

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 104: GINA BIANCHINI

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson, and I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Our guest today is Gina Bianchini, the CEO and founder of Mighty Networks.

WHITNEY Welcome Gina.

GINA Thank you for having me.

WHITNEY First question for you today is where did you grow up and what did you think you would be when you grew up?

GINA So I grew up Cupertino, California. It's in Silicon Valley although at the time it wasn't really clear that it was Silicon Valley as, as you remember too having, having grown up there as well. Um, and it was orchards. My grandparents had moved there to open a nursery in the 1950s. And so it was a very interesting place to grow up because on one hand, you had, you know, just a like very strong, post-war middle class environment in place. You had agriculture and orchards and just a tremendous amount of beauty.

You had actually research universities like Stanford and, and Berkeley and Santa Clara, and, and just like an incredible just melting pot of interesting people. And you know, we were an hour obviously from, from San Francisco as well and just the incredible social movements and change movements that, that San Francisco has always kind of driven in, in some respect.

My dad was a history teacher and my mom loved anthropology and was an anthropology major. And because of that we just ... we grew up in an environment ... I, I have an older brother and a younger sister, and we just were always curious. And I loved history, I loved thinking about people movements. I love thinking about social change. I was just always fascinated by the stories of people and how, you know, cultures evolve and, and, and how it really ... systems worked.

And then underlying all of it, again, as you well know, the computer happened. And it just happened that the people that invented Apple Computer lived probably two miles away from where I grew up. And so, you know, all of a sudden, the, the orchards became, you know, nondescript tech buildings. (laughing) And, um, and Apple Computer, you know, moved in. So, and Atari moved in and HP was there and Lockheed Martin, you know.

So all of sudden there was always this sort of, intersection of technology, engineers, counterculture, research labs and all of it happening kind of in one place at that time. And if anything, it's given me an appreciation for just how important moments are, uh, how important sort of timing is in all of the different things that we do whether it's as entrepreneurs or human beings, um, living our, living our daily lives.

WHITNEY Were you aware, Gina, of what was happening? You, you said the power of moments. Were you aware of how momentous this was or do you remember when you became aware of it?

GINA Um, yeah. It's a really good question. So, you know, for me it was probably third, fourth grade when Ataris showed up in our classrooms. I don't know if you remember that as well. Like, like just one day, you know, we all could take a computer class where we got to build a dot matrix turtle or something by like plotting it out on, on, on a graph.

I had a classic childhood in so far as, um, I played sports. I was good in school. I love sports. Um, you know, my, my dad had been an athlete so I was like, "Oh, I want to be ... like I like ... I'm good at this. This is fun. I like playing soccer. I can run fast and score goals.

Um, and so I played sports. I went to school and was good at school. I-

WHITNEY What sport? Gina, what sport did you play?

GINA When I was a kid, I played everything. I was a ... I played soccer. I played basketball. I ran track. I was on, I was on a track team. Um, and specifically I was a sprinter, but then I also was a race walker which is a very obscure sport.

Uh, so I race walked and then I raised animals. So I had, um, I had mini lap rabbits that I bred and then sold in the newspaper, and that was really kind of the first business that I had

WHITNEY How old were you when you were raising rabbits?

GINA I was probably like in fourth, fourth to sixth grade is when I did rabbits. And I did community theater. Like I was, (laughs) I was that kid. But then like I didn't know anybody who wasn't that kid where, where I grew up when I grew up.

WHITNEY All right. So couple other things I want to touch on before we move to, to college. Um, you in your bio ... It's interesting to me you're like, "I did race walking, I did soccer." You, you failed to mention you were an all-American field hockey player.

GINA Yeah. Because that was later. Yeah.

WHITNEY When did that happen?

GINA That was in high school.

WHITNEY In high school.

GINA Yeah.

WHITNEY Okay. Got it. So how did you even discover field hockey? 'Because wasn't field hockey a fairly obscure sport, um, when you were in school?

GINA Well, in Calif- Yeah. So, in California ... Well, first of all, field hockey if you just kind of look at the history of field hockey, so it's, it's very popular on the East Coast, always was. It was the one sport that was socially acceptable for women to play.

