

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 56 – Becky Douglas

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest today is Becky Douglas, founder and president of [Rising Star Outreach](#), a charity that works with people in India with leprosy, and the mom of ten children.

Becky: So I'm Becky Douglas, and I'm the founder and the president of [Rising Star Outreach](#), a little charity that works with people in India that have leprosy. And I'm a mom. I have 10 children. (laughs) Which usually surprises people. Um, and that's, that's who I am.

Whitney: Uh, okay, I'm obviously stuck on the fact that you have 10 children, that is amazing. Um, but let's back up cause what I want to do I want to learn more about [Rising Star Outreach](#), but I want to hear your story. Like where did you grow up, and how did you decide to have 10 children, because I think that's really important and probably goes to a little bit of why you started this nonprofit in, in India.

Becky: When we got married, my husband and I decided that four was a really nice number. Then after we had four, my husband said, "You know, wouldn't you like just one more?" (laughs) And that just kept happening. And we found that we loved children.

And then we adopted three. So we have two from Lithuania, a girl that was paralyzed from the chest down and her younger brother. And then we adopted a little girl from India ... well, she wasn't that little, she was 14, actually. She had worked as an unpaid house servant for five years, from the ages of five to 10, and then was given away to an orphanage. I met her at age 12, it took us about two years to get her a visa. We brought her to the states at age 14. And she had never been to school. And she didn't speak English.

So we ended up starting her in first grade, at age 14, and she now has her masters degree in family counseling, and is married with, expecting her own first child.

Whitney: How did you meet her when she was 12 years old?

Becky: She belonged to this little orphanage that I first went to India to see. And maybe I should back up a little bit, and tell you how I got there. Um, because it, it flows from the family, actually.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: Um, so my oldest daughter Amber was severely bipolar.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: She struggled in and out of mental institutions for about seven years. And, she finally gave up. And she took her own life. And she was in college at the time. So we went

through her things, we found that she had been sending part of the money we gave her for college every month to support an orphan in India.

We thought maybe because she suffered so much, she just had a tender spot for the underdog. But anyway, at her funeral, instead of having people send flowers, we just asked them to send money to this little orphanage and people were very generous, and enough money was sent, and they asked me on the board of directors of this orphanage. And I thought okay, well, if I'm going to be on this board, maybe I better go to India to see what I'm doing. And that's the orphanage that we met Esther at.

Whitney: I'm trying to take all of this in. Your daughter, in taking her life, gave you a gift. And she gave other, many other children a gift.

Becky: It's so interesting to hear you say that, you know, you ... as a mother, losing a child, you would never categorize that as a gift. But I think God is so good, that great things can come even from great tragedy.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: When I went to India to see this little orphanage that I'd come to check out, um, it was darling, by the way, 54 cute kids. But every day, as we would go in our car from our hotel to the orphanage and then back again on the streets of Chennai, every time we stopped at a stoplight these ... we just seemed to be engulfed by beggars that were like really nothing I'd ever seen. They had rotting hands and feet, and open, gaping wounds, many of them with puss running down their arms. Um ... I-I-t, it was unbelievable, I remember one stoplight, a man thrusting his hand in the window to beg with maggots crawling through his hand.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: It just ... truly the suffering was almost palpable, I couldn't even look at them. Had a hard time looking at them, so we didn't. All of us in the car, just would talk every time we'd come to a stoplight, amongst ourselves, so we wouldn't have to look out the window. And we, I remember just finally thinking that, that there seemed to be so many, and I said to our driver, "Who are these people?" And he said, "Oh, those are the lepers." And I said, "What are you talking about, there's no leprosy in the world today." He says, "Yeah, we have millions in India."

And that just ... that was so astounding to me. When I got home I couldn't sleep. Those images just haunted me at night. And I remember, I just kept thinking, gosh, why doesn't somebody do something, are there really millions of people that live this way? And, um, you know, so finally when ... a night after no sleep, I thought we were somebody. Do something. (laughs)

So, that morning I called three of my friends who were also housewives. I dragged in my husband's secretary, we sat around a kitchen table, my kitchen table. And we formed Rising Star Outreach to serve the leprosy affected of India.

But I have to tell you, when my husband came home that night, and I said, "John, like you are never going to believe what we did today." And he said, "What did you do?" I said, "We formed this charity to help people in India that have leprosy." He just said, "Seriously, Becky?" He said, "Uh, what do you know about leprosy?" And I said, "You know, nothing." And he said, "Yeah," he said, "What do you know about medicine?" I said, "Okay, you know, nothing." He said, "What do you know about India?" I said, "Well, I was there, right? I was there for 10 days." (laughs) And he just kind of rolled his eyes, and he said, "What do you know about running a business?" And I said, "All right, nothing." He said, "What do you think you're going to do?" And I said, "Well, I don't know, but we're going to do something." And I said, "And you're an attorney. I know we need to get one of those licenses that says if people donate to you, no they don't have to ... have to pay money. And we don't have to pay taxes." And he said, "Yeah," he said, "Uh, that's called a 501C3 license, and normally when you ask the government for one, you have to tell them what you're going to do." And said, "Great, tell them we're going to do something." And that's how we started. Literally, that's how we started.

