

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 63: Nate and Vanessa Quigley

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, speak, write and live all things disruption. My guests are Nate and Vanessa Quigley, co-founders of Chatbooks, photo books for people who don't have time to make photo books.

Whitney: Nate and Vanessa Quigley, welcome. We are so happy to have you on the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. And one really fun little tidbit is that we have never had a husband wife team, actually we've never, I've never interviewed two people at the same time before. So I think this is going to be really fun, um, to do. And so welcome to both of you.

Nate: Thanks. Great to be here.

Vanessa: Yes, thank you Whitney (laughs).

Whitney: So let's just start off by, uh, we'd love to hear your backgrounds. How did the-how did the two of you meet, how long have you been married, and where do you live and just a little bit about the two of you?

Vanessa: Well, this week we are celebrating our 24th anniversary.

Whitney: Congratulations.

Vanessa: I know-it's hard to, hard to believe-

Nate: Wow.

Vanessa: But we've been together longer than that, we actually met when we were 18 as freshmen at Brigham Young University. Uh, I had come to Utah to go to school from Florida, and Nate had come from Connecticut and it was meant to be. We, it was love at first sight, and we have seven children, and we've lived kind of all over. We were so anxious, we loved our time in Utah at BYU, but we were anxious to, uh, move on and so we didn't even walk for our graduation. We packed our little Honda and our baby because we graduated with a one-year-old, and, uh, moved to California and then we spent some time in Paris, and Boston, Connecticut, Florida, and now we're back here in Utah in the beautiful mountains.

Whitney: Mmh, Vanessa, what did you study in college? I mean, we are going to talk a little bit about the business of, uh, of [Chatbooks](#) in a moment, but, uh, we'd love to hear your, you know, what did you study in college, did you ever expect that you would be doing what you are doing today?

Vanessa: Never, never, never (laughs). I, uh, I studied music of all things. I, in fact, I AP tested out of all of my math, I didn't want to have anything to do with numbers. I just, I wanted to

be a performer, so I-I majored in vocal performance, specifically opera, and I wanted to do that for the rest of my life and perform. Nate is the business guy, he has all the business background. And throughout our marriage he's been really excited about building companies and always wanted to talk to me about building a company together one day but it fell on deaf years, I had absolutely no interest. So, it is quite ironic that we are here running a business together. And I win awards for being a woman in business, and I feel like the least qualified of anyone, but there's nothing like learning on the job.

Whitney: Right. So, is your interest, I'm curious Nate, would you agree with that, did Vanessa really have zero interest in-in running a business and starting a business together, is that how you remember it?

Nate: No, it's really funny because I have pitched Vanessa on, you know, like 50 different business ideas along the way, and the only other business she ever showed any interest in was the very first business idea we ever talked about, which was, believe it or not a scrapbooking supply catalog that we, because Vanessa was a really big scrapbooker when we first got married, had our first little baby back in the mid-90s when that was a big thing, especially in Utah, the Utah county area where scrap booking was kind of born. It eventually became like a two billion dollar industry, but it was started right in, you know, the town where we went to college and Vanessa was really into it, and she made these amazing scrapbooks of our first baby and our little newlywed-life.

And, and you know, the places she went at the time to buy little scrap booking supplies were little mom-and-pop shops, and I was thinking, "Man, we can make like a bigger sort of mail order catalog business out of this."

Vanessa: That's right.

Nate: And Vanessa was like, I remember you were really excited about that.

Vanessa: I forgot about that. I was really excited about that because I loved scrapbooking, and, yeah, we were moving to California and I was afraid I wasn't gonna have access to all that stuff. So I actually remember looking at shopfronts on Montana and Santa Monica.

Nate: I do too. I do too.

Vanessa: And then we realized, uh, we can't afford Montana and Santa Monica.

Nate: We couldn't afford our rent controlled apartment.

Vanessa: No. It's true.

Nate: And then I got really busy just trying to survive in my first job out of school, and then in business school, but I would-you know, I would continue to pitch you on different things along the way, and you never paid attention to any of that.

Vanessa: No, well, I having babies like at break neck speed, and so that was kind of part of it (laughs). I could hardly think about anything else.

Nate: But 20 years later we kind of are in a scrapbooking-ish business.

Vanessa: I know. I know.

Whitney: Yeah, absolutely. It's like you planted that seed 20 years ago, and then you started this business now. So okay, so you had this idea, interesting, just wasn't the right time, and then Nate, you go off, you graduate, um, undergrad, what did you study, was it accounting or was it something else?

Nate: Yeah, It was accounting. So Vanessa was on stage singing in operas, being super interesting and cultured and cool, and I was doing double entry like debits and credits. And I would come and do my homework watching her, um, rehearse with the concert choir and stuff like that in the audience. So I was always a fan of the arts-

Vanessa: A patron.

Nate: And then I just, you know, stumbled back into my very boring accounting classes, and graduated from BYU and took a job in a management consulting, and we were-we were with McKinsey & Company for a couple of years and then I went to business school.

