

## ***Disrupt Yourself Podcast***

### ***Episode 16: Paula Froelich***

P: Ok, I'm Paula Froelich and I'm a journalist, storyteller and explorer. I pretty much, um...I've worked for a bunch of places like the Guardian, New York Post, Dow Jones, Playboy, Newsweek, Yahoo and I've written a couple books; I'm working on two more right now. And I'm really just, kind of, obsessed with the world out there.

W: What a wonderful introduction.

P: Thanks.

W: You gave me a couple of things that I now want to ask you about that I did not know about. One thing you mentioned was that you had worked at the Guardian, and that, from what I understand, was your very first job out of school. I would like for all of our listeners to hear how you got that job.

P: Ok, so it was totally random. You have to understand, I grew up lower-middle class, on the poverty line. We...when we first moved back to the States—I was born in England to American parents, and then we went to Saudi Arabia for a bit...we moved back to the States and we were on, the family was on food stamps and welfare, for a while.

W: Your family?

P: My family was, and then we got out of it, um, but it was, you know, it was an interesting, you know, situation. So we didn't really have any money, but my mother...and my mother was very strict, and her number one rule was, "I will never give you a cent, but there's always a plane ticket to get home. So you'll never be homeless." I love saying that to people without telling them how I grew up, because they always just assume that we were insanely wealthy. And I'm like, "No, no...that's alright." And so much so that I did actually move to London after college; I didn't know what to do and I knew I didn't want to go home to Ohio or Kentucky. And so I found out that I could apply for a British passport, because I was born there

So I moved to England with, like \$800 in my pocket and quickly found out that the pound was one pound for every two dollars. So there went four hundred of my eight hundred and I had to get a job. So I worked at a health club passing out towels; I worked at a coffee shop. But I wanted to get into journalism, and this is way before computers because, although I don't look that old, I am. Thank you Botox. But I went to the Westminster Library and, basically, researched every single features editor of every single paper. And at the time there were like 12, because London has a thriving newspaper industry—or did.

And so I just called them. And the only person who was too polite to hand up the phone on me after I called them nine or ten times a day was the assistant to the features editor at [The Guardian](#). And finally one day she just goes, 'Here's his direct line; you did not get it from me. Please, I can't...I can't take these calls anymore.' And I said, 'Okay, thanks.' So I called him, and he said 'Alright, you can come in for work study,' which is internship, and that only lasted a week, and I ended up staying for...the first time I stayed for about a year

W: You were calling people nine or ten times a day?

P: Yep. Absolutely. 'Hey, it's Paula. Can I speak to so-and-so? Hey, it's me. Can I speak to so-and-so?' Um, you know, they'd usually just hang up on me, except for the secretary at The Guardian who was too well-bred to hang up on people. Thank you, secretary at the Guardian.

W: I love it.

P: So I got my way in there and then I free-lanced around for other places as well, then I started working on the news desk as an assistant. Then I knew I...I didn't want to stay in London, you know, it's a little mildew, so I took the long way home, kind of super tramping through India, Nepal and Thailand. Went to L.A. but again, my mother wouldn't give me any money; I didn't have a car. So I literally moved to New York for public transportation. It sounds kind of ridiculous and it sounds like, 'Ooo, I moved here for public transportation,' like a quip, but it's actually 100% true. And then I moved here and I started interviews and at the time people were like, 'Oh, but don't the British papers just make everything up?' And I was like, 'No they don't. It's The Guardian.' So I ended up doing interest rate swaps in over the counter derivatives for Institutional Investors Newsletter Derivatives....

W: Did you know anything about this?

P: I did not. I did not know what a stock or a bond was. And so they gave me three weeks to get up to speed or they'd fire me, and I was like, 'Well, I'm not going back to Ohio.' So I figured it all out, and then I got hired from there for Dow Jones Newswires, and this was really interesting. It was, like, when Glass Stiegel was coming down and a lot of things were blowing up: Russia, Brazil....

W: So what was this, 97, 98?

P: 98, 98.

W: Okay.

