

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 148: JEREMY ANDRUS

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S-curve of learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson and today our guest is Jeremy Andrus, a man who consistently plays where others aren't. A disruptor. First, as a CEO of Skullcandy where he helped grow sales from \$1 million to \$300 million dollars, and now as the CEO of Traeger Grills, a product that people don't like, they love. People like the Curry's, as in Steph and Ayesha, Joe Rogan and Dan Patrick. Jeremy is the husband of Kristin and the father of six children, ages 3 to 12.

WHITNEY Jeremy, welcome

JEREMY Thank you. It's good to be here.

WHITNEY Delighted to have you. First question for you is, where did you grow up and what did you want to be when you grew up?

JEREMY Boy, where did I grow up? All over the world. So I moved around quite a bit. My father was in brand marketing and you know, my earliest memories are in the Midwest, Minnesota. 10 years old, we picked up and moved to the Midlands of England. So, we lived in a tiny town called Cropston that you've never heard of. Our house didn't have an address, it had a name. And it was just at the intersection of a road and it was probably the first major change that I'd gone through in my life.

Then I developed a thick British accent, moved back to Boston and people made fun of my British accent. So, I'm like this high-pitched, British accent living in Boston. And, if you'd asked me where am I from, the answer would have been, "I don't know." It's, like, we're just trekking around. I still say I'm from the east coast.

WHITNEY So, you grew up in lots of different places. What did you want to be when you were that 10-year-old with the British accent?

JEREMY I always wanted to be an entrepreneur and CEO. I don't ever remember a moment of wanting something else. And, I'm not sure why I wanted that. Partly because my dad was a businessman and I was always fascinated by the ability to go out and build something or sell something. I

remember my first business, I bought a lawnmower. I bought it from the neighbor. It was in kind, I agreed to cut his lawn for three years and he gave me this riding tractor, lawnmower.

WHITNEY ... a riding lawnmower?

JEREMY It was a riding lawnmower, which I only flipped once on a steep backyard. I was always writing little business plans. I didn't call them business plans but I was thinking about, "How do I build the next..." I was always selling stuff door to door. You know, I was finding, like, these little sort of trinkets that felt innovative. Little, innovations that hadn't found the market. You know, once it was these gas caps so you didn't have to put the gas cap back on your car, so you could put gas into it without taking the gas cap off and putting it back on. My dad and I bought 100 of them. They were really hard to sell. I went door to door for days and probably sold two of them. You know, I never thought I wanted to go work for a big corporation. It's easy to looking back and now identify with what my desire was, even though I didn't know how to articulate it, but I always wanted to build stuff. Sell stuff, build stuff, you know, I was never a guy that wanted a job.

You know, I had a couple of jobs growing up. One summer, it was before I was old enough to get a job, I was probably 13 years old and I picked fruit and vegetables in a farm for a summer. You know, like, strawberries on my knees for eight hours a day. And, I was getting home would say, "Boy, I worked so hard and he gave me 24 bucks." And, that was nice to have but it didn't feel like a great trade. So I was never someone that thought about, "How do I get a job and work more hours and save for the next 50 years?" Because, when I built little businesses, when I cut lawns and I could make 50 bucks an hour cutting a lawn as opposed to, you know, waiting tables and making 8-10, it just never registered to me that that was an interesting career path. I wanted to build stuff where I felt like I controlled the outcome.

WHITNEY So, you said your dad was in brand marketing. Where do you think this entrepreneurial, build, figure-out-how-to-do-this came from? Or, is it just more your DNA? Do your parents look at you and go, "Jeremy, where did you come from," or, "you're a chip off the old block"?

JEREMY You know what? My dad and I, we're actually very different.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm

JEREMY There's an entrepreneurial side of my dad as well. He and I worked together on some of these things. And, I remember when I was really young he started a scone business at the Minnesota State Fair. He was trying to see if there was a business to be built. And I remember seeing him do this. Now, I look back and realize my dad had graduated from college and graduated from Kellogg, from business school, worked at General Mills and he's, like, making dough and setting up this stand and selling stuff, and it wasn't to make a few extra bucks. I think he wanted to see if there was a business to be built. And, so there's definitely some common DNA.