Whitney: Okay, so, um, just give us a quick-quick background. I know, because we've gotta do like 15 years in five minutes, but, um, after B school, you've done a number of entrepreneurial ventures, can you just walk us through, um, some of what you've done? And, I know I'm asking you this on the fly, but as you think about what you are doing today, what's one of the key ... Like, so you are an accountant, right?

Nate: Yeah.

Whitney: What's something that you learned from being an accountant that now serves you as an entrepreneur? If you can just kind of trot through that quickly, and Vanessa I'm gonna give you a chance to think about, and I know that these lists for both of you could be very long, but I want you to just think about one or two of them. Vanessa, in your full on child rearing, lead parent years, um, what are-what are one or two lessons that you've learned there that have helped you in the business? So Nate, I'll let you go first and then we'll hear from you Vanessa.

Nate: Okay. So, as I left business school there was a really logical reason to go back to McKinsey for a few years, because they would pay for business school. So that would have been the intelligent thing to do. And unfortunately I just really wanted to start a company. I wanted to start, starting and growing businesses, and kind of had that itch for a long time. And my amazing, um, co-founder here, co-founder of Quigley Corp. was willing to support the, you know, the kind of the irrational decision to start our first company right as we left business school, and so, um, started a-

Whitney: Wait, before you-before you go there Nate, where did that come from do you think? This entrepreneurial, you just had to build something, where do you think that came from?

Nate: I don't know. It's funny, all of my business school, my business school application you have to write like five essays you know about who do you want to be when you grow up basically? And they were all about starting companies, and they were all about, as I was kind of on the LA freeways going back and forth to clients, I was always obsessed with, you know, these buildings with the names on the side of them, like what is that company and who started it and why did they start it? How did they do that? That was always kind of an obsession.

And then in high school I never really had a job. I had one job actually, I hated it so much that I never had another job. I would always find a business partner, and then we would start like sealing driveways or, um, going around in-in, with our little trailer and collecting junk, and taking it to the dump. And you know, we always just came up with some weird way to make money all summer long that let us do it at our own, you know, kind of on our own pace.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: where we could also go water skiing in the morning and at night. Um, and we, I always felt like man, I make more money doing this, I have way more freedom and way more fun, I'm working with a buddy of my own choosing, and we are like listening to music all day long, versus my one experience at an hourly job, and the clock just dragged.

And I was a bagger at Walter Stewart's market, um, which is a little grocery store in New Canaan, Connecticut. And I just remember, I was 14 years old, I'd just, you know, not made the basketball team, which is the first I'd ever gotten cut from the sports team, and I was so devastated. My mom and dad were like, "Well, you better go find something to do." And so I became a bagger and that was just the worst job ever, because it's-

Whitney: So insult to injury right? You don't make the basketball team and now you are bagging groceries.

Nate: Yeah, exactly, and-and you are standing there – it was so slow, and then you finally get paid at the end of two weeks and it's like, no money.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: Uh, and there was taxes, I never, I didn't know what taxes was, I was being paid in cash. I was like, "I'm never doing this again."

Vanessa: (laughs).

Nate: Um, I think I've also had a little bit of like wanting to, you know, wanting to start a business, wanting to work for myself in some way. Although, obviously as an entrepreneur with investors you don't really work for yourself, you work for your investors, but I think that's probably where it came from. I have no idea.

Whitney: Yeah, well, that sounds right. That-that-that makes, at least it's part, it's a contributing factor at the very least. So, okay, so accountant, you studied-

Nate: Yeah.

Whitney: Did you become a CPA?

Nate: Nope. So I-I had a bachelors degree in accounting and then went right to management consulting, to business school and then, um, became an entrepreneur.

Whitney: All right, so what are some of the things you've learned?

Nate: Yeah. So, I-I think, you know, accounting really is a ... I think a terrific background for an entrepreneur. So just to be able to understand in general - how does this thing work, and I've met other entrepreneurs that don't have any type of formal, either MBA or accounting type of training and I do think they are at a disadvantage. I mean, they find their way, great entrepreneurs find their way around it, but I think their life is a little harder than it needs to be - is they don't, you know, know the difference between revenue and cashflow and just some of the basics that end up mattering.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: I've also found in my time as an entrepreneur, my CFO has-has been sort of right hand man, an incredibly important partner to me. And I think being able to speak the same language as your CFO and understand, you know, why she or he is worried about something and not have to have them, you know, go back to absolute rudimentaries to get it across to you has been a real advantage. And I think the same is true, as you just sort of through and negotiate contracts, like you can more quickly and readily understand, why does this person care about that, and why do I care about this other thing? And then how can we come up with a term that works for both of us?

Whitney: Hmm, and what job do you think really, um, forced you, or gave you training in that-that negotiation piece. Because it probably wasn't the-the accounting aspect, or was it?

Nate: Um, well my very first business was always trying to go out of business.

Vanessa: (laughs).

Nate: So, you know, um, that was-its primary desire in life was to implode and go out of business and luckily we survived the first couple of years while it was furiously trying to do that. And we were able to kind of turn the company around with, uh, with a really important contract we signed with Pepsi.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: Now what happened with my real contracts and negotiation experience, and I do think, you know, the accounting background and the business, you know, sort of MBA stuff, ended up mattering, because there were a few terms we really needed, and there were bunch we didn't need to care about. And I think that sort of tried to save Eleven Technology through a really important contract with Pepsi was, I don't know, that was probably the first moment where it was really real.