Whitney: I think you're probably saying this a little bit for effect, but how did you feel when your husband was saying, "Well you don't know anything about this. You don't know anything about this."

Becky: That's true.

Whitney: Because he ... because he probably wasn't the only person that was saying this to you.

Becky: No. No. Everyone.

Whitney: Probably everybody was saying you had lost your mind.

Becky: Everyone said to me, "Are you crazy?" Right? Literally everyone said, "Are you crazy?" And I thought, am I crazy? (laughs) I must be crazy, but there is sometimes is something inside of us that drives us. There's sometimes we see things in the world that are just not okay. For me, that was just not okay. And I could have these images haunting my dreams for the rest of my life, or I could do something. And so that's when I thought, you can take action here. Just because you're a housewife ... I mean, I think that's the other thing I kept saying to myself, because his line of questioning to me made me feel like, you're only a housewife, right? (laughs)

But, um ... but I thought I'm a person, and I can do something, maybe I can help one person. But then at least I'll feel like I've done something.

So, but the truth is when we got to India, we had no idea what to do. (laughs) And so, we thought well just take food to them, rice and beans is what they eat in India, so we started taking rice and beans to the colonies, and they just loved it. But, it didn't take us long to figure out that we fed them today, we had to come back and feed them tomorrow, right. So we weren't really doing anything.

Whitney: How did this start to unfold? Um, because it's, it's fascinating to understand that discovery of how you were going to do what you were going to do.

Becky: Well, so we, we first started with this little orphanage because we knew them, right? And so-

Whitney: So there was already an orphanage.

Becky: Right, there was an orphanage, and they had helped some leprosy colonies, or they took us, actually, to some colonies. And so that's how we first got our start to visit the colonies. But it was really once we started taking them stuff that we just thought, th-th- this is nothing, we've got to find a way to get them to earn their own money.

You know, we can do so little with the little bit of money we have. We, we tried to find ways that they could earn their own money, and it was, it was a disaster. Number one, they don't have any hands and feet, most of them.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: Or, you know, deformed hands and feet. And they're considered untouchables in Indian society. In India, every caste has hundreds of well-defined levels. And in the untouchable, or the unscheduled caste they're at the very bottom. The idea of karma, that whatever happens to you, you know, you have brought on yourself through your thoughts, your actions, your words, through either this life or the previous thousand lives that you lived. In other words, what's happened to you, you deserve. And since leprosy is considered to be the worst thing that God can give a person, the worst curse, it follows that those who have leprosy are the worst people, and they deserve to suffer.

Whitney: So people feel completely justified rejecting them?

Becky: Yes, and I'm, they are so untouchable, this just sounds crazy to Americans, but until j- just 25 years ago, I mean, there were ... there was a law in India that if their shadow even touched you, by law you could beat them almost to death. That was one of our big problems, is that since they were so untouchable, nobody wanted to help us. And nobody wanted us to do what we were doing, 'cause they were supposed to suffer. That's what they had brought on themselves. It was really interesting as we tried different things, we couldn't really find anything that they wanted to do, or were willing to try, because if they said, "If we touch something, no one will buy it."

Then we met this woman, her name's Padma Venkataraman and she's amazing. So, turns out, she's the daughter of the former president of India, Rama Swami Venkataraman, and for 20 years she had been the permanent woman's representative to the UN from India. And many of those years, she was the president of the Council on Women's Affairs, so she was essentially the top woman in the world on women's issues. She just had tons of experience in creating change in the world. And she had-

Whitney: Wait, how did you meet her?

Becky: So, oh, this is a fun story, right. But, but her story, I mean, you talk about disruption-

Whitney: Yeah.

Becky: Her story's an amazing story of disruption, 'cause here she was this, this international persona with ... I mean, you should see the house she lived in. I mean unbelievable in New Delhi, um, and in Austria where she was in the UN. She decided that she needed to have more hands on ... I mean, she just got tired of working through diplomatic channels and said, "I want to be on the street working with the people." And the people that need it the most were those with leprosy.

But, so, and this is before Muhammad Yunus, right, this is before microfinance, before any of that stuff. She just started going to the colonies and talking to the women. And saying, you know, "What do you need?" Working with them, helping them wash their dishes, helping them, whatever, just day after day talking to them. And she realized that they needed a way to support themselves, so she started her own kind of microfinance, this is before it was a buzzword, right. And so what she did, and I love this, so she would go in to a colony, she would give them, I'm way off track, but she would get five women, because that's all that would ever listen to her, and she'd say, "Let's find a way for you to, to earn your own money." And so, "Let's start businesses, because maybe other leprosy people would buy from you." So in order to create capital, because she had none, they, she started a bank. And they would each put, um, 10 rupees each month out of their begging money-

Whitney: So this a precursor to Grameen Bank?