WHITNEY Ah.

GINA And so I picked it up pretty fast and, and, and then played it in high school. And again, I was really lucky that I was in the, you know, the right place at the right time with a great high school team. And then I kind of lucked out in terms of being good at it in a way and in a system that colleges looked at, you know, San Jose Field Hockey players and Silicon Valley, um, Silicon Valley Field Hockey players. And so I was recruited back east but I was also, you know, recruited to, to schools in California and was really fortunate to be able to play in college which I did.

WHITNEY Interesting. So, it's, it's a confluence of things again, right? You're, you're a talented athlete. Um, you said you inherited it from your dad. You worked hard at sports and then right place, right time.

GINA Yeah. My mom would like you to know at this moment that she's very well-coordinated as well.

WHITNEY (laughs). It sounds like there is a history there. (laughs).

GINA Yes. (laughs). It's not just my dad.

WHITNEY Shout out to your mom who's also very coordinated. What does she like to do for her ... in, in her coordination skills?

GINA Apparently not very much but she would just still like that point to be made. (laughs).

WHITNEY Okay. Well, shout out to Gina's mom. Um, that's really funny. So, um, okay. So here you are, you grow up and then this really tragic thing happens when you're 11 years old. And ordinarily, I wouldn't ask you to share this but I think it's important. At least, my sense is it's important in terms of what you now do.

GINA Yeah. So when I was 11, um, basically two army officers showed up at our door. It's 6:14 in the morning, and told us that my dad had been killed in a, in a drunk-driving accident in Jackson, Mississippi while he was on a National Guard reserve trip the night before. And so, it was so weird. It, it's still like weird to think about it because when my mom came in my room to tell me and my sister because we shared a room, um, and she had already told my brother and he was like upset.

But like literally I was like, "Oh, my God. Our dog is dead." Like, because we lived on this busy street and I ... So I had literally no concept as an 11-year-old that like anything bad could happen other than like my dog dying because that was like the only th- that was like the most tragic thing that I could possibly think about. Um, and so when she said that my dad had been killed, I ... like I was in shock. I actually think that I ... Even now like a zillion years later, I, I still don't like quite believe it or just process it. I don't know. Like there's just something when you're just sitting there and you're like that's just not possible. It's just not possible.

So, anyways, I think the things that I, I certainly learned from it, one, at that moment that I learned that everybody handles grief differently. Um, and actually it's one of things I'm

very respectful a- about is the fact that you cannot predict how you or anyone else handles grief, um, and handles, you know, just shocking trauma. Um, and also that it's really hard, you know. (laughs) Like it's, it's really ... I mean my mom is 36 years old. My dad was, was killed when he was 38. She's 36 years old with a 13-year-old, an 11-year-old and a 9-year-old. And that was something that was really challenging and yet there was always the expectation that, that, um, you know, we would be, we would be survivors, we would be all right. We would, we would make it, make it work. Um, and we did.

Some of us in some way is better than others, but at the same point in time, I think that it also solidified for me was that the things that I feel incredibly fortunate to have been exposed to by my family, by where, you know, where I live, where I grew up – my dad's sister lived next door to us. My cousins lived next door to us. My grandparents lived in walking distance of our house.

And I was just incredibly fortunate to grow up in an area that, um, celebrated people's passions. My dad was passionate about old cars, and on a teacher's salary was like able to like buy cars in pieces and put them together and then like show them and just he loved them. It was ... He demonstrated for me true passion, but so did my mom. Like my mom has never, never found an interest that she takes on with anything less than like 110% which sometimes is problematic, but sometimes it's just amazing to watch and amazing to see.

And I think the thing that I learned from, from just, you know, th- the environment where I grew up and how I grew up and the values that my family had and, and one was, you know, anything was possible and I was capable of doing anything and that I, I put my mind to. Two, the things that make us human and the things that allow us to celebrate, you know, are our interests, are our passions, is our curiosity, and also our ability to connect with other people, uh, and build relationships that are meaningful and valuable and honest.

And that I wasn't sure what I was going to like do with my life, but I knew I wanted to do something that could have an impact, um, not just because I thought I was capable of it because I did think I was capable of it, um, but also because I felt on probably some level that I had come from a history and a legacy of, of people that weren't necessarily going to be able to, you know, have the impact that, that they would have had had they not been killed at 38.