Whitney: Did you end up selling that company, what did you end up doing with that company?

Nate: Yeah, so we raised venture capital for that business and then kind of fought our way through the post 9/11, 2002 recession. And then four years later sold it to a public company.

Whitney: Hmm, so how many years did you go on that company of just, you just kind of said it tongue and cheek of it kept trying to implode, it must have been incredibly painful.

Nate: Yeah.

Whitney: How many years was that happening?

Nate: I would say it was ... That was pretty miserable, right up to the very end. I mean, I would say the last couple of years we-we sort of figured it out, and we were able by the end of-by the end of that run to-count kind of all of the, not all but lots and lots of the leading consumer goods companies as-as customers. It was a six year chapter, and I would say the first few years we just did the wrong thing. The next two years we figured out what the right thing was to do, but it was a really difficult period, you know, that 2002 timeframe, if anyone remembers post 9/11 like, the country was really, you know kind of shut down and everyone was very, very conservative. And we needed to raise more capital, but you just simply couldn't. There was just no capital available.

We were really fortunate to land customers like Pepsi, Procter & Gamble and Pepperidge Farm, and-and just run the company like a bootstrapped business after having burned through, you know, in the 2000, in the-in the sort of pre-9/11 years, all of our venture capital.

Whitney: And then the last two years then you had, you were starting to move into selling it, it sounds like.

Nate: Yeah. Basically the last two years, with those 3 really important early wins, Pepsi, Procter & Gamble, Pepperidge Farm, um, we-you know we tried to finally figured out, this is what we sell, this is what the next version looks like, so the dev team knows what it's doing as a roadmap. And-and then we can now build the sales team and we manage a sales process. And it was much more sort of what you would think a business was like, where you actually have a machine and you are kind of running it, versus the first, you

know, kind of four years. Honestly I have to admit, were, how do we keep it alive this month?

Whitney: Mmh. Vanessa, do you remember what that was like for you?

Vanessa: Yes I do. (laughs).

Whitney: What was it like?

Vanessa: I remember ... It was a little terrifying, I mean, there were times where he'd come and he'd say, "We are done, I can't, we can't make payroll. It's over." And I'm surrounded by children. And, uh, yeah, it was a little scary, but, um, Nate is one of the most determined and hardworking people I know. So I didn't ever worry that we'd be homeless, you know, and he's very marketable, he's talented. But yeah, it was-it was scary to see this risk, because-because starting a business out of business school, with an offer to go back to McKinsey and have our business school debt paid off and a nice income. You know, that was, that was kind of a scary thing to walk away from to try the entrepreneurial route. I knew that's what-what he needed to do and what would make him happy so-

Nate: Part of me wishes you would have told me absolutely not, are you insane -

Vanessa: I know. Part of me does too (laughs).

Nate: It was so hard.

Vanessa: It was, it was interesting. We had some-we had some interesting times.

Whitney: So, I want you to hold onto that experience at Eleven, it was called Eleven Technology, is that right?

Nate: Yeah.

Whitney: Okay. Why don't you hold onto that, because I think there are some interesting lessons to be teased out of that as we talk about your current business [Chatbooks](#). So let's put that on pause for just a second. Vanessa, I want to ask you the question of the experiences that you've had as a full on lead parent, and also being part of an entrepreneurial duo, where you are not ... You know, you are the lead parent, but you are not the lead entrepreneur, and sort of your fate is not in your hands entirely. Just some experiences that you gleaned from that that you now bring to your work today.

Vanessa: Well, I think being the spouse of an entrepreneur, you know, you have to have a lot of grit as an entrepreneur, but I think you need to have grit as a spouse as well. You know, so, I-I learned those lessons by, you know, standing by his side, as he went through the ups and downs of that. The thing that I feel like I go back to, you know, now in my job as an entrepreneur with [Chatbooks](#) - I did a lot of performing kind of part-time on the side, with the performing, you know, honed the art of storytelling, which is primarily what I do here I feel like right now is-is telling our story in lots of different ways.

Um, but as-as a parent, you know, in the very early days, we had a baby way before we thought we were going to, and we were still finishing school and then next thing we know we had another baby, and which is kind of I felt like winging parenting. You know, I didn't have a real plan, I was just kind of, you know, learning as we went. We were babies ourselves practically. We were very young.

But with the three and four kids I realized I needed more structure, I needed to do things more deliberately, and I think it was about around then when we really started to talk about making our family culture. And we, we instituted a few things, one of them which is, remains today, it's our Quigley creed, which kind of outlined the values of our family and defined who we are, and how we behave. It was really our attempt in brainwashing our children to be kind and obedient. We-

Whitney: Wait-wait-wait, what are one or two of the highlights from that-that Quigley creed?

Vanessa: Well, it's not very long, it's Quigley's are respectful, responsible, considerate and kind. And we made hand motions to go with it, and every week we would have them stand up, you know, oldest to youngest and recite it like military style. (laughs). And often would call out, you know, "Hey, was that responsible?" Quigley's are responsible. Um, and so I think that experience with our family, and you know, it came with varied success as we built this company here, from the very beginning, I was really mindful of, the culture and what we wanted as far as a company culture.

