you through the next few years, which could be incredibly volatile. I'm very grateful that we made the choice that we did. We also have never been constrained by gender norms in our relationship, and that has only been further grown over the past two years. But it has been an amazing real privilege to have this support and to be able to continue to grow my business and to do the work that I love so much.

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FT: Wow. I mean, how are you thinking about the next few years? Do you think your husband will – Has he really embraced this to the point where he's like, “This is what I want to do,” even as COVID dissipates. Or I don't even know how we can characterize. How do we call like – It's not like it's not over, right? It's just we're learning to live with it, I guess. How has he been reevaluating his own ambitions and professional goals?

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LB: Yes. Farnoosh, we are one of the many families who has an unvaccinated kid. She is pushing four and a half. She's going to be five soon. We can't wait for that moment. But for us, the pandemic is not over. It has not ended. For me, I have a mother who's also severely immunocompromised. So we are every day seeing the importance of keeping her safe. At each moment, when my partner husband has thought about reentering the workforce, we've had her home with an exposure or a cold or something else. But he has many passions, so definitely looking in that direction. Again, we have a tremendous privilege in being able to support ourselves on a one-income family at this moment, which a lot of families don't have that choice.

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FT: Right. But, gosh, you must have been scared because it's not fun to go into something like this and as you describe it not having the support of family and a lot of pessimism around you. How did you work through that, as I'm sure it was a stressful time? Stressful in any condition, saying, “Okay, I'm going to like try to build my business,” and then, of course, in a pandemic. But, again, you said it was an interesting niche that you were in that allowed for growth.

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LB: I'm so lucky, really, that my work speaks to me so profoundly, and that it speaks to others too. Every day, I hear from people who are struggling to articulate themselves in important moments and how much that makes them doubt themselves. So my work is reinforcing, and I struggle with this too. It's why I do this work. I've had a lifelong struggle with being able to articulate myself and important moments. So that's really what has kept me going is speaking to

people every day and seeing the impact, seeing them feel better and feeling relief for the first time for many people. It keeps me going, and it really hooks me into the importance of this work and more broadly changing the way that we communicate at work so that we're really being led by and listening to more types of voices.

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FT: Well, this transitions as well to talking a little bit more about Present Voices. This is your company. It's so fascinating. You combine neuropsychology and theater direction. These are your two loves. How is neuropsychology? I can see where the theater comes into play. But how is the neuropsychology an element in all of this?

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LB: Well, just by happenstance of being an artist, and I spent my 20s directing theater, and I love directing theater. I was really raised in the theater. I've always loved helping people tell stories on all kinds of stages in the back rooms of bars and the deep parts of Brooklyn. But it doesn't pay the bills. Unfortunately, a lot of artists are not supported in our society. So I spent my entire 20s for 13 years as the personal assistant and main employee of a neuropsychologist. I ran his practice, I helped him write his neuropsychological reports, and I did extensive research for him on trauma and anxiety, executive function and attention. All while the same time for me, I was very confident doing theater and really in the role itself. But the moment I had to talk about myself, the moment I had to be interviewed or really promote it, it was like my personality shut down. All of my old feelings about anxiety and speaking up would resurface in those moments.

So the neuropsychological aspect is really important because a lot of times, anxiety can be pathologized for us. Impostor syndrome can be pathologized, as Ruchika Tulshyan talked about so well on your podcast a few weeks ago. So we really have to take the reins back. We have to help ourselves feel more powerful and more in control. Understanding the neuropsychology behind it can be really enlightening for people. A lot of the people that I support feel like there's something wrong with them, that there must be something that if they could just work harder than their articulation would work, if they can just think more deeply, then they'll be able to

articulate their ideas. I often find it's the opposite. That we're working too hard at communication.

That really is the foundation of this work, a lot of my own understanding of neuropsychology. Frankly, when I first started to do this work on myself 10 years ago, and I was very alone in that, I used neuropsychological understanding and exposure therapy and how could I really immerse myself in the sensations I was feeling, the sensations I feel right now appearing on your podcast? How can I make myself less afraid of them? How –

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FT: Are you afraid right now?