Becky: Yes. But it was on a different ... I mean, Grameen was over in Bangladesh, right, this is Hindu, India. There was no communication between her and Muhammad Yunus. But the interesting thing, like almost at the exact same time. No banks would lend to the leprosy affected.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: So they had, she had to create her own capital. So she said, "Look, we'll make our own bank and every month you put in 10 rupees." That's like 16 cents. Well, but that's a lot to them. And so, it was a lot money, so they put it in, and when they got like five dollars, you know, to buy an iron or something, enough for that, then one woman would take that money and she would buy an iron and start an ironing business.

But, it wasn't Padma's money, it was their money. So the pressure to repay it was huge. She didn't have to put any pressure on them. So when it was repaid, the next woman took the money and she started a business, and before long, those five women had more money than anyone in the colony.

The average microbusiness was earning between one and three hundred dollars a month. I mean, so the difference between, you know, eight to 12 dollars a month, and, and-

Whitney: A hundred dollars-

Becky: It was like huge.

Whitney: Right.

Becky: So suddenly they're the wealthiest people in the colony. So then all the men want to come join, right. But, um, those five women would always control the lending in that colony. So she taught them. If a man comes for a loan that's known to brutally beat his wife, no loans, till the beatings have stopped. You know, or if a man came for a loan that was known to have raped several girls in the colony, which is, unfortunately, is very common. Um, again-

Whitney: No loans.

Becky: No loans till the rapes had stopped. So really, for the first time in history, these women are taking charge of their lives in ways they've never been able to do before. It was just, it was amazing.

And the whole colony, you talk about disruption, the whole colony is changed on its head because women have never had a voice. So that's how she started. And she had been doing that for at least five years when we met her. And one of, or the people that we, worked with us, saw her at a colony and watched her, and called me and said, "You've got to meet this lady." (laughs) And he gave Padma my phone number and said, "You need to call Becky Douglas, because she's always talking about finding a way to help these people earn their own money."

So, literally, I was sitting in my bedroom, in Norcross, Georgia, and I got a call from India, from Padma. And she said, you know, "My name's Padma Venkatraman and I work with the leprosy affected, why don't we partner?" I said, "So what ... who are you?" And she says, "I'm just someone that works with the leprosy affected." Because her father was one of Gandhi's Freedom Fighters. He was actually imprisoned with Gandhi. And so her whole family is very Gandhi, and she grew up with Gandhi. If you, if you have any power or station in life-

Whitney: You don't tell anybody.

Becky: You never tell anyone, right. You don't use any influence that the men on the street can't use. And so, I mean, it took me forever til I finally realized who this woman was that had called to partner with me. And that's, that's how we met.

Whitney: How did you finally figure out who she was?

Becky: Well I was with her one time and ... I mean, she's, she's like a rockstar in India, honestly, because she's a woman that left the halls of power to serve the poor. You know, almost like a Hindu Mother Theresa-

Whitney: Right, right, right.

Becky: But she's really ... I mean, and so it didn't take me long, people said, you know, "How do you know this woman? Do you know who she is?" And, you know, when I finally said to her, "Was your dad president?" (laughs) She just kind of smiled and she said, "Yeah."

But what, the fun thing about this, is, for me, how little it takes. How little it takes to create a business in India

So we had this one man in one of our colonies, his name is Gopal and he wanted to start a tea business. So he came to the women and he asked for a loan of three dollars. He bought a pot and two cups. And that was his tea business. And so he paid it off, and he came and wanted to borrow eight more dollars so he could buy this old beat up bike. Because he said, "If I can take it out to the workers in the field, I'll get more money." Right? And so they give him the eight dollars, and then he paid that, and he just kept taking more and more loans out, as he paid them off, bigger and bigger loans, and he now has a business that supports his family.

So one time, when we said to him, "So Gopal, how different really is your life now that you're no longer begging, I mean, now that you're supporting yourself." And I thought he'd say something like, um, "Well, you know, I get to eat every day now." Or, "My kids get to school," you know, something like that. But he didn't. He said, "You know, when I used to beg in front of the shop in the city, the shop owner would come out and curse at me, and threaten me until I moved away." But he said, "Now I supply tea to that shop. When I come now, the owner sets a seat and offers me tea."

So to him, even more than they money, is the dignity that he is getting, right, as a productive member of society. Because before, even his shadow was defiling. And the fun thing is, Whitney, is you can go to Chennai, now, today, and be in the city for a week and not see a single leprosy beggar at the stoplights. Because they're all working their businesses.

And we're not the only ones that have been working. But the truth is, change is possible. It's a whole different city today. And these people are so much the happier, they have a reason to wake up in the morning, right?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: They're not just going to beg. And they have dignity. When you beg on the street, it, you, it makes you into the worst person you can possibly be, because the worse you look, the more money you make right? So they don't shave, they don't do their hair, they try to look bad-

Whitney: It's a performance. They have to perform.

Becky: It's a performance, but it's even more than that. So like with the leprosy affected, so leprosy destroys the feeling in your limbs, right, so they have no pain to protect them,

that's one reason that they're losing their limbs. 'Cause they injure them, very easily without pain, right, and then they live in these filthy colonies, no doctors treat them, so they get, these injuries become infected, and then gangrene moves in, and then maggots move in, and then we have to amputate. But it's not because the leprosy's active, it's because the after affects of leprosy. So they have no pain.