Whitney: You know what's so interesting about that? You said you have seven children. And, um, if I recall correctly you came from a very large family, is it 12 children or 10? I'm trying to remember.

Vanessa: I'm the oldest of 12.

Whitney: You are the oldest of 12, and so, I think-I think that that's interesting, because we have two children, and when you've got two children you can be a little bit helter-skelter. I mean, you can kind of have that messiness of a startup, and not have to figure it out, because you feel like you are in control and you kind of can just wing it.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Whitney: And, what, what I'm hearing you say is that when you had three, four children, five and you probably experienced this growing up or certainly your parents did is you've got to have some kind of process in place. It's like I think about the s-curve or the learning curve, you can be messy, but once you have enough you got to lock and load and figure out some type of system or process. And, and the other thing that's striking to me as I'm listening to you talk Vanessa is that when you had children so quickly and they were just coming at you, again, so many people, me in particular in this conversation, let's plan out when we have our children and what that will look like.

And when they are kind of just coming at you just got to figure it out. And the thought that I'm having is that's kind of like being an entrepreneur, stuff is just coming at you, and you are figuring it out. Is that, am I putting words in your mouth or is that accurate?

Vanessa: No, I think there is a correlation there, and you know honestly growing up in a very large rowdy family, I-I enjoy some surprise, a little bit of craziness and chaos. And I kind of feel like that, I kind of thrive in a little bit of that. And so, you know, in our own family obviously we had some a little bit of that too, but I think that is what appeals to me. Um, especially, it has been interesting as our company has evolved, you know, those early startup days are very different from where we are right now.

And I sometimes long for those early days, there is something really kind of romantic about it. I mean, I'm thrilled with all we've been able to do and I'm just so proud of what we've built and love our team, but it is different. And, you know, we have had to create some processes and refine those, and it does take a little bit of fun out of it, but I know from experience with my family that it is necessary to keep everything on the rails.

Nate: And I would say that we have-we have fewer, I would call processes here at Chatbooks, but we do end up talking a lot about culture and values, and that's I think similar to our family. We have a ... We don't, I wouldn't say that we have lots of like really well laid down tracks that we do over and over and over again, but we do keep coming back to like the Quigley creed thing.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: And, um, I think we are trying to run the company the same way where we just, we love having really-really talented people on the team, and we kind of go crazy to recruit someone that we need that we think is really special.

Whitney: What's the Chatbooks' creed?

Nate: Yeah, the Chatbooks' creed. Well, the first it's a star. So we talk about the Chatbooks all start team, and our real hope that we can-that we can have kind of an all star team culture, where there is a lot less coaching and a lot more just sort of great players doing their thing. But there is-there is five points on the star, that's kind of how we've organized our values. And the first one is grown up. That's kind of the head of the star, and then the two arms of the star you can imagine that are, amazing and ship. And those are kind of intentions, and that's kind of how we actually do things with our arms and hands. And then the legs we are standing on are optimistic and kind. So kind made it from Quigley creed over to Chatbooks all star points.

Whitney: Mmh, I love that. That's such a great visual. I've asked you so many questions. I feel like I'm burying the lead. What does Chatbooks do, how did you get there, um, was this, did this idea come from your head fully baked or did you iterate your way toward this idea, how did this come about?

Vanessa: Chatbooks are automatic photo books, it's a mobile and web app that makes photo books for you, takes all the work out of it. And like we said before, I had a passion for scrapbooking, I've always believed in the importance of holding onto our stories, our family story. Um, but through the years of lots and lots of children and very little time to do anything crafty and also at the way that we, you know, we manage our photos. They are all just digital, and they just get stuck on our drives and we don't do anything with them.

Um, I needed, I realized one day that with my youngest who was five at the time, not only did he not have a scrapbook, but he didn't have any printed photos at all. In fact, one night I found him up in his bed and he was crying, which is totally not like him, because he is the jolliest kid on the planet. But, he ... When I asked him what was wrong, he rolled over, and he was holding a little photo book his preschool teacher had made for him for preschool graduation, and he told me that he never wanted to grow up. He'd been looking at these, you know, six or seven photos in this little album, and was reminiscing, and I realized that I was failing him, because he had five years of a very rich wonderful life, but nothing to hold onto, and to look back on.

And I knew I wasn't ever going to have the time to sit down and scrapbook like I had done years ago. Nate for years had been, uh, building a little, uh, business on the side at first, and then for about two years full-time. You know, building some software to help families hold onto their memories, but in a purely, uh, digital way, that everything was safely organized in the cloud. Uh, but it was missing the part that I cared about, and that was the physical thing to hang onto. Uh-

Nate: It was also missing users and people who cared a lot about it.

Vanessa: It was a little too complicated.

Whitney: (laughs).

Vanessa: It actually wasn't that complicated, it just required-

Nate: You had to do something.