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LB: I have to say most people really struggle with this, and I find that almost everyone does. Also, it's the same physiological sensations that me, I experienced as anxiety. Other people are going to experience as adrenaline. So, absolutely, we feel these sensations. The key is to not feel afraid of them, to recognize them for what they are, to understand why they happen, which is an incredibly natural human sensation. Then to put very tangible, practical, personalized tools into place that help you feel in control. It's really the combination of neuropsychology with the storytelling and the larger parts of acting, training, and understanding the way that story works that have come together in this work for me and for the people I support.

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FT: I love that. Can you tell me a little bit about these tools? I like to drive it home for the listeners. So I think what you said about the pathology, understanding maybe these stories that we have inherited from the external world, and we have attached them to our own sense of self-worth, we need to dismantle that, and that is foundational. So then perhaps the next step is to understand what are these tools that we can latch on to. I'm sure they're different for everybody. But what seems to work when you're in the context of work and a professional setting?

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LB: Absolutely. I really want a shout out to Christina Blacken, who talks about narrative intelligence. Christina's work gets deep into understanding stories and the way that they attach themselves to our bones. My work comes in more on how can we make this tangibly more comfortable. A lot of times at work, people are being given feedback that is intangible, that is not practical, of people wanting them to have more confidence or more executive presence. These terms that feel very outside of ourselves. I believe firmly that confidence only comes when we feel comfortable, when we can find comfort within ourselves so that we can actually feel safe to articulate our ideas.

That comfort is not available to everyone in every setting. For myself as a white person, it is definitely more available to me than to others. So I really believe in transforming the anxiety into attention. I believe transforming the distractions we all feel everyday into presence is the way that we do this. We cannot think our way out of the anxiety. For me, I have anxiety that ranges from physiological sensations, all the way to racing thoughts and emotional shutdown that a lot of my clients experience. If I try to think my way out of that, I'm going to end up back in that anxiety loop. So instead, we begin with very physical, tangible, quite technical tools, and these are not habitual.

A lot of times, people say, "Well, when does it become habitual?" Really, it is our natural human tendencies that are habitual. It's the way that we're socialized as communicators that can become habitual. I find that the unconscious behaviors can lead to unconscious thinking and unconscious communication. So by taking our consciousness back, by making tangible physical choices in the moment, we're actually engendering more conscious communication through conscious thought. One of the big examples I'd love to give is leaning back. This is one of my favorite simple tools, and this is not just new to the pandemic. I used to joke that I would walk through hallways in the office.

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FT: Wait, wait, wait. You're telling me I shouldn't lean in.

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LB: You know. I mean, I really believe that –

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FT: I'm joking.

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LB: That's a huge disservice by telling us to lean in. By us, I'm talking to women and non-binary femmes. I'm also including men in that too. But when we lean in, we are actually constricting our physical comfort. We are moving our presence to other people. We are more often to absorb over index facial expressions from others, and we are much less likely to feel centered and to be able to listen to our own perspective. So just by leaning back, we are going to build more hormonal confidence. But the biggest benefit is also that we are changing our habitual behavior and forcing ourselves into the present moment. From there, we can make different choices.

Just as an example, that is how we can start to change the very habits that are ingrained to give us a bit more presence, a bit more power, and a bit more agency in the midst of anxiety, which works so hard to take away our ability to make choices.

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FT: Oh, my gosh. I'm writing all of this down because what you have essentially done for me is make concrete the thing that I've always suspected in my head and have a word for it. When I get confident in moments of anxiety, which I feel many times in my career as somebody who has to constantly performing, meeting really powerful people, in the presence of greatness all the time. I'm anxious interviewing people because you are bringing such a wealth of knowledge. I'm here to learn, and I can feel like sometimes I stumble or I'm not asking the right questions. But you have said something. You said zoom out or lean out. But it is true, and I have caught myself doing that. I didn't know that I was doing it, but I do that. I tend to. It's almost like it relaxes me, and it gives me perspective.

When you feel like there's so much chaos in front of you, which can translate into anxiety in your bone, in your brain, there's something about, as they say, like take a step back. Is that what we

mean when we say take a step back? Because, one, it calms you but also provides you with the entirety of the context of what is going on. Sometimes, I find that that makes me laugh. Like when I look at them, like is this really it? I've been so hyper focused on something minute. But when you zoom out, you put it in the context of the world, and you go, "That's silly. What is even that?" I mean, that's been my – I can now piece together that journey for myself, just in what you said in these like few minutes. You're brilliant.