P: And, um, so that was super interesting. And then I met someone who knew someone who said, 'Oh, you know, you'd be really good at [Page Six](#). They have a vacancy. And I said, 'What's that?' And they said, 'It's the gossip column at the [New York Post](#).' And I said, 'I've never read the New York Post.'

W: So someone just said 'you'd be great for this' and you got this job as a gossip girl for the New York Post?

P: Yeah. I was 25 and I was like, 'Sweet, I can eat and drink for free.' And that's...I did Page 6 for 10 years and then I left. During Page 6 I wrote two books; the [second book hit the New York Times bestseller list](#) and I quit, um, with no job, because I kind of figured I didn't want my boss's job. Like, I liked the Post. I was...it was getting a little groundhoggy, you know, like when all of a sudden you're just like, 'Oh I see this train wreck coming a mile away. Oh, that one.' Let me write down exactly what's going to happen in the next two years. And so I became... I became really cynical and I didn't like that. And, um, I also...it was just boring. It was like, you know; it was starting to take a turn. We weren't write...when I first started we were writing about boldface names and business and, you know, anything we thought was interesting. It was becoming way more celebrity—and this was around 2009 when, you know, it's like, any uneducated dingleberry with a nose job could become famous, right?

W: So now it's let's see...you go...fast forward to 2008?

P: Mm hmm. 2009. I was just...I was not happy. There was a bunch of things that had happened. I've written about it...you know, I wrote about it in this book called [Ten Habits of Highly Successful Women](#). I wrote a chapter called 'Controlled Burn' about how I...you know, where I come from in Ohio and Kentucky in order for us to...in order to have a fruitful crop you have to burn it down at the end. And you have to let it lie fallow for a bit before it can come back. And so I set about pretty much burning down my life. I'd saved up my...the controlled burn was I'd saved up money for a couple years and I quit. I didn't know what I was going to do because I didn't really know who I was anymore, so I quit. And I went to...I went to...I slept for, like, basically two months, and I didn't know what to do with myself. And then I remember thinking, 'All right, girl, when was the last time you felt like you were cool and interesting and brave?' And I remembered that trip to India that I had taken and I said, 'Alright, I've always wanted to go see Africa. I'm going to go do it. I'm going to go do it by myself.' And, um, I did; I went and did Kenya by myself and it was just so interesting because at the time I had also been...you know, I went and saw some...I did some psychotherapy and the way that I did it was, I used one strength to deal with the past and one strength to try to make new grooves for the future, and I wanted to try to re-groove my future and not just go with what was comfortable because what was comfortable was not making me happy.

W: What's something you learned that you were then able to implement as you were traveling?

P: You know, something about, well, do you really need to talk all the time? Do you really need to be funny? Do you really need to do this? Do you need to react this way? Can you not just sit still in the moment? And so I would go on these trips and I would come back and I would just try to learn these new skills, but also, it was interesting because I actually wanted to figure out who I was, right?

W: Mm hmmm.

P: Like, who am I, if I'm not Paula Froelich from Page 6? Who am I if I am Paula Froelich period. Not Paula Froelich from Dow Jones. Not Paula Froelich from the Guardian. Not Paula Froelich from blah. Just Paula Froelich. I find New York, Los Angeles, a lot of the larger cities, if you are just Paula Froelich, period, that's not enough. And so it feeds into an insecurity and I wanted to really just shine a light on it.

W: So what happened? You traveled for how many years?

P: I did. I traveled for, well....I saved up...I saved up some money and I lived cheaply so I traveled for—on and off....Now you have to understand, I have a dog, I have a home, and I also don't believe in people taking off for a year. It's this really messed up American system we have of...and women especially fall prey to this. Actually, no, I take it back; men do to. You know, women fall prey to it in a different way. But it's you go to high school; you graduate at 17 or 18, then you either go straight to work or you go to college. After college...in college, at 17 or 18, you pick your major, ie the rest of your life, which is ridiculous. I mean, I wouldn't trust a 17 or 18 year old with the keys to my car much less the rest of their life. And so then, we go...then you go to college and then, maybe, maybe you take a summer off an backpack through Europe. Wink. Crazy. And then you go straight to work. And then you get married and then you have kids. And it's all this very linear story of, you know, then you work your way up and you go from one job to another to another and you're in this bigger, better position and then all of the sudden you're just dead. And, um, it's...at no time does anyone take a gap year, like the Brits or Australians have. So I am a huge proponent of a gap year, whether you take it after high school, after college, in your twenties, thirties or forties—people need to take some time...