So that's always been a driving force for me. But I think it was a driving force f- for me, you know, wh- when I was 10, you know, let alone when I was, you know, 20 or 30 or 40.

WHITNEY

Yeah.

GINA

But the other thing about high school that, that I should actually mention because this was probably the most pivotal thing besides field hockey that, that mattered to me in high school was, you know, as I mentioned, I was, I was really passionate and curious about history and politics and, you know, always thought that, that not necessarily that I wanted to go into politics but I definitely always felt like I wanted to, to, to lead something. It was important to me to sort of have an impact.

And then when I was 16, I kind of threw my hat in the ring to ... and I applied to be a congressional page which is a six-month program in Washington, DC for juniors in high school where you go to school in the morning at, at ungodly hour, um, especially when you're in high school, and then you work all day in the House of Representatives or the Senate. Um, and I was fortunate like I, I, I was chosen, um, as one of the congressional pages, um, on the house.

So, I actually when I was in junior in high school, I moved to DC for six months, lived in a dorm on Capitol Hill, met some incredible people from all over the country, and like now all of a sudden like, you know, as a, as a total suburban California girl, you know, I'm exposed to like food deserts in Washington, DC and people from all over the country. And it was just an incredible experience. It also really defined my decision about college because I was like, okay, it rains in May in Washington, DC, but this East Coast thing like you can't like leave your house in the morning with wet hair because it will freeze.

It rains in May. It's super cold in February. And I was like, why do I ... Why would I do that? Like California is pretty great. (laughing). So, I came back from being a page, you know, basically applied to ... So in spite of kind of being recruited for, for, um, for field hockey at colleges back East, I was like, "You know what? I'm staying in California" which meant that I, you know, could basically choose from one of a handful of schools that had division one field hockey in California. But also, it's super important to me after my page experience to go somewhere where I would be exposed to people from all over the country and all over the world because that was such an important experience. So basically, that's two schools at least in my own experience in California, Berkeley or Stanford. I got into both. I went to Stanford and it was an incredible experience.

WHITNEY So, it sounds like the page experience was very formative for you. You know, what I find myself, um, curious about, Gina, as I'm listening to you is that, um, your parents had very modest professions I think by most people's standards, important and modest.

GINA Uh-huh (affirmative).

WHITNEY And at the same time, as I hear you talk, I, I hear this sense of you really have believed since you were a very young girl that you can do it. And somehow your parents believed they could do it. Most people ... I don't want to say most, but many people do not feel that way. Where do you think that came from? As you look at your, your parents, your grandparents, where did this sense of just possibility that is within your grasp come from do you think?

GINA It's a really good question. So one, you know, I, I think anybody who grows up in an environment where their grandparents were immigrants, poor immigrants, which was certainly the case, actually, not for my, my dad's parents but grandparents, who had come over from Italy and like worked in the coal mines and like in San Francisco and like, you know. Wh- When you watch over the course of a generation, the American Dream. I mean it's really ... It sounds so cheesy but like-

WHITNEY Oh, I just got chills.

GINA Yeah.

WHITNEY It doesn't sound cheesy at all.

GINA When, when you watch people ... And, and I think that that is the thing that that makes all of us, you know, so incredibly fortunate, but it was the American Dream. My father was the first to go to, to college in his family, and my father was a pretty unique man in so far as like always was, was successful and kind if that, if that makes any sense and also pretty funny.

And then my mom, you know, my mom was the oldest of six kids. She started saving for college when she was like 11. And, and that was like a very important part of my mom's identity. Um, and, and was the, was not the first to go to college, but she went to college

and she paid for it herself, and was ... And my parents met in college. And I think when you are surrounded by stories and people who, you know, are, are doing things but ... You know, my, my father always had sort of this, uh, he was kind of a local celebrity for lack of a better word. That sounds so cheesy but like he was, and we grew up around that.