Vanessa: Something of the user. And I just in this experience with Declan and that moment of you know, seeing his tender heart breaking, I had this flash in my mind of my Instagram feed that like, I'd been using Instagram for a few years to share moments with friends and family and it wasn't like comprehensive of our whole life, but it was definitely the highlights and it had the journaling aspect of the caption, so I just thought, "Man, if he could just print my Instagram I'd be happy." I wouldn't have to do anything and that would be solve this problem for me.

And so, um, I told him that that's what I thought he should do, and he was at a point with Just Family, the company he was working on, to try something new. And so he took-he took a risk of my idea, and turns out-

Nate: And that was-that was a very sanitized way of saying it all, because Just Family was-was kind of a project, it didn't deserve to call itself a company because-

Vanessa: But you had raised money.

Nate: We had raised money.

Vanessa: And spent our money.

Nate: (laughs). We invested a lot of money and, uh, it just wasn't going anywhere. I also have to admit that I-I really did not care at all about the idea of printing anything out of Just Family, in spite of the fact that at this point probably hundreds of users had asked us if they could print the things they were putting into Just Family. I kind of thought they were just sort of behind the times, and they were going to eventually realize that print was dead and print was over. I also hated Instagram with a burning passion.

Vanessa: Yes. I used to hide in the bathroom to look at Instagram, because it was not allowed.

Nate: Yeah, I hated it. I mean, obviously it was allowed but like, you know-

Vanessa: No, I didn't want it. It was just competing like, with what he was building.

Nate: Yeah. I was hoping that families were going to spend all their time kind of putting their stories together and sharing them among families, and it was going to basically be like scrapbooking was in the mid-90s. I mean, you didn't share your scrapbook pages with anyone-anyone that everyone ever known and met. And I just, I was like the kind of conservative guy from Connecticut, it just didn't make any sense to me.

So, um, but I was totally wrong on both of those points, and I spent two and a half years and a lot of, um, Vanessa's money. And even then friends and family's money, you know, pursuing this really Quixotic, anti-Facebook, anti-Instagram quest. And it was going nowhere. So I was-I was at that point I think very humbled. And when Vanessa came downstairs after talking to Declan she had sort of the, you know, a zeal in her eyes and her red hair was flying around, and she said "Hey, I don't want to use that, just print my Instagram."

And it was that moment of clarity we kind of went back into the office the next day with my little team of four or five guys. That was the other thing, we had no women on the team. So, no one-no one was there to tell us that we were missing it by a mile, other than, you know Vanessa in that moment where she really was ready to speak up. And-and uh, we kind of just pushed all of the code off to the side, and started over on this, print, you know, print my Instagram idea, and a couple of weeks later had a prototype and everyone that we showed the prototype to said, "I want that."

Every time we would show, you know, version 77 of our million line code, Just Family system that had 45,000 functions built into it. People were like, yeah, that's cool. I should use that. And you know, as an entrepreneur, "yeah, that's cool, I should use

that." I mean, just anyone who might be listening who is building something, if that's what you hear, you are dead. And what you need to hear is, "shut up, I want that."

Vanessa: Shut up and take my money.

Nate: We actually got that in a couple of, uh, [early Instagram posts](#) as we launched Chatbooks, people were writing, "shut up and take my money" in the comments.

Whitney: Seriously-

Nate: And we kind of thought this probably it. This is the one.

Whitney: So you did it once, you did it twice-

Nate: Yeah.

Whitney: What lessons are there for everybody else who is listening? Because you, so the question is, you didn't get the product market fit. You kind of were stubborn, and then this time, I'm trying to be kind.

Nate: I know. I know.

Whitney: You did it again, and you weren't, you didn't quite get it. What do-why do you think that is? And what lessons would you, um, impart to those who are listening?

Nate: Well, it won't surprise you to know that I have spent a little time thinking about this, because it is a little bit maddening, you know like, how in the world did I miss that so clearly, you know, again? And I think it comes down to like what it actually takes to, um, you know, to sort of survive as an entrepreneur, is, it's very classics, like you are back to Oedipus, it's your fatal flaw is very closely related to your greatest strength.

You have to be ridiculously stubborn, and you have to be able to block out all kinds of nay saying and criticism, and like, you know, what are you doing that's so crazy, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard of in my life. You know, there is a whole bunch of that you actually have to block out to survive. What you can't block out somehow is, you know, a real user, with a real problem, with a real credit card telling you what they actually want.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: And so it's just this really tricky screen you have to put up to sort of protect your sanity, and you know, and have enough sort of grit to kind of persevere, but also in the process not just go completely blind and completely ignore all of the signals that are coming at you.

Whitney: That's fascinating. So really what you are saying is this, your dogged determination is what has allowed you to be an entrepreneur, and it can also be a fatal flaw, and so there

were a couple of ... And so now your question that you are probably asking yourself continually is how do I balance for that? And it sounds like at least part of the answer is to be willing to listen to a truth teller, which in this particular instance happens to be now your business partner Vanessa - is she's got a totally different perspective. Is that...?

Nate: Yeah. I think that's-I think that's-I think that's a great point. If you can surround yourself with people that you have tons of respect for, but who don't see the world the same way, and are able and willing. Some people are willing, they are just not able to get the absurdly determined human being to kind of deviate or change course or try something new or hear a different perspective. I really do think there is not like an easy answer to this.