I actually kind of did that once; I went traveling for six months...

W: Right.

P: ...and what I found was that after four months I was bored witless.

W: So you were ready to come home.

P: I was ready to do something; I was ready to be good at something again. Um, so I used that lesson in those four years where I would go for three weeks at a time; I would go for four weeks at a time. I would come back; I would sit. I would have a think about it. I would, um, write a story about it for somebody. I would, you know....

W: So you took the really, sort of, interval training approach, like you would training for a marathon.

P: Mm hmm.

W: You run then you walk, then you run then you walk. You, you...you know, you go six days; you take a rest. And so that's...that was your approach to travel.

P: 100%. And also because it allows you to be somewhat immersed but also know you aren't there indefinitely so you are more active and paying more attention and you do have a list of things you want to do and complete. You know, I always say...it's like when somebody comes to visit New York for the first time, I always say make an itinerary that you can switch from because 5000 options are more paralyzing than two.

W: You need to have that constraint. What place, um, in the world has most changed you?

P: You know it's interesting because I call myself 'The Accidental Patriot,' for the simple fact that, you know, I was growing up, and I always thought, "Anywhere but here, anywhere but here; I just want to get out, da da da, I just want to get out of Cincinnati. I just want to...." Ah, and all these books, I was like, "It sounds so amazing; it sounds so awesome and this, this this...." The more I travel the more I really love America. You know, I am resentful—I'm beyond resentful—towards people who say, "Make America Great Again." Because I look at them and I say, "You haven't been anywhere. You don't understand how great this place is." And I do mean in relation to London, in relation to Paris, in relation to other first-world countries. There are things that I do think...obviously, no one is ever perfect; there are things you can learn from other societies, but, you know, look at...I look at America, look at who we are. We are the original EU, but we worked.

W: That's great; it's a great observation. Your focus right now is travel...

P: So....after I traveled I then got this amazing job; I was editor-in-chief of Yahoo Travel and it was awesome because I got to put my gut...I got to merge

my gut with numbers, which is...I see what's out there, this is what I think is going on, and then let me go check the census polls; let me go check this. Um, and it worked and here we're going to do...we were the first ones to really focus on solo travel. We were the first ones to really focus on adventure travel and by adventure, we also focused on women and minorities, because our, you know...my whole point was it's not just white dudes who travel, you know. Then I did my show, which I loved; it was [A Broad Abroad](#), and it was more like a newsy show so it was not....

W: So this was on Yahoo; it was a channel on Yahoo?

P: It was. And it wasn't "Look at this speech. And this is what you eat. And blah, blah." It was really about meeting people and telling their stories and how to bring it back home. It was just, "Look, this is life." We did something in Oman that got 1.3 million views called [What Life is Really Like for Women in the Middle East](#) and it was talking to a woman in a full *niqab*, talking to somebody in the headscarf and talking to somebody without one. What their life was like. How did they date? How old were they when they got married? Were their camels involved? You know. And it was just kind of sitting down asking lady questions.

And it's really just there is a curiosity, and I think that people in the flyover states get a really bad, crappy rap of...you know, I've heard media executives tell me over and over how stupid they are and how they don't know this stuff, and you're just kind of going, wow, I beyond resent that. I am from the middle of the country.

W: Well, yeah, I was going to say, it's really interesting because here you grew up in Cincinnati and you found yourself saying, "I want to get out of here. I want to get out of here. I want to get out of here." And yet, now you say, "No, this is part of who I am and this is...."

P: Not only a part of who I am, but it's become the most important part.

W: So, so you've talked about how you meet people that are interesting and interested. For me, this sounds kind of scary to do, to sort of....What does that, how does that connection actually happen? Where do you...I mean when you go over there, do you have an itinerary, you know, go over there—go somewhere, I should say, do you have an agenda, do you have an itinerary....