So, and this is just an interesting story, the first day we started our clinic, my friend was with the clinic, she's a nurse. And she said the very first colony they went to, this woman came up with these unbelievably horrible hands. She said they were ... I mean, we see bad hands. (laughs) But these were, she said they were beyond the pale. She said they were swollen like four times their normal size, and they cracked, and puss was running down her arms, and my friend said, "Oh my gosh, we've got to fix these hands." And she said, "No." She pulled them away. She said, "I put them in the fire every day. I get more money begging." Right, she can't feel it. But she looks, I mean, can you imagine how these burned, horrible hands looked, and people see that and they just say, "Oh this poor woman," and they give her more money.

So, until we could get the people off the streets, we could never improve their lives, right?

Whitney: Yep.

Becky: Because they want to look terrible. So, um-

Whitney: So what did you do?

Becky: Well that's when we did the microfinance. But the other thing is, w-what happened is once they started earning money ...

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: It's like, we didn't even teach them this, they just suddenly wanted to have respect. Because they were doing respectful things, right? So they started combing their hair, and they, I mean one of our businesses, actually became a beauty shop.

Whitney: So the initial idea was that the leprosy affected would sell and do commerce with other people who were leprosy affected?

Becky: Yeah.

Whitney: Is that still how it is, or has it expanded?

Becky: It's expanded. Because now, I mean, they've learned that if they, if their prices are lower than anyone else's because they're leprosy affected, people will get over their stigma, they'll come in to the colony, they'll buy ... for example, we have one carpenter who does unbelievably intricate, ornate, incredible artwork. He makes these doors that are to die for. I mean, you and I would pay thousands of dollars for them. And he sells them

for just nothing, and so now, from all over people are coming to buy his, his stuff, right? And so greed is becoming our friend.

And then the other thing that happens though, is that once you get rid of those wounds ... as long as they're dripping blood, and you know, have these hideous things, they'll never be accepted in to regular society.

Whitney: Right.

Becky: But once you get rid of those, then there's really nothing that, that, they're not scary anymore.

Whitney: It's not visible and so-

Becky: Well, they still have deformities, but it's not that same dramatic-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: Open wound kind of scary. So that actually became our next thing we wanted to do, we wanted to get those wounds healed. So, we had raised money, and the first trip I went back to India to hire a doctor, but we couldn't find a doctor that would work with people with leprosy. Because, they said, "Oh, we touch them, then we're defiled, and now we can't treat anyone else, we've just lost our practice."

So we couldn't find anyone, so, we started bringing our pocket knives to India. And we started literally digging out those rotten wounds, and then we would fill the resulting holes in their flesh with salt crystals, and then wrap them in bandages. And that allowed them to keep their limbs a little bit longer, but you know, clearly-

Whitney: So did you bring nurses and doc-doctors from other countries to do it?

Becky: No, this was, this was when we first started. That's all we knew to do. And um, so, I mean John says, "It's amazing you haven't been thrown in the, in the prison for practicing medicine without a license." (laughs) But um, but that's all we had, right? Because we couldn't, I mean, we were trying to hire nurses, trying to hire doctors and there was no one.

And anyway, then finally when we partnered with Padma, she was able to find us, through her influence, some doctors and some nurses and we now run mobile medical units.

Whitney: So you started in 2001. How large is the organization today? How many people have you, um, lives have been impacted and, and I think I said this already, but what does the organization look like today, what are you doing today, specifically?

Becky: We work today in 62 leprosy colonies. We've worked with 30,000 people whose lives are truly vastly different today than they were before we started, right? Um, and it's not

it's not just the, the lending, it's not just the medical care, it's the way they see themselves.

When we first started like we, we finally got doctors, we finally got these mobile medical clinics. Every week they would go to a colony, I mean, they would go the same colony every once a week, right? And so with 62 colonies that, I-It really was a, you know, that's all they could get to it was once a week. Then they would clean out those wounds, cut off the necrotic tissue, bandage them up. And the wounds weren't healing. I mean, a year in to it, the wounds still looked exactly the same.

And so I said to our doctor, "What's the deal? We're paying you all this money, and you know, we're paying for medicines, and bandages, and nothing's getting any better," and he said, "Well Becky, they never do anything the doctor tells them." And I said, "Seriously? Why not?" And he said, "I don't now why not." So I was talking to Padma, and I said, "Padma, this is a problem, like what, why is this?" And she said, "You Americans." (laughs) She says, "You know, you come to India, and you just give stuff away." She says, "I know it probably makes you feel good." But she said, "Every time you give something to someone, you demean that person. You diminish them." And she said, "Furthermore, nothing given free has any value." She said, "If you really want to lift these people, you make them responsible for their own wellbeing, you give them the ability to care for themselves."

So, we started charging two rupees to see the doctor. Which is like, you know, three and a half cents. And, lo and behold, they started doing everything the doctor told them, because they now had skin in the game. Now, they were paying for their ... and they to this day feel like they're paying for their medical, right, it doesn't begin, begin to what the cost is. But they feel like they're paying for it.