Whitney: No, of course not, you know, if you think about your life, all of our lives is a hero's journey. This is part of your hero's journey is to figure out how to do that.

Nate: Yeah. I think that's right, and it's mostly just my responsibility to sort of figure out, how do I-how do I know if right now I'm doing the thing that I do and that it's part of my-part of my strength kit, you know like why I'm able to kind of be an entrepreneur, and then wait, is it getting in my way right now? Like how do I figure out when I'm - okay good, I'm using my superpower, versus oh no, my fatal flaw is about to take the company over a cliff.

Whitney: Interesting, so interesting. Okay. So-so Vanessa, I would, the question for you is, you come downstairs and now there is this problem like, honey, let's solve this problem. Do you remember like how you approached this, or was it just really like my child is in pain, or our child is in pain, we need to fix this. Here is a way to fix it. Um, did you say like, "Would you please listen to me," or what did that look like?

Nate: No, that's not what you said.

Vanessa: So my child was in pain, I was a little bit in pain too. We had not received a paycheck for-

Nate: Three years.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Nate: Two and a half years.

Vanessa: Two and a half years, and we had also moved our family from Florida, where we had been for about seven years, and where I grew up and where all my family was to Utah.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vanessa: You know, and that, you know, moving teenagers, moving a family is just hard no matter what, but moving on such a gamble was-

Nate: Move, there was no relocation package.

Vanessa: No-

Nate: We moved ourselves.

Vanessa: I packed every single thing for that move with a family of nine. Yeah, I was a little, um fed up.

Nate: Vanessa is a redhead, I mean, she was a little fiery. But I mean, obviously she needed to be. And I think all the stars had to align. I had to be in a place where I had a few sleepless nights, and was I think at that point finally kind of humbled in a way that it's hard for me to humble myself. And then she came down with, uh, you know, with a lot of passion, and that was it.

Vanessa: I think in some of the earlier, you know, earlier days, where I didn't feel quite as personally invested, I was like, this is Nate's thing, this is cute and fun, oh so he thinks print is dead, hmm, I don't really agree, but whatever. It's his thing. But then, you know, after a couple of years I did feel personally way more invested, so I felt a little empowered - more empowered to say let's steer the ship this way, this is the way I think it should go. But it is interesting that once I gave him that, um, directive, and he started going with it, and definitely, you know, we realized there was product market fit. I didn't really want anything to do with the day to day operations of this new company.

Whitney: So how did you get pulled into it? (laughs).

Vanessa: I think-

Nate: I persisted.

Vanessa: He did. It was a constant conversation, but like my youngest was just starting school full-time. This was the moment of my life I'd been waiting for, where I had my days for myself to do what I wanted. And I really considered going back to school to get a masters in music or becoming a yogi, or taking up tennis. I had never anticipated running a business. And I did have concerns about running a business with my husband. I always thought that might be a dangerous mix. We are both the oldest in our family and I'd always been my own boss, he'd always been his own boss. I did worry about two bosses working together. But, um, like he had said there were only men working in the company, and we needed to get the word out about what we were doing. You know, that storytelling element, and there was nobody doing that.

We had a really great photographer that was taking beautiful pictures of the product, and she had created an Instagram, I was kind of telling the story that way, but I needed someone else to help tell our story and then continue to guide the product. It was still like, there were still some tweaks to be made, and so, um, I just really one day realized this isn't going to work without me.

Nate: She-she realized we were going to screw it up without her, and so that's kind of what finally...

Whitney: Because you were-you were the client, and you could say, "Here is what we need. Here is what we need to do."

Vanessa: 100%, this was a product that was solving a personal problem of mine, I knew better than anyone why it was important and what it should do, and how to talk about it, and so I came to work with my laptop and started Googling like how to get PR, how to get, how to, you know, how to market a startup? I literally taught myself everything, um, from Google.

Whitney: How exciting!

Whitney: So Vanessa, do you remember a point at which you were like, "I'm doing this." Like where you went from kind of dabbling to I'm gonna go help make sure this thing works to like, you were playing the president or playing a co-founder on TV and actually being the co-founder, do you remember when that happened, or the moment when you knew that has happened?

Vanessa: It wasn't like a, a real like aha moment, I kind of felt like I was playing another role. You know, I was, as a performer I'm used to like pretending to be someone else. I kind of was doing that, because I was just so terrified, and I felt so unqualified and-

Nate: But you started to have fun.

Vanessa: No, it was really fun, I, it was really fun, but, um, I think it got real, the first time we had our, our ChatFest, or our birthday party, I think it was at our second birthday party and there were people in the company that I didn't know, I hadn't met yet, and um, like realizing, there are a lot of people that have put their trust in us, and we are ... I felt super responsible for their livelihood and their careers. And that's when it really felt real. And I was really grateful in that moment that I wasn't doing it by myself. Um, all of those fears by the way that I had had about running a business with my spouse were unfounded. It turns out we make a pretty good team, which I guess after being married for 20 odd years shouldn't come as that big of a surprise, but um-

Whitney: What's your favorite part about working together?

Vanessa: The business trips (laughs).