And, you know, my mom, you know, my mom was and is super smart and just never really, never really despite wanting kids and loving kids and wanting to like always have lots of kids, never embraced the gender roles of like these are the things I should do. So it was like loves kids, hates to cook, you know, and still hates to cook. So, I, I just, I feel like I was surrounded by people who demonstrated that you could do things that were against the odds. And also that, um, you know, watching my mom in ways that were, were pronounced and more subtle just look ... A- and again this was the '70s and '80s.

She would have never considered herself I think proactively a feminist per se, but literally, she would just look at the traditions of my father's side of, you know, very traditional Italian family and just be like, "Yeah. I'm not doing that." And so that combination was a pretty unique one, um, to, to be a witness to.

WHITNEY Yeah. Thank you for sharing that because it is, i- it's just so interesting to hear you talk and there's just this, this underlying sense of, I can do this. And so hearing about your parents, about your grandparents, about the American Dream, I think it starts to get encoded into the DNA of you, and so it's just fun to see how that's played out over now what sounds like several generations. So thank you for sharing that.

Okay. So you go to college. Um, let's talk a little bit about what you studied in college and then, um, your first business that you started and what that, that journey of becoming an entrepreneur.

GINA So I, I should even go back. Like my little rabbit business was probably my first entrepreneurial-

WHITNEY Oh, right. Of course.

GINA I, I also when I was a kid, I had a playhouse and my grandmother was really into crocheting. So I, um, I didn't really want to learn how to crochet, so I would only crochet like a little str- you know, like basically, the, the thin string. I didn't-

WHITNEY Oh, yeah. The chain.

GINA Yeah. The chain.

WHITNEY I know how to crochet.

GINA Yeah. I'd like ... I ... That was the only thing I could do but I would crochet bracelets, necklaces, headbands, uh, bookmarks, and then I created the Ye Old Crochet shop in my backyard. Um, those were like my two businesses. (laughing). And so like ... That was always like, you know, business always seem creative to me, so that was kind of fun.

So I go to college. I try not to study political science, but then realized that like that was the thing I loved. I loved thinking about people as systems. And if you think about what political science is, history to some level as well, but really political science is it is the systems architecture of people in many cases, um, which, which, you know, I don't think ... I don't know that people will describe it as that but like I live and work in, in an environment where systems thinking, systems architecture is basically what software

platforms do. I just had always taken it from the people approach, uh, and the people angle because that was the one that was the most interesting to me.

So, I, I studied political science and my ... Between my software and junior year, I went back to Washington, DC. I was like, maybe the summer is better. It was not in case you're wondering. Um, it like rained a bunch and then I basically was like, okay-

WHITNEY And it was humid. And it was humid.

GINA It was humid. I'm like, "Okay. Wait. I still don't want to live on the East Coast." But I was in DC and I'm standing outside the White House with a sign. And I remember this very vividly. So I'm standing outside the White House like sweating because it was humid. I got my sign. I'm looking around. I'm like, "Okay. This is cool." I get why, why like, you know, social change marching while holding a sign is super important. I also would prefer to be inside the building.

How do you get inside the building? How do you, how do you get a seat at the table? Um, so I was like, "You know what? It might actually be fun to look at this thing called business" which again, not very many people in my family had like necessarily done that because on both sides I come from not, not like corporate business, you know. My grandfather owned a nursery, And then my, um, my mom's dad was a teacher. My dad was a teacher.

Then I came back to, to Stanford. I ... The following summer I did an internship in, in at a company. It was large aircraft, uh, and container leasing company. Just, you know, one of those really sexy ones in San Francisco. And, um, and then I got to interview with all the different departments, and I was like, you know this management information systems, that sounds cool. Like, I don't know what it means but it sounds like it's about management, so I'll, I'll go ahead and, and choose that department to work in.

And I show up the first day and I was like, "Oh, so that meant computers. I was not thinking that that was the case, but okay let me just go with it." So I went and I got a bunch of like VHS, um, instructional videos from the library, about like how to, how to use, you know, Microsoft Word and how to use Excel and how to use all these things that I kind of knew but not really knew how to use. And I ended up by the end of the summer, I had organized basically a new budget upload process using this new kind of like mini-computer called an S400.