The second level of that, is we had a doctor ... 'cause they still were, the wounds were healing a little bit, but not, not as fast as I thought they should be, and I said, "Can't we do something?" And he said, "You know what, until they start cleaning out their own wounds every day, they're never going to heal." He said, "Once a week is not going to do it, because the body builds up that necrotic tissue again." He says, "They've got to cut off their own necrotic tissue themselves."

Whitney: What is necrotic tissue?

Becky: Dead, it's the-

Whitney: Dead tissue.

Becky: Dead tissue-

Whitney: Okay.

Becky: That builds around the edge of a wound, right?

Whitney: Okay, okay.

Becky: And um, so remember I told you they don't have any feeling-

Whitney: Right.

Becky: In their limbs, but they do have feeling in proud flesh. So, and we work without anesthesia, we'd work in the dirt basically, because we had nowhere else to work. But um, so then we started, uh what we call wound self-care, we started making kits for them to do all this themselves every day. And we did training, and started coming back every week and checking on them. And lo and behold, the wounds are healing up. And there, most of them are gone.

So in colonies that we would have 60 people waiting to see us when the clinic came every week, we now have 10 or 15. And we don't those big, gaping, open wounds anymore, we just see wounds that are just slowly, slowly, you know, coming together and healing up. But that's so important, because once those wounds are healed, they can come in to society. Right, I mean, that's a huge step for them to become normal again. And India, as bad as the disease is, the biggest thing that these people face is the stigma. That keeps them from ever becoming anyone.

Whitney: So once the physical wounds are healed, they can start healing emotionally.

Becky: That, yeah. That's the beginning, right? And then you have to give them some dignity, you have to get them to where they have a purpose in life, they have a reason, they have, they have a respect for themselves, their kids respect them. They feel empowered. That if they want something, they can earn it.

Um, and then the final thing that we did, is we ... we-we looked at these kids, I mean, they, none of them were going to school. None of them, they were begging in the streets, right, because people give more to kids that beg than they do to adults, right, so they were income generators for the family.

But they're just growing up to be that next generation of beggars on the street. So I thought if we're going to stop it, we've got to stop it at this generation. So, we ended up buying what's now 16 acres, and we started a school. And so, we started out initially with just 27 kids, because before we got our acreage, we rented a little house that had two bedrooms, one as big as a-a twin sized bed, and enough room to get from there, you know, between there and the wall, for one person if they went sideways. That was where the director stayed. And then one other small bedroom that we put a mat, wall to wall, I could show you a picture. We, and we figured 27 kids could sleep on that mat, shoulder to shoulder, or front, front to back. And that's literally how we started the school.

'Cause they had to stay there, 'cause the leprosy colonies are so spread out, that they can't come in and go out every day, right? So it had to be like a boarding school.

Whitney: Yeah.

Becky: So we started with those 27 kids. And we now have 350 kids on our campus. We have another campus of 60 children and a preschool. We have 30 children in college at the moment. And, um, it's pretty cool because what we did is, um, we felt like they couldn't just be as smart as everybody else, because they, with the stigma, they would never get hired.

Whitney: They had to be smarter.

Becky: They had to be smarter. So, in India, because of the British system that was there a zillion years, they still teach by rote memory. That's how all of India learns. And so we thought we've got to figure out a better way. So, um, one of the people on my board at that point was, um, she directed World Teach for Harvard. And so she sent us four World Teach teachers from Harvard. And, um, they taught our teachers how to teach. And we got a principal from Duke, a professor from Duke, so between those two things, instead of learning by rote memory, our kids were learning problem solving, and critical thinking, right?

It was a whole different level. And so, now that they've been in the school for a while, our first kids, that were, m-made it to the tenth grade, which is like the end of high school in India, they took this national exam, kind of like the SAT, and they rank the schools. So, the year before last, based on the national exam scores, our school was ranked number one. In the Kanchipuram district of almost 500 schools. We beat out all the prestigious private schools, we beat all the rich kids in homes growing up speaking English, and we are an English meeting school, everything's taught in English. Even though these kids-

Whitney: That is amazing.

Becky: Had never heard it before, right? And when they come to us, no matter what their age, they're not even toilet trained, right, they've been on the street, peeing in the street, and they, they can't read or write their name in any language. I mean, they come the very lowest, but they're now scoring at the top of the Indian educational system. So you talk about disruption, I mean, this is disruption.

Whitney: That, that, that's amazing.

Becky: And-

Whitney: That is amazing.

Becky: In fact, that year, which is the year before last, of our 10 graduates, our first graduates, four qualified for medical school.

Whitney: Wow.

Becky: I know. Isn't that amazing? So, change is possible. We've seen it. And we are so convinced, in fact, our, our mission statement changed at that point because up to then we thought we're serving the leprosy affected, and then at that point we realized, you know what, this sounds so basic, but we are true believers that every child in this world comes with inherent gifts, and talents, and abilities, and all they need is opportunity to develop. And they will become amazing.