Whitney: (laughs). Where you are able to leave everything behind and go off and, you know-

Vanessa: Yeah, it does feel like we are on a day date every day, at some point, you know-

Whitney: Yeah.

Vanessa: I don't know, I just-I-I love that, and I love seeing him doing what he had done his whole career, uh, while I was, you know, doing my thing. I just had no idea what his days were really like, the pressures that he had, and was under, and um, I don't know, I think it's, I find it pretty sexy actually watching him run a meeting.

Nate: Oh, boy, oh boy, next question, next question...

Whitney: Nate, before we go on though, I think it's an interesting question, Nate, what about it is fun for you, uh, about doing this together, is it fun that you get to talk, shop in a way that you couldn't before or what do you enjoy?

Nate: Funny, the other companies that we, you know, I was involved in after business school. They, I mean, I wouldn't call them boring, but they weren't the kind of thing you want to come home and talk around at the dinner table about.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: Um, this is our little family farm, and our kids love it, and our kids understand the product, and our kids see value in the product and know why we are doing it, why we think it's important.

Vanessa: And they are also making sacrifices to make this happen.

Nate: They've made a lot of sacrifices.

Vanessa: Because I'm a lot less available.

Nate: And even, you know, leaving Florida and coming to Utah to sort of get the company going.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Nate: The kids felt, I think feel really invested. And so I just love how, I don't feel like there is no division in my life. I'm not trying to figure out, how do I keep this first company out of business school from going belly up and be the husband and dad that I want to be? And we are really fortunate that we live about two minutes away from the office. So, I just feel spoiled in a 100 ways that we get to run this little family business together, and we all kind of love it, and it's a-it's a product that does a thing that we all think is really important and helps and strengthens families.

So it's hard for me to pick one thing. I honestly just feel so incredibly lucky right now to be able to work every day with my wife on a problem that we really care a lot about, and to have our children, you know, a part of the story as well. It kind of feels really idyllic and family farm-y, you know. But I'm a little bit of romantic, so I guess that's why I like it so much.

Whitney: Interesting, are any of your children working with you, or are they old enough to be doing that at this point?

Nate: Yeah, we've had, um, not right this very second, but our two oldest kids have both worked as interns, one translating our app into Spanish and the other doing a variety of marketing and design jobs. Neither one of them are working here right now, but it was really fun to come into the office and have Vanessa show up, and then um, have, you know, our daughter Laken come in after her morning classes and spend a few hours out in the patio doing like photo shoot with some of our products and photographer. So, at this exact moment no, but we have had, and it's been really great in general.

Vanessa: Oh, and the younger boys we've hired to put together office furniture and package doo-dads.

Nate: True, and they know when we are bringing lunch into the office. We bring in lunch a couple of times a week and Aiden our high schooler and a couple of high school friends always somehow show up.

Vanessa: They tend to show up.

Whitney: They happen to show up that day.

Nate: Yeah.

Whitney: So in terms of roles and responsibilities, Vanessa, you know, if you think about functionally what you do on any given day, what does that look like, and then Nate what does that look like for you?

Vanessa: Functionally, I mainly I'm in working with products, development and with PR and marketing.

Whitney: Got it. Okay.

Vanessa: Um, you know that storytelling element, but then making sure that we get the product right. And, you know, we started off just as print your Instagram, but we've grown a lot, there are a lot of different photo sources that we can use, but continuing to make it as automatic as possible. Um, we've worked really hard this last year on a new product that uses AI machine learning to help automatically curate un-curated photo sources. That's been a big project to tackle, and, uh, I've had a lot of input on if we're close enough to release it, yeah once ... We still have a little work to do.

But-but I love having my hands in that. Uh, I also make a point to be home when my kids get home, so I am, I keep part-time hours just because I still have, you know, a bunch of kids that come home in the afternoon and I think it's really important for me to be there. So yeah, as far as family, people always ask like the division of the family life. Um, I-I, I still do most of the cooking, and um, I do a lot of the lead parenting. But it has been fun to see Nate take up a lot more of that as we've done this venture together as well.

Nate: Especially as you go on your fancy business trips and leave me home.

Vanessa: Oh yeah.

Nate: You know.

Vanessa: Sometimes I have to go on trips without him, and he gets to handle home too.

Nate: Vanessa used to always think I was going on vacation, you know when I was going on as a global sales odyssey, you know, I could go trundle through bread companies in some crazy, some crazy places, I was trying to sell our software at our first company. And she-I think you always really did think I was just going on vacation.

Vanessa: I was very jealous.

Nate: And now it's fun to watch Vanessa try to get out of trips, for Chatbooks and she's trying to figure out if there is a way to finagle out of it last second. I'm like, "You understand now."

Whitney: Right, exactly. So, um, Nate, what are your from a functional perspective, what do you spend most of your time on?

Nate: I spend, um, a lot of time I would say, you know, won't surprise you, finance, um, and operations, and product as well. I would ... You know, Vanessa is really, um, helping ... And her official title is Chatbooker in Chief.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nate: My official title is CEO.

Whitney: Got it.

Nate: But Vanessa does an amazing job of just representing and being the voice of the customer. Um, at the executive, um, team meetings, and at our board meetings. It's just so great to have our customer who understands all the trade offs we have to make, but also understands the realities of what our customers really want and how they think.