And so, I came back to Stanford my senior year, and I was like, I'm going to get a job working in business because that seemed ... a couple of people I knew who were older had done that and that seemed pretty cool, and it also seemed like you could make some money doing that, and I like ... I wanted, I wanted money and I wanted a purpose

And so I, I got a job working at Goldman Sachs in their high technology group which at the time had two people, three people in it, um, because it was looked at like as a completely career limiting move. Um, and it was 1994. (laughs).

So, I just again happened to be kind of in the right place at the right time. I had like worked in an MIS department not knowing what it was, turned that into a you know, pretty incredible opportunity at Goldman Sachs in their high technology group. Uh, learning about different parts of software and hardware, um, working on, you know, initial public offerings and M&A and just learning how to be a professional. Also, making some of the best friends that to this day are still my best friends.

So, that was a pretty formative experience, and then I worked on, uh, initial public offering for a company we had taken public at Goldman and they, um, asked me to come over and run investor relations and do kind of basically their corporate development role. So, I did that for two and half years and that was an incredible experience.

WHITNEY

What company was that, Gina?

GINA

It's a company called CKS Group. It had been three guys out of Apple. Like these were sort of the dark days of Apple before Steve Jobs had come back. And so a lot of the people that, you know, had, had really built their careers and, and reputations during Apple's heyday had left Apple to start this ... Essentially it was one of the first web development and design companies, and then did a bunch of the early branding work for like Yahoo and as well as Next as well as, um, as well as MCI was a big customer and there were a number of others.

And the company went public. Um, and so that was just a really incredible experience to, to have, uh, what was a pretty significant amount of responsibility pretty young. And then I went to ... I left CKS to go to Stanford business school. Around this time CKS merged and, um, basically the, the end of CKS was that all of the really good people went back to Apple, um, and became Apple's internal branding agency and, and creative team.

So I went to Stanford Business School and in my second year at Stanford Business School ... And this was during the like first dot-com era. So I was in business school from '98 to 2000 which was like the height of the dot-com boom. So I almost ... I almost think about myself as like a little bit of a Rip Van Winkle. Like, I missed like all of like the crazy opportunities to make crazy money in non-businessy situations and came back into the workforce pretty much in the most dire like moments of not just the technology industry or what felt like the technology industry but like San Francisco in general.

I mean it was, it was a depressing time in 2000. Um, but in 1999, 2000, my boss from CKS, um, Group had moved over to a venture capital firm called Sequoia Capital, and he had called me up and he was like, "Gina, Gina, let's start a company. Let's do this, let's do this." And, and he had that kind of like super, you know, e- e- excitement. And I was like, "Okay. Let's, let's go do that."

So I started a company in March of 2000 called Harmonic Communications. And what our goals was, was to essentially take all the different places that you could have marketing or advertising data, bring it on to a hosted service and be able to analyze it and drive much more targeted advertising and marketing spend across the right channels. So, you know, obviously what we all do today it was just in 2000.

We were the right idea at absolutely the wrong time. Um, because you know, in 2000, all of the big companies that we would have wanted to have as customers, you know, they, they thought for a moment. They're like, "Thank God. I don't have to think about this internet thing." Like it was just like a total fad and now it's, now it's over.

That was a really both challenging and incredible experience because one I stayed employed through, um, you know, through some of the darkest days of 2000, 2001, 2002 when a lot of my business school classmates, um, you know, were, were ... You know, they thought they were taking on a job that was going to make them, you know, a millionaire right out of business school. And then all of sudden, you know, they, they're out of work and the company is out of business.

So I also learned that it's not a great idea to start a company unless it's around something that you are incredibly curious and passionate about and want to work on for 10 years.

And advertising tracking, measurement and optimization, um, wasn't necessarily that for me. Um, I'm really glad I did it and I certainly gave it, you know, everything that I could. But at the same time, um, something interesting was happening amongst, you know, my friends and people that I was seeing and just, you know, the people who stuck around Silicon Valley and San Francisco after the dot-com bust, when everybody else kind of went home because, you know, no longer world riches is going to be made were really pretty interesting people.