So we have brought more than a thousand volunteers from America over to India to work. And each one of them brings their own skills, right, and so, um, we've had a lot of people from Broadway come. And have started a dance program. And so our kids just won an international dance program. They're phenomenal. And we had two girls from the US women's soccer team come and now our soccer team's winning clear up to the state level. And we've had, I mean, i-it goes in every category, we've had these amazing volunteers come, and now our kids are the top of everything that they're doing in India. Which just goes to show-

Whitney: That are children of-

Becky: The leprosy affected. Yeah. But I have to tell you, that we have, so 20% of our kids actually come in from the surrounding villages.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: Because we decided-

Whitney: You've expanded.

Becky: Well, no, we just had to get rid of that stigma.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: I mean, that's the biggest thing they face, so we thought we've got to mainstream them somehow.

Whitney: Ahhh.

Becky: So we said, "Okay, we're going to let ... we're going to save 20% of these spots for our kids from the surrounding villages", and everyone from India, when they heard that, they said-

Whitney: No one will go.

Becky: "You stupid Americans, no will send their kids to a school, right, with children from a leprosy colony, are you crazy?" We said, "Oh really, well we are going to have free English taught by Americans. And we are going to have a state of the art computer lab," which we, in fact, do. Because we're the offsite backup of a big, um, legal outsourcing

company, and so they come like almost every other month and update our computers and I mean we are truly are state of the art.

Whitney: It's interesting, because as I think about the journey of, of Rising Star Outreach in India, and I think about your own journey, because, you know, 17 years ago, 16 years ago, you didn't know what you were doing, you had never started a business, you hadn't done anything. And so I wonder-

Becky: Well, wait a minute, I had done something, right? Not anything, but-

Whitney: You, well, right, yeah, thank you for correcting me, but according to a lot of people, you had not done ... you'd been a mother, and you'd reared 10 children which in my book, is if you can rear 10 children you can be a CEO of any organization anywhere, in my opinion.

Becky: (laughs)

Whitney: But according to many, you did not have the skills to do this.

Becky: Oh, yes, absolutely did not have the skills.

Whitney: And, and yet, here you are. So, my question to you is, have there been any points in time where you said, "What am I doing? Am I absolutely off my rocker?" And when did you switch, and say, "Mmm, I do know what I'm doing?"

Becky: Well, the truth is every day. Because every day in India there's a crisis.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: And every day, I was truly aware of how inadequate I was.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: And so, I-I think two things happened, I think first of all, I had to, I had to expand and grow. I mean, I had to reach inside myself and teach myself things I had never learned before. I mean, literally, I didn't know how to get on to, um, email. M-My husband kept opening me an account, and it would just go dead because I would never use it. So he'd have to open it for me again, he was determined I was, but with 10 kids, who had time for email?

Whitney: Right.

Becky: Right? But, I mean, I had to learn all these things. I remember for the first six months I did this, every time I needed to add an attachment, I had to get one of my kids to come add the attachment for me. (laughs) I mean, I just was illiterate, truly. So I had to educate myself.

But the second thing is, I learned that the world's full of very creative, awesome, wonderful people who care. And all I had to do was find those people. So the skills that I didn't have, I could find and bring other people in to do it. And there is something, Whitney, that when something is created that is good, it creates a positive energy, and that draws people to it. And we have, if you go online and look at my board of directors, I think you'll be astounded - people who came together for a cause.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: Who believed that change was possible, could see change happening, and we, when we started out, we never filled out a grant application. We would just say, "Come to India. Come see what's happening." And we would literally have these billionaires in, on their hands and knees, cleaning out leprosy wounds in the colonies. And they could see that for just pennies, lives were changing.

Whitney: So you've never asked for money, you just said, "Come to India."

Becky: Come, we, well, never's big word-

Whitney: Okay.

Becky: But that's how we started, right?

Whitney: Right. Right.

Becky: I, we didn't know-

Whitney: You're like don't say never.

Becky: (laughs)

Whitney: We're still raising money, okay, right.

Becky: Yes. And we, we do now, fill out grant, but it's always people that have come to India.

Whitney: Right, right, right.

Becky: I mean, that's how I got in touch with you, right?

Whitney: Right, right.

Becky: Is by someone who came to India and said, "Wow, what can I do to help you, this is amazing."

Whitney: Right, right.

Becky: So that's how we've grown. But the other thing is like, we, the, my board just jokes with me that half of my board came, came to us by sitting next to me on an airplane.

Whitney: Really?

Becky: I mean, literally, I'll just sit next to someone and start talking to them, and, I mean, for example, one time I was on a flight to Dubai, out of India, 'cause the Gulf News decided to do a special on our work, and they did a five page special in the Gulf News, in, in Dubai. But anyway, so I was going to spend a day with reporter there, and I, the first time I had ever flown Emirates, got on the plane, and they, the flight attendant said, "Oh, Madame, we've moved your seat." I said, "No, no, no, I have to have an aisle, 'cause I have 10 kids I use the restroom all the time." (laughs) And she said, "No, we've, um, we've moved you up to first class." I went, "Oh, whoa." I mean, this is first time I ever flew Emirates.