JEREMY I think part of the difference is that if he ... the world has changed a lot since he had started his career. He got married young, had kids young. And, there wasn't as much entrepreneurship.

WHITNEY That was an odd thing.

JEREMY It was an odd thing.

WHITNEY People weren't entrepreneurs.

JEREMY They weren't. I can't imagine... there was never a moment where I said, "You know, maybe I want to go work for General Mills and like, work my way up the ladder for 40 years and..." You know, very predictable."

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY So, I did have some jobs, and again, some of these things I understand better looking back.

I had some jobs, and they didn't really go very well. And, I sort of wondered, "Maybe I'm not going to be successful like I thought." And, I now look back and say, "I have a very strong DNA."

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)

JEREMY I have found exactly what I want to do every day and, you know, there's a lot of maneuvering to figure that out. But, there's some DNA and I do, you know, I have four siblings and we all do very different things.

WHITNEY Okay. So, you landed at Skullcandy about 15 years ago now?

JEREMY Yep.

WHITNEY Tell us how that-

JEREMY March 16th of 2004, was my first day. That's a Monday.

WHITNEY Okay, so almost exactly 15 years.

JEREMY Uh-huh (affirmative).

WHITNEY So, tell us how you landed there, but don't give us the super linear version.

JEREMY So first of all, I had been dissatisfied in my career for a long time. I was a management consultant for technically three years. But I got a year into it and said, "This stinks." Like, "I'm not good at this. I don't like this." And, then I started kind of doing different things. I started working on some real estate stuff on the side. I day-traded stocks. And, so I was not a very good management consultant. And, I loved Monitor, I loved the people, but I remember a single moment in three years where I was sitting across from a client after working so hard, and feeling this rush of adrenaline that I had done good work and I was enjoying it. Once in three years is a, that's a hard, like over a thirty year career, I get to feel that not very many times. And, I appreciate what I'd learned from it, but I bounced around a lot.

You know, for six months I day-traded stocks and you know, unbelievable experience. Like, incredible adrenaline rush, very stressful. I turned \$25,000 into \$2 million and then I lost all of it plus I had to borrow \$200,000 to pay back my margin losses. So, like, this unbelievable ride. It was a terrible experience but I learned a lot from it. And, I've got all of these sort of seemingly random experiences, all of which gave me some additional insight into what I wanted it wasn't what I wanted to be, what I wanted to do and, like, where would I find the greatest satisfaction?

But it took me a long time to get there. Like, I mostly-

WHITNEY So, it sounds like about 10 years?

JEREMY Yeah, it was about 10 years-

WHITNEY ... after college. Yeah.

JEREMY Yeah, it felt like a lot longer than that, but that's about right.

WHITNEY Well, but at that point in your life, as a percentage-

JEREMY It was a lot.

WHITNEY ... that's a long time.

JEREMY Yeah. You're right. You're right.

WHITNEY You just said something about the day-trading. I mean, talk about a roller coaster, right? \$25,000, \$2 million, borrowing \$200,000. You said you'd learned a lot. What is one thing that you learned that you now apply today as a CEO of Traeger Grills?

JEREMY I want to create value. Like, I want to build something where, because of my ingenuity and hard work and thoughtfulness, willingness to take risks, I can actually build something that has value. And, when you're day-trading stocks ... I was in the middle of 20, 30 trades a day. I didn't control the outcome, I wasn't adding value to anything or anyone and all I was doing was making money. And, that was kind of fun for a while because it just felt really easy to make money. Now, when you're day-trading stocks in, like, '96, '97 with a lot of margin and you're buying internet stocks, it turns out that anyone can feel good about their capability. I really had no idea what I was doing. It was terribly stressful for me, and I don't stress out very easily, hardly ever. And I found myself on the wrong end of a short. I shorted a stock that just, it quadrupled in three weeks, and I did it with leverage. And, I was finding myself waking up at like 2:00 in the morning wondering, "What's going on in the Hong Kong exchange?" And, then at 5:00 I can start to check the London exchange, and it was just eating me up. And, it was a combination of, "I'm not doing anything of value. I'm not building anything I'm proud of," and, "it's just consuming me in a very negative way."