Whitney: I know that you are obviously not publicly traded, but what data can you share with us, so that people have an idea of how much you've grown from when you started just "print me my Instagram photos" to where, you know, how many books have you printed, just what kind of data can you share with us?

Nate: Yeah. I think we've talked publicly about how many people in the business, how much capital we've raised and how many books we've sold, so I'll give you those. We have about 65, um, folks that work full-time in the office, and another 80 or so, this fluctuates a little bit up and down, on our customer support team, these are people who work part-time from home around the country. We call them our Mom Force. That was

another sort of amazing invention of necessity that has now become really part of our secret-part of our secret ... A secret weapon for us I think, and a really core part of this strategy.

We think we can provide incredible customer support, because we have these amazing women. And it is women that work for us in customer support, taking care of our customers, and, you know, clock in and out of a cube farm, they work from home on hours that they set, and they just do an amazing job. So about 140 people, 150 people in the business. Um, we've raised just over \$20,000,000 across a few rounds of venture capital, and we've sold more than 5,000,000 books, um, in the last, you know, in a little bit less than four years.

Whitney: So, I guess my last question, what are you excited about in terms of on the horizon for the business? I-I know Vanessa you just mentioned this, um, this AI of being able to, uh, curate photos, anything else that is on the horizon that the two of you are especially excited about?

Vanessa: Well, one thing that there isn't a great solution for out there yet is, uh, which is an essential part of our family story is video. And, um, we think we have a real fun and unique way to help families enjoy, organize and enjoy their video. And so I'm excited about that, and hope to have that launch in time for the holidays.

Whitney: Mmh, okay, and Nate, any other thoughts from you?

Nate: No, we are-we are both really-really excited about the machine learning stuff that should be launching in the next month or so, and-and video. We think that really that is kind of complete the vision of how do we safeguard, organize, and enjoy our family memories and stories and very excited to get things we have kind of, you know, in the lab right now out into the wild.

Whitney: Hmm, so where can people find you?

Nate: Chatbooks.com.

Whitney: All right. It's that's easy.

Nate: Yeah.

Whitney: And so, if you have an Instagram feed and you wanna turn it into a book you can sign up there, is that correct?

Nate: You definitely can, and we should say that while that was the original inspiration, um, something, we are now printing, the vast majority of the things that we print come direction off people's phones and computers.

Vanessa: From their camera rolls.

Nate: Yeah, their camera roll or just your laptop.

Whitney: Interesting.

Nate: So, while Instagram is absolutely kind of what got us out of the wilderness, um, it's becoming a less and less important part of our business.

Whitney: Hmm, love it. Nate and Vanessa Quigley thank you so much for being our guests today. This has been fascinating. I think people are going to love hearing your entrepreneurial journey. And, um, any last thoughts you'd like to share with us?

Vanessa: Nate has one thing that he always says.

Nate: What?

Whitney: Okay, what do you always say Nate?

Nate: Oh yeah, my grand unified theory of entrepreneurship is don't quit and don't run out of money.

Whitney: Okay, and so now, and now I think to send us off, Vanessa I think I want you to sing that for us. Don't quit, don't run out of money. Sing it.

Vanessa: (laughs) I need to think about that. (singing). Don't quit, and don't run out of money! Don't quit!

Nate: It's a little jingle.

Vanessa: I need to work on that.

Whitney: (laughs). There you go. All right. Thank you so much it's been an absolute pleasure.

Vanessa: All right. Thanks Whitney.

Nate: Thanks Whitney.

One of the things that was hard about interviewing Nate and Vanessa is that I have known them for over a decade—you'll see that they are not only featured in *Build an A Team*, but also in *Disrupt Yourself*. So I had to keep asking myself--what would you as you are listening want to know? What would I ask if I didn't know them?

Whether it's an interview or the work you do everyday, would you approach it if you hadn't done it before? Because this is, in fact, very hard to do, it's part of the reason we jump to new learning curves. It's to give our curiosity some adrenaline.

Hearing about Nate's experience of his fatal flaw was instructive. What makes you great, can also pull you down. For those of you that haven't already listened, listen to Carter Cast (Episode 55) on derailers. Also, so interesting, that it took this difficulty, this nadir, of being in the depths for Vanessa to be willing to say something. And then talk about acres of diamonds--the answer to making this business work was right under Nate's nose. Vanessa his wife, was / is the voice of the customer. As is their customer support by the way.

Practical tip: The next time you hire someone to work for you, hire where others aren't hiring -- self-taught, boomerangers, on-rampers.

Our review this week is an iTunes review and comes from AerialPJ who says -

I listened to my first episode in the car...big mistake...there were five solid takeaways I wanted to write down, and couldn't do that while I was driving. :) Time well spent.

Thank you so much, ArielPJ! If you'll email us at wj@whitneyjohnson.com, we'll send you a copy of my new book, *Build an A Team*. Thank you to each and every one of you who leaves reviews of the podcast or of my books because it helps tremendously in getting these ideas in the hands of people who want to do things differently, but don't quite know how to.

Thank you again to Nate and Vanessa Quigley for being our guests, 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.