And we were all, you know, true believers not, not in the internet per se. Like, like, "Where was I going to go? Back to DC or New York? It was freezing there." I was not like going back there. Um, so what happened was there this sort of just small community of people, um, that were looking and watching this new thing kind of emerge. Um, it started with blogging, Uh, in 2002, 2003, blogging was pretty cool. It was kind of a new way to sort of think about websites, you know. And like people, you know, were, were really sort of building these very authentic internet-based cultures.

And this thing called Friendster happened. Um, this thing called like I have a crush on you and all of sudden, it became really clear to like a handful of folks that I was friends with and me and, um, that there was something happening around this idea of viral connection, networking, connecting to different people, and it immediately made sense to me because I had had 20 plus years of thinking about people and systems architecture.

Well, what is ... You know, when you fast forward today of social networking, it's people systems. It's systems architecture of human beings. So it immediately made sense to me and, um, I, I just was, was really fortunate that another friend of mine called me up and was like, "Gina, let's start a company. Let's do this whole sort of social networking thing as like this programmable apps just like the internet and I said, "Yes." Um, and-

WHITNEY W- was this Ning? Was this Ning?

GINA Yeah. This is Ning.

WHITNEY Okay, okay.

GINA So, so basically, there was just this really interesting moment where, you know, Reid Hoffman was a good friend of mine at the time and he was starting this LinkedIn thing. I like watched what they we're doing with Paypal and, and then, you know, Marc Andreessen who I started Ning with asked me to start Ning together and I was like, "Yeah. Let's do it." And you know, Reid had just invested and Peter Thiel had just invested in this new thing that was happening and it was around the corner from us in Palo Alto called Facebook, The Facebook at the time.

Um, and they were just, you know, everybody was kind of ... It was a small set of people and everybody was just kind of around. And, and it was, you know, a really special time. So our take on social networking at Ning was, um, social networking would evolve to be much more like the web. There would be creativity. There would be people doing blink tags. There would be, you know, a lot more sort of creativity and expression that would be in social networking. It wouldn't evolve like AOL or CompuServe which were they had very narrow and fixed view of what you could do with things.

Our bet was that, you know, MySpace would actually be the model and would be the thing that, that, you know, allowed for people to have creativity and connect people in creative ways around their interests and their passions. And so it was wildly successful for, for a variety of reasons for quite some time. Um, and so, you know, if we fast forward whatever

15 years at this point, you know, Facebook did some things that were incredibly smart. I never looked at Ning and Facebook as direct competitors.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

GINA Certainly everybody is competing for people's time, um, and sort of expectations of what it means to build community, what it means to organize, um, and from my perspective, you know, whether it was at Ning or then, you know, I left Ning and, and founded Mighty-Mightybell but is now Mighty Networks. My strong belief ... it was my belief then and it is my belief today that the right way for social technologies to be implemented is with a leader, you know.

It's sort of evolved to think about it as they're a creator with a purpose, a brand, a business, but with a strong brand, a strong person leading a smaller network of people, and when you build software that enables that person, you or, um, you know ... And, and there are literally 340, you know, 364 million creators with a purpose, people that are out there who have raised their hand and said, "I want to bring people together because I want to make a living doing what I love but also I have expertise to share. I have relationships that I want to facilitate and bring people together and curate people meeting each other. And I have experiences that I want to create because that is why we are here on earth." And-

WHITNEY That's so interesting. Okay. Keep going. Keep going.

GINA And so, I have been absolutely stubborn and passionate that social technologies will ultimately evolve to be something that is much more ... uh, that looks much more like the web in its early days that is about creators building brands and businesses that bring people together. And those are things that increasingly people will pay for and therefore we can fund individuals who are phenomenal leaders and, and creative visionaries and, you know, just make it easier to meet people and, and realize your interest, your passions, your goals. And, and that's what we're doing with Mighty Networks. We really think about it as ... And there's all sorts of really amazing things happening in the market right now completely independent of Mighty Networks that just happens to be like coming full circle in many, in many respects.

Um, but, you know, my, my story and my experience has been, you know, pick a lane and, you know, really I believe in this model that is creator centric, that is creator led, that is about how do you build a platform that allows, you know, for example, you Whitney to take this podcast and all of the other things you're doing and, and provide the, the conditions by which people feel safe and comfortable expressing who they fully are as people, but more importantly making connections and building relationships in that context around the things that you've really spent time and developed an expertise around in terms of frameworks and models for each of us to realize our full potential.