So I get up to first class, I'm sitting next to this very distinguished looking gentleman. And I talk to him and he's from India, and we talk, and he says, finally he says, "Wow," he said, "This is the work of the gods." He said, "How can I help you?" And I said, "I don't know, what do you do?" And he said, "I'm the managing director of all the oil refineries in India." I said, "Perfect, why don't you come on my board of directors?" He said, "Oh, that would be such an honor." I mean, literally, this is how we've gotten half of our board. I've either met them in a bathroom, or I sat next to them on a plane, and it just seems like when you tell people what's going on, there are so many people that want to make a difference in the world, want to do good, want to use what they have to make other lives better, that, like I said, it just creates an energy and people just come to you.

Whitney: So I want to just go back to the question that I asked you about yourself. Do you feel like there's been a moment where you sort of said, "Okay, I," not "I got this" but you sort of came of age?

Becky: Literally, there's hardly a week that goes by that I don't say, "That does it." (laughs) "I give up."

Whitney: I give up. (laughs)

Becky: "This is just too hard." I mean, India right now is going through a stage where they're, they're very actively trying to get rid of foreign charities. So, last year, depending on which account you read, of the ... so every year, a fifth of India's charities has to be, um, certified, re-certified, so every five years you do your certification again. It's called FCRA license. And last year, of the 55,000 charities that were up for renewal, the government says 13,000 but most people that work with charities say 30,000 were thrown out of India. Including the Ford Foundation. Greenpeace. Compassion. I mean, all of these major charities.

We, we got renewed. Which is amazing.

Whitney: Why do you think that is?

Becky: Um, I don't know. I think, I-I'm a great believer in God.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: Um, and I think we're completely honest, we've, we've never paid a bribe. So no one had anything on us. You know, no one could, um, and I just think when you're honest, that somehow good things come to you.

Whitney: Yeah, what would you do if in five years they said you couldn't renew, what would you do?

Becky: We're going to be okay.

Whitney: Just a couple more questions as we wrap up. So, how has this impacted, and, and influenced your children? Seeing, having this experience?

Becky: Um, I think it's impacted them in a major way, actually.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: Um, as hard as we were trying to raise children that were socially responsible, um, you know, and they get in to high school, pretty much the world revolves around them.

Whitney: Yep.

Becky: This has brought a whole different feeling in to our home. So every summer my kids all go to India, and they work, um, for many years they did, now they're married, and so they don't go anymore. But they would work in the, as volunteers in the children's home, in the school, and in the colonies. And it gave them a different sense of what matters in this life. And their priorities, truly, did a major shift.

Um, and I feel like they're successful, wonderful children, but I think they also have a real commitment to, to not just making money and joining a country club. I mean, I think they feel like there is more to being successful, and it involves giving back.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). What does your husband say? How does he feel about what you've done?

Becky: (laughs) He loves it. In fact, you know what, in fact, the funnest thing is how proud he is. When we started our school, we have 27 kids, but even that first day we had hundreds of kids on the waiting list, they came from all over India, when they heard there was a school that would accept leprosy affected children. And as the school went on, that waiting list just grew, and grew, and grew. And every year that they don't come to school, they get further behind in their studies, right?

And so, Padma finally said to me one day, she said, "Becky, we, this is not okay, we've got to fix this." And she said, "You know, the government provides free schooling for

kids." She said, "We need to get them in the government schools." And I just kind of said, "Seriously?" I said, "How do you expect to do that?" Because they have to buy uniforms, two uniforms, their book bags, their notebooks, there would, pay their fees, you know, it comes to about \$60, and no leprosy affected person has \$60.

And I said, "So how do you expect to do that?" And she said, "I've been thinking of an idea." She said, "What if we made a one time loan to the parent, if their child wants to go to school. And then every time I come to the colony to do the microfinance," she said, "And once a month, I'll collect \$5 from that family." And if you do the math, in one year, that's the \$60, right, they've paid it back. She says, "So then they can borrow the same \$60 the next year for the next year of school." And then she says, "So theoretically, Becky, this one loan of \$60 could put a kid through 13 years of school." And she said, "The best part about it is the parents are paying for it. But they're doing it at a rate that they can afford." But the best thing about that is that when they're invested, right, nothing given free has any value, when they're invested, they won't take the kids out to go begging. And sure enough, that's exactly what has happened, 'cause they want those kids to be in school now.

And so, um, we were started thinking about how are we going to expand, and we thought well, this might be a great way. So, I asked our director, what's our repayment rate? How are we doing with that? She says, "Well you won't believe this," but she said, "We've been doing this now for six years," she said, "We have not had a single parent miss a single month's payment."

Whitney: Wow.

Becky: These are leprosy affected people, they're basically beggars, most of them, right, and that's like such a miracle. That's not a single parent. So this year, we put out another 450 loans. And, if it works this year, our plan is to take it throughout all of India, there are 800 colonies in India. And I have this vision, that in very few years, in a very short time, any leprosy affected child in India who wants to go to school, whose parents are willing to work hard, can then go to school. Which will be the first time in history.