WHITNEY So, it taught you what you don't want.

JEREMY What I don't want. But, there was an element of it that I liked. I like fast pace. I kind of enjoy chaos. I actually kind of enjoy this... and I don't know how to describe this feeling but it's sort of like, I'm tipping back in my chair. I don't know if I'm going back or forward. And, that's like this rush, and I enjoy that to the extent that I feel like it's not a binary moment where I crash down or I survive but, like, it's a collection of, like, these high adrenaline, like, really interesting moments. And, there's a whole bunch of risk in every single one of them, but in the collection of them you actually have this opportunity to have this portfolio of risk that might turn out to something because you have a little bit of control over every decision that you make.

WHITNEY Mm. I love that. I love that and I love how you brought the stock into what you're doing now. you start there, it's \$1 million, you grow it to \$300 million dollars. Pretty good return for, you know-

JEREMY Not bad.

WHITNEY ... if you're looking at ROI.

JEREMY My dad and brother were pleased with their investment.

WHITNEY Yay.

JEREMY Yeah.

WHITNEY Right, so, the scone making with your father-

JEREMY That's right.

WHITNEY ... paid off, right?

JEREMY Yep.

WHITNEY So, but the question I guess, why not just, why not just run off into the sunset? You had made enough money.

JEREMY Oh, my gosh. That is... by the way-

WHITNEY M- is that wrong?

JEREMY ... that is a thought I had but, never serious. My thought wasn't so much, you know... in my late 30s, like, riding off in the sunset was not interesting to me at all. Like, we still live in a small house, I paid back the \$200,000 that I'd borrowed from my parents, with interest. Took me 12 years, you know, 11 years to pay it back. I remember leaving Skullcandy, the day I left, feeling this tremendous burden lifted from me. And, part of that's because for eight years I was always a half a step behind, and it moved fast. And, then we went public, and then we were the highest shorted stock on the Nasdaq for six months. And, so when I- when I finished, like...

WHITNEY So, you're on the other side of that trade?

JEREMY Oh, my... yeah. I was in a pressure cooker constantly. And, so if you ask me about my Skullcandy experience, like, nothing but really, really, like, deep gratitude for them. I learned so much from it. You know, I will tell you I loved it until I really think about it, and then I will say, "I was totally dissatisfied with the outcome and I didn't feel sufficiently, um, you know, knowledgeable or good at what I did." We certainly had enough financial resources to be done but that wasn't, like, that wasn't what drove me for a long time. Like, I wanted enough to pay off my business school debt and my Subaru and, like, just things like that. But, money is not my driver and it becomes less and less so every day. I just don't think about it ever, except the reality that there's only one way to ultimately keep score in business and that's money. And, it's not my money, it's the money of, like, everyone in my office - financial security's important to them.

I have three private equity partners. I hope they love Traeger but, they really love returns and that's what keeps them in business. And, so I finished Skullcandy and I felt this need to sort of pick myself up and look above the headphone space and say, "What do I really want to be?" Like, "Do I need to reinvent myself to be happy?" Should I be more focused now on helping others? Whether it be, you know, as an advisor to entrepreneurs." You know, "Should we start a non-profit?" You know, "Should we give our money away over the next 30 years?" "Should we take our family and go join the Peace Corps and, like..." I considered all of these things, and I had a lot of conversations where I eventually netted out was, I wasn't done. I loved the thought of doing it better. I wanted to be a better leader. I wanted to feel like, it wasn't just luck the first time. And, interestingly, I looked back and I realized it was just luck the first time, but the second time I can actually draw on the lessons I learned and I love that about it.

Like, I find myself in the middle of these incredibly difficult situations here and they don't feel like a burden to me, they feel fun.

WHITNEY 'Cause, you're like, "We did that in practice."

JEREMY Yeah. No, I

WHITNEY So, like, Skullcandy was your warm up?

JEREMY Oh, big time. And I am so much better now than I was then. And, by the way, I'm so much better now than I was 12 months ago.

I remember talking to a, uh, a career mentor of mine. Like, this guy rescued me when things were just terrible at Skullcandy. Called this guy, just a cold call.