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LB: I am not brilliant, Farnoosh. None of this is new, first of all. This is all rooted in the science of embodied cognition, which has been studied extensively by social scientists like Amy Cuddy and John Neffinger and Matthew Kohut. It is definitely true that we experience this very internalized focus when we approach public speaking. I want to thank you for even admitting that anxiety because a lot of people don't, and that is one of the biggest barriers to more equity and inclusion at work. We can get into that a bit later. But it's really important to decentralize ourselves when we are public speaking. By public speaking, I do not just mean public speaking. I mean, every moment of communication that is important to us in our everyday professional lives.

But we all have a natural tendency to center ourselves and to become hyper focused, and that's a trauma response. It's hyper vigilance. So we become very much the center of our own focus, and that can be detrimental to our anxiety, and it can really be centering our attention in the wrong place. So just by zooming out, we can position ourselves where we need to be. I love to expose the process behind my preparation. I'm a big believer that we need to be working less hard and preparing less and really being more efficient in the way that we use our time. But today, I'll tell you, I prepared really one thing, and that was my perspective. If I were to come here, Farnoosh, and want to make a great impression or want to prove my work, it just doesn't work. It centers myself, and it makes me feel very anxious.

So the preparation I did today was thinking, "Who am I speaking to?" I don't know that you have anxiety. So I thought through to a listener, who might hear this and think, "Oh, maybe there's not something wrong with me. Maybe I am human. Maybe my voice feels out of sync because of uncomfortable situations where I don't feel safe." If I can speak to that person, wow, it helps me

decenter myself, and it helps me feel the impact of this work in a greater way. That is what we want for all of our work, right?

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FT: Absolutely. I mean, another thing you said was when you admit anxiety, you unlock the barriers that we have with regards to equity and inclusivity. Can you expand on that? I think that's important to remember that this is important for us as individuals. But by taking care of ourselves as individuals, we are effectively helping someone who is watching who needs that support and inspiration too.

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LB: Yeah. I talk a lot in my work about who is doing this work. Who is doing the work to be more present and conscious communicators? Who is working hard to be more compassionate? So it's really, really important that we are all doing this work, and that particularly for people who have felt marginalized in their voices at work, that they can work less hard. So that is a big key component, and I work with all types of people at all levels of seniority in nearly every industry. It's very interesting that the higher the level of seniority, the more visible success that someone appears to have, the more stigma, shame, and secrecy they are going to have around admitting that they struggle with communication. This is doing everyone a massive disservice.

If particularly the people with more privilege and power can make this admission particularly to the people that they serve and support within their organizations, they are going to give everyone more permission to be vulnerable in this regard. We cannot learn and grow when we feel unsafe. It does not work. We have to find a way for ourselves to feel comfortable. Leaders and organizations have a tremendous responsibility here and how they can admit their own shortcomings. Do the work so that other people can do less of it.

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FT: Yes, yes. Because going back to your point about feeling safe, that's not necessarily an easy thing to identify sometimes. It's nothing to do with you. It's your environment. So any

advice for those of us who do feel like our company and our leaders have not done that work to provide that welcome and safe space for us? How do we reconcile that?

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LB: Yeah. For ourselves as individuals and, again, for myself as a white person, I'm communicating from my own very limited perspective there. It is essential that we work on how we can trust ourselves. For a lot of people, a lot of the people I support, again, they're getting these very buzzy words as feedback with no ways of incorporating that tangibly. If you tell someone that they need more confidence, that feels like it's outside of them, and they inherently are working for some external validation in order to achieve that confidence. The actual definition of confidence, do you know this, Farnoosh? I just looked it up a few months ago. It is to boldly trust, to boldly trust.

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FT: Oh, wow.

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LB: Wow. If that's what confidence means, then that is only inside of ourselves. So the first thing is that when you find that trust within yourself, and that really is about honoring your own communication style, your own experience and cultural background, honoring everything from where you come from and how you communicate, that is the first step. I find that once people are able to access that, then the confidence comes. The executive presence, whatever that buzzy word means, comes. Then, of course, we can serve as an example for the rest of our organization. But when I support organizations at the institutional level, I really will only do so if the people at the top are doing this work as well.