But, it's not just that. We decided that if we were going to attack the stigma, we can't just have kids going to the government schools and getting a mediocre education, right. I don't want to dis India in any way, I'm just saying, compared to the private schools and compared to our school, it's a very low comparison.

Whitney: Right.

Becky: And starting this next year, actually starting this year, we're going to start with our next campus. So we plan to campus north, south, east and west. Because we get the reports, every year, from all the kids that are in the, in the, um, we call it the perpetual education grant.

We get their report cards every year. And so, we can identify the brightest and the most, um, driven, the kids that are the most motivated, whose families seem to the

most supportive. And we can put those in these schools, and suddenly, we can be graduating thousands of kids in India that are going to be at the top of their, of the educational system, that are going to be the engineers. And I-I think when you-

Whitney: That will completely upend the world's view of-

Becky: It will. Because if you think of that leprosy affected person as the person with puss running down their arms on the side begging, or it's the person who's doing the IT for your office, or is your doctor, I mean, that's a whole different way of thinking about these people, right? So if we can impact that stigma with these kids, that can impact millions, literally millions of lives across India.

Whitney: More than millions.

Becky: Yes.

Whitney: Tens of millions.

Becky: Because it's literally a worldwide problem.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: So ... I mean, I think that will be a disruption.

Whitney: The most simple definition me of a disruptor is a silly little thing that takes over the world. And so, when I think about what you're making it possible for these children, who are leprosy affected, to be able to do, it's the ... in, in the world's, you know, in so much of society's view, these silly little things, and they're certainly taking over their own world, and potentially taking over many other worlds too, so, it's really fantastic.

Becky: Well I would have to say that probably the person most surprised in all of this has been me.

Whitney: Why?

Becky: Because I never had the vision. Right? I thought I would just try to at least go help one or two people, I could at least do something, right? I never had the vision that this would become what it is today.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So that, that goes back to the very, an earlier question I asked you, is maybe, maybe that's a better way to ask it, is you started something very small, and you just knew you had to do something. Do you remember the point in time where you realized, oh my goodness, this is way bigger than I ever thought?

Becky: Every year it has become way bigger than I ever thought.

Whitney: Okay.

Becky: I still don't think I have the vision of what this is going to be, except that now I actually can see, and we're, we're just joining ILEP, which is the International Leprosy Elimination Program, right, run by the UN. And um, 'cause already people are coming to us saying, "You do education like no one in the world does for the leprosy affected," I can see this being all over the world.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Becky: If you really do stop it at this generation ... I mean, I don't want to, I don't want to sound outrageous, but you know maybe, maybe the vision's way beyond what I have. Maybe the legacy we can leave the world is a legacy of a world without leprosy. It won't be us alone, there's many, many people working, right, doing their own thing, but coming together, I mean, wouldn't that be a wonderful legacy? This disease that has destroyed millions and millions of lives over thousands of years. We don't need it anymore in the world.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Amazing.

Isn't Becky interesting? I've said many times that if you've reared lots of children, you can go toe to toe with a CEO. In Becky's case, she's both. A few years ago, Jane Clayson, who by the way introduced Becky to me, wrote a book titled [I Am A Mother](#). This was her response to people who after she had retired from television--and asked her what she does now...I'm not just a mother. I am a Mother.

And that question -- Why doesn't somebody do something? [In episode 48 with Eric Ries](#), you might remember. He asked the same question. When we ask that question -- it would seem, like Becky, said -- you are that some body.

So Becky started. She knew nothing about business. About India. About leprosy. What she did know was how to start. Do you remember in Episode 45 I interviewed Richie Norton? He wrote the book [The Power of Starting Something Stupid](#). He said the common denominator with all successful people is that they start. This is true for you too. Where you start is to a large degree irrelevant. The question though is -- can you gain momentum, and how fast?

Now that Becky had started, she's been very discovery-driven. She takes a step forward. Gathers feedback and adapts. Is food the solution? Nope. Make things. Nope. Work with one charity, a second, third, fourth. Nope. Until she took all of this accumulated experience (remember that no S-curve is ever wasted), and started her own charity. As the energy of her S-curve built, more energy came in the form of Padma Venkataram. Now - Becky's started a school. She is on this incredible journey. What a gift. To her. To her daughter. To her family. To the community.

Practical tip: If you feel like you need to do something. Pay attention. My hunch is that your brain won't really have the idea--and certainly won't obsess about it -- unless it's possible for you to execute it. You're able if you are willing.

If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes – if you're willing - we hope you will leave a review on iTunes, even one sentence. It helps other people find the podcast

If you aspire to be a talent magnet, like Becky Douglas is, check out my book [Build an A Team](#) published by Harvard Business Review Press.

Thank you to Alison Levine, who was [our podcast guest in Episode 49](#). She wrote in telling us she LOVED being on the Disrupt Yourself podcast—that we were great hosts, with lots of good questions. Thank you Alison—you were a great guest.

Thank you again to Becky Douglas for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.