WHITNEY So, let's play that out a little bit. Um, let's say, um, so what I'm hearing you say with what you're doing with Mighty Networks ... And I want you to be thinking one question because I don't want to forget this. What did you learn from Ning that's allowed you to make Mighty Networks successful? It's something I want you to be thinking about. And also, how did that experience with your dad dying at a young age also inform what you're passionate about today? So make a note of those and let's circle back to those.

Um, so, what I'm hearing you say is for example, I've got a newsletter that I send out every single week. Right now, the communication that takes places is frequently almost always people who get the newsletter. They'll email me back, we'll talk to each other. So it's this one ... either one to many and then one to one. But at this point in time, unless I directly

curate it, there's no way for the people who subscribed to the newsletter to interact with one another.

What I hear you saying is that Mighty Networks creates or is a platform whereby we could have the people who are getting the newsletter now start to interact with each other around the deep interest that you, you advocate for. Is that what I'm hearing you say?

GINA That is affirmative.

WHITNEY Okay. I understand.

GINA The one to many is the opening. It, it, it's the thing that, that gives everybody a sense of, you know, what are we doing here together? Where it creates scale and connection and something much more meaningful and deeper. It's when you are able to facilitate the communications and connections between people who want to meet each other.

But just because I drink Diet Coke, does not mean I want to talk to people about Diet Coke. But when it is something that is about culture, lifestyle, decision making, my profession, my children, my, um, my belief system, um, the ways that I can realize my full potential or the things that are getting in my way, there is absolutely no better medium way other than to facilitate communication and relationships between those people. So, an email doesn't do the trick. Um, events do. Community does.

Direct messaging does, but can't actually just enable direct messaging amongst strangers and expect everybody to like meet and hang out with each other, which is the challenge of both Facebook groups and Slack. Um, you, you know, an online course for example, we built online courses into Mighty Networks in part, because when our, our creators asked us to. Um, and also because online courses allow you to offer expertise that facilitate conversation.

WHITNEY Right.

GINA It's actually crazy to think about it that all this online course platforms don't actually think about it, think about their, their courses in the context of the greater goal which is community. Now, the benefit for you as a creator, you as a, as a host is that you also then are not replying to 30 emails every day when you send out your email newsletter, instead you can facilitate a conversation and be a part of it. But everybody who's in that network also has all these other really interesting reasons and ways of interacting that you've facilitated or curated but don't actually have to do yourself.

WHITNEY Fascinating. I got to say you're certainly selling me. I mean it's really, really compelling. I'm just thinking about, you know, there ... when I get emails back on the newsletter and having these conversations and they're so interesting, and I think, "Oh, wouldn't it be great if everybody else could hear what, you know, so-and-so just said?" Yeah.

GINA Yeah. We have like ... Yeah. We have a Mighty Network for example that, uh, that is ... I mean it's amazing. So it, it, it's called Beyond Type 1-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

GINA ... and it is a, it is a brand that was created for ... The fact that people with Type 1 diabetes, um, it is your lifestyle, and it is created as a lifestyle brand that is aspirational but also, you know, real.

Um, and they started a Mighty Network, I think it was like two and a half three years ago, um, in, in part because they were just getting so many inbound questions and they were like, "Oh, my god. We got to allow people to talk to each other because they have the answers." And, you know, fast forward to today, and it is, you know, Beyond Type 1 in addition to being a website and I think the largest, you know, Facebook page for Type 1 diabetes. They've launched all of these incredible programs. Um, you know, Sarah Lucas who, who was one of the co-founders is just an incredible woman, um, whose daughter had ... has Type 1 diabetes.

And basically, the, the Mighty Network has become the heart and soul of the brand. Um, and that, that's simply because we've, we kind of accidentally on purpose, um, pulled together all of these things, content, community, courses and subscription commerce together in one place and offered them on IOS Android, you know, mobile web, desktop web even with the ability to have your own apps if you want, um, because ... and, and this goes back to your other question, because of what we learned at Ning.