P: Absolutely.

W: Do you just happen to meet someone, like, give us...help...take us there with you.

P: I usually go...I always go with an itinerary...I usually go with small groups. You know, like, I'm not going to Afghanistan by myself. I'm not taking a boat up the river Niger in Mali for three and a half weeks by myself. That's just, you know, that's foolhardy. Um, it's not smart. Um, so you...there is a security basis on which to build from. Um, I will say, being a woman, I am usually more open to talking to women, or children, especially in certain parts of the world. You know, I'm just not comfortable with men coming up to me. So it's, you know, I do have a set of rules that you abide by, but it is also, you know, you just, you're open to it, like, "Oh, what is this? This is interesting." And I usually find that if you're open and kind, you know, people have a lot of questions for me, as much as I have questions for them.

W: What's next for you?

P: I don't know. You know, I, I'm coming to grips...so Yahoo Travel ended, last year, and I'm trying to figure out what I want to...wanted to....You know, I thought it was, 'I'm going to do a travel show.' You know, there are no travel shows with women, so that's interesting. But I also realize, it's not...I'm not quite sure and one of my other lessons I'm trying to learn right now is, I'm trying to be comfortable with the fact...

W: ...that you don't know?

P: ...that I have been successful. I have done things, they're great; I will be successful again. But that my career is not linear and my life track is not linear and that to me is very uncomfortable. And also that, you know, I'm not sure. It's not that I don't know, because I do know what I'm really good at. I'm really good at going and finding out things, and finding interesting people. Um, I would like to try to figure out how to bring that to America. I'm really, really, you know, it bothers me that New York and Los Angeles dictate the media for the rest of the country. I think at some point there should be something from the inside out showcasing and talking about really awesome people and things that we're actually doing instead of just one segment on CNN once a week or 'this is what people think of Trump; look, we're talking to people in the middle of the country.' We're not, you know...were like, 'well why aren't you doing that every day?'

W: It is interesting.

P: They are the country. What bothers me I think is that most people....I once had somebody who had just given a speech about thinking out of the box, tell me, 'You know what your problem is, Paula? I can't put you in a box. I don't know what box to put you in.' And I was like, "Does it have to be that way?" You know, like, why can't we all....like, I'm multilevel.

W: Yeah.

P: Like, I've written about women's issues and derivatives, and gossip and business, and travel, you know, but the underlying thing is journalism and it's really about asking questions and learning and sharing the knowledge. So I don't know why everything has to be so caged up.

W: So you said early on in the conversation that you're working on some books?

P: I am, I am. I'm working on two books. One is a novel called *The Catastrophists*, set in western Kentucky. And the other one is a non-fiction and it's based on the four...I think I could call it *The Gap Years*, if you will, you know: the four years in between.

W: And so this travel show you've decided to kind of set that aside for now?

P: Yeah, you know, you can only bang your head against the wall so many times, um, but you know I'm looking. I'm working on a few other projects.

W: Okay, good. Anything you want to share?

P: No, I just...I'm interested in the concept of the gap years.

W: Okay, very fun. Well, it's interesting because, um, I...actually, our son right now is in Brazil. He graduated from high school a year and a half ago, almost two years, and he's been in Brazil for a year and a half on a mission. And I think it's fascinating because this gap—two years for him—has been transformative.

P: Absolutely.

W: Absolutely transformative, um, in terms of who he is, what he cares about, how hard he works, his determination and so I am a big, big fan of the gap years. I'm excited that you're going to do something around that.

W: Well, one of the things I will do is I will check back in with you—actually I forgot; I have to play a game—but I will check back in with you in 6 to 9 months and just see how you're doing. And I suspect that, in my parlance, you've gotten to the top of a learning curve and you're in the process of jumping to a new one but you haven't quite figured out which one you want to jump to so you're still in this place of...you're in the parachute and figuring out exactly where you want to land, which is a very thrilling and terrifying time.

P: It is. It is beyond terrifying. Um, but, as you said, exciting. It's kind of like, 'Okay, which way am I going to go?' Alright. And I have the knowledge that I've done it before and I've always landed.