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FT: Good, good, good. To boldly trust. I like that. Well, before we go, Lee, I would love to learn a little bit more about your upbringing and your background. One of the questions I used to ask guests more frequently, and I want to bring it back now, as I'm saying it out loud, is what was

your biggest money lesson that you learned as a child? I wonder if being raised by artists influenced this lesson.

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LB: Of course, it did. I was raised by a Broadway musician and a mime.

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FT: Wow, wow.

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LB: I joke a lot about this. It's a funny thing to joke about as the child of a mime, being someone who could not speak. I could not talk unless I had a script, and it was tremendous social anxiety. I had what I would call inappropriate laughing and crying. I would feel like my reactions were not appropriate. I would feel like I would say the wrong thing constantly. So being the child of artists, I naturally went into the theater where there was a script, and someone told me what to say and how to interact. It helped me really find more liberation in my voice.

But as far as money comes, I was raised in a household that really prioritize passion over profit. I am a huge believer in that as well. But, of course, we should be valuing our own work. I wish that we lived in a society that value the work of artists much more. But I really was raised in a household that really was limiting the importance of money. Now, in my adult life and particularly as an entrepreneur and small business owner, I've had to really look closely at the way that I overwork, the way that I try to over prove my value by exerting more effort. I see this a lot as a theme with the people that I support. If I could just work harder, they will know that I am good enough or that I belong.

This has been my own personal process the past two years, and this is a process I think a lot of parents are going through in the pandemic as well. It's not even a matter of conscious choice. It's a matter of I don't have enough energy to do everything I need to do, and I have to be far more efficient to preserve that energy. So I've really been critiquing the way that I overwork, the way that I, as some of my clients call it, become of an efficiency monster of just wanting to be

productive and productive. Instead, how can I not equate my success with my level of productivity? How can I work in ease and rest? This is such wonderful important work that's – The Nap Ministry by Tricia Hersey has really led the conversation on rest and rest as a form of resistance. So that has been a really big lesson that I'm continuing to learn every single day.

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FT: Wow. So the daughter of a mime becomes an expert in communication. I mean, that's a memoir, if there ever was one.

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LB: I am writing that book right now. I'm working hard on that. It's interesting to put the lens of communication into writing when I've been focusing on the last 20 years on speaking. But communication is total. It's every way that we interact in this world.

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FT: Lee, how's the apartment? Are you still in Brooklyn?

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LB: I have to tell you, Farnoosh. We left that May 2020. We could not stay. It was not habitable. We left, we put all of our things in storage, and we bought a house. That has been a very proud thing for me, for us as a family, and for me as the sole earner. It's been wildly exciting and to live in more than 600 square feet for the first time and have abundance of space. It's a very new sensation, but we're enjoying it very much.

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FT: Hindsight is 2020, but I'm sure at the time you didn't know if you're making the best choice or the craziest choice buying a home and so much uncertainty. You just knew you had to get out. I felt very similarly. We did the same thing. We left in May of 2020 from Brooklyn. I remember going out into Cadman Plaza with my daughter. She was like three and a half with

her scooter. There was nobody around, and it was four o'clock in the afternoon. It was a vast – Just that Will Smith movie where he's the last man on earth. I said, "We need to get back inside. This is not a safe place for two, a woman and a girl," right? I mean, let's be honest. The world is scary, and it's scarier when you're only two girls. There was nobody around, and it was – I didn't feel good about it. So we left and we really left shortly after. Imagine trying to find and buy a house now. It would be a lot different.

Well, I'm so glad that you and your family are in a much better place and that you acted on your instincts. It worked out for you. Like I said, I knew we were going to cover so much terrain, and I wish we had more time. But, Lee, thank you so much for gracing our show.

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LB: Thank you, Farnoosh. I was so happy to talk with you today.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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FT: Thanks so much to Lee for joining us. To learn more about her, check out presentvoices.com, as well as leebonvissuto.com. We'll have both of those links in our show notes. I'll see you back here on Friday for Ask Farnoosh. Not too late to send in your questions. You can direct message me on Instagram @farnooshtorabi. Thanks for tuning in, and I hope your day is So Money.

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