So, that to me is it's really the future. Um, the future is more and more creators being able to make a living doing what they love through offering community-driven, um, subscriptions and, and solutions that allow it to be really easy to build new relationships, you know, suck in other people's expertise and experiences and be a part of something that's bigger than themselves.

WHITNEY Fascinating. Okay. So, as we start to wrap up, I want to come back to the, to the sort of your animating force and just ... This is clearly a passion for you. You've made the decision to, I think, my sense is this is your life's work in terms of building community through technology and I think you would say it differently and more eloquently.

GINA No. That's fine. (laughs).

WHITNEY What is the ... (laughs). Do you think that your father's, um, passing away or what other experiences did you have-

GINA Yeah.

WHITNEY ... that made this so that this matters to you so deeply that you, you really do want to devote your life to it?

GINA Yeah. It's a really good question. You know, here's what I would say. Um, I think, you know, we're all looking on some level for the easily packaged story. You know, this happened and therefore this, you know, I did this, you know.

WHITNEY Right.

GINA My dad being killed when I was 11 was, you know, really, um, important life experience. Is it the only one that, that, um, you know, has led me down this path? Absolutely not. Um, and I think that if anything, uh, I celebrate resilience, I celebrate hard work, I celebrate learning and learning from every single experience. And so, I, you know, I don't think I really picked this lane until 2010 probably, 2009 af- like after we have been successful with Ning.

And I was just like, "Oh, my gosh. I love these people. I love these leaders." Imagine that, that like th- the little dent in the universe that, that I can have a role in is, is, you know, in a world where there are big platforms and incredible pressure, um, because of the amount

of money that can be made to build platforms that think about people as users and think about people as, you know, the product.

Um, imagine that I could again put a little dent in the universe by, by just staying focused on creators, just staying focused on the individual or the small team or even like the, the larger brand who can control their own destiny, that can have the data, that can have all the features that they would otherwise build, um, you know, have to build with custom development to be able to pull together all in one place under your brand because that is what your members want.

They don't want to have to go to Patreon for this or Eventbrite for this or a Facebook group for this or then Teachable for this or like, like be just ping ponged around, um, but rather think about building software, uh, that, that allows a creator or a leader to do the things that are uniquely human, um, making connections, creating experiences and sharing expertise. That's my lane.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

GINA That's what I want to do. I'm going to find some way to do that whether that's, you know, in the context of Mighty Networks or if like I get dropped in to like a small town that I have to move to because I'm, you know, wild failure in Silicon Valley. I'll still find a way to do that, um, because I just think it's too much fun and there are too many facets to it, and it's too important, you know, not to keep, not to keep getting better every single day and how my team and I deliver on that mission.

WHITNEY So exciting. Gina, um, any last words that you'd like to share with us before we wrap?

GINA No. I mean this is a super fun conversation, and I really appreciate, you know, you taking the time and thinking of me and also anyone who stuck around till this point. (laughs).

WHITNEY Oh, it's fantastic. I wish you all the best in creating many, many, many, many more Mighty Networks. It's been an absolute pleasure.

GINA Awesome. Thank you so much, you guys.

When you zoom out and look at Gina's story, you see the power of community everywhere. In her tight-knit family, on sports teams, in the page program, in business school.

It really doesn't surprise me that this Mighty Networks platform - where people can make a living doing what they love in the midst of a community - came from the imagination and heart of someone like Gina.

We often think of innovation as something completely new that has never been done before. But frequently, often, it's applying what already exists in a new way. In the case of Gina, she's using the technology of a social network to connect people around their deep, meaningful interests. Imagine learning, for example, that your child has been diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes - to know that a community exists and is waiting and willing to help you? That's powerful. Or as Gina would say, a mighty network.

Practical tip:

How can you lean into the power of community this week? Is there a colleague you can reach out to? A resource you can share in person or virtually with someone who might need it?

In that spirit, we have a resource for you. If you are thinking you want to grow faster, change faster, we've created a personal disruption e-mail mini course that's based on some of our favorite podcast episodes. It will come straight to your inbox for five days. There's a link in the show notes to sign up.

Thank you to Gina Bianchini for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, art director Brandon Jameson, and to you our wonderful listeners.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.