WHITNEY What's his name? Let's give him a shout out.

JEREMY His name's Wayne Marino.

WHITNEY Okay.

JEREMY Wayne was the number two at Under Armor, worked for Kevin Plank. Joined when they were doing \$50 million in sales. Probably left at about \$2 billion in sales. And, I called him and I said, um, "A few people have said I should call you. I need a CFO." And, he kind of laughed and he said, "I'm leaving Under Armour. I'm not looking for a job, I'm moving out west. How can I help you?" He literally picked up the phone and he said, "Okay," and started talking about my problems in business. And we spent 45 minutes together and I just said, "This guy has an answer to everything." Like, just wise. He's seen these patterns that I hadn't seen.

JEREMY And he said, "I'm coming out west in a few weeks to check on the house we're renovating. Do you want me to swing by Salt Lake? I've got to go through there to get to Reno, driving to Tahoe anyway." Shows up, I think we're having a long lunch, and we spent two days together. Literally walks in with his bags and stayed in my basement for a couple of nights, which was not very nice. And we just white boarded, like, all of these problems, take pictures, erase, and we did this for two straight days. And, I bring this up because this guy knows me well.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY And, when I was thinking about, not just Traeger but other things, like, "Do I reinvent myself? Do I do this again?" He had a really astute observation he said, "You know what?" He said, "I think what you really want is to be better at what you don't feel like you are great at."

WHITNEY Better at your craft.

JEREMY I wanted to be better at my craft.

WHITNEY Yeah.

JEREMY And, not f-

WHITNEY Not being a CEO that you'd wanted to be since you were a little boy.

JEREMY That I wasn't at Skullcandy.

WHITNEY Mm.

JEREMY Like, I faked it constantly. I was so deficient in so many things, and I thought it was a good observation on his part, and, it really rang true that I needed to get better to feel good about really about me accomplishing what I'd set out to do.

And, I think the good news is that, I sometimes looked at successful business leaders and I wondered, "How do they keep up this energy in their 50's and 60's and 70's? Does it get monotonous?" And the good news is that for me, money is not the driver, it's the building and it's the being good at what I do, I have this ability to sort of look back every month, every six months, every 12 months and say, "I've made progress. I'm better." And, I have so far to go and I would be the first one to acknowledge that, but I really love the fact that I honestly, I look back six months and I don't know how I did it six months ago. I was so deficient in so many things. To me, that's the best part of this whole thing.

WHITNEY That's great. I want to double click on Wayne for just a minute because it's... I mean, this relationship that you've just described is fairly remarkable and I think a lot of people say, "I want a mentor like that." You know? "Will you be my mentor?" As Sheryl Sandberg has said in her- her book, *Lean In*. I think, though, that to be able to have a really good mentor means you have to be a good mentee. What do you think you did that made it so he's like, "Okay, I'm going to invest my time in him"? Can you think of anything? Has he ever shared that with you? Why he was willing to spend that time?

JEREMY Boy, that's an interesting question. I think part of it was, I caught him at a perfect moment in time. Part of it is that he probably felt sorry for me.

WHITNEY (laughs).

JEREMY I mean, the questions I'm asking probably said not only, "Kid, you're lost, but-"

WHITNEY And, your company's growing fast. You need help.

JEREMY But, I've been through this. I think there was, like, a connection over his ability to help. And then I think that, um, I was very thoughtful in my request and some of these things I understand better looking back. I had never... I didn't have a mentor.

I was just making this up as I went. And, boy, I didn't realize what I was missing out on. I can't tell you how many people reach out to me now via LinkedIn, from a conference, and it's like, "Will you be my mentor?" And, I'm like, "Hold on a second. What do you do? You're building a medical data and I don't know anything about it so..." You've got this whole range of, like, incredibly thoughtful, good fit to, I got a LinkedIn message a couple of days ago which was, "Hey, I have a start-up. Can you help me with best practices on scaling a business?" I used to respond to all of these and the reality is, I don't know where to start, when I did that, it took away time from-

WHITNEY Scaling your business.

JEREMY Scaling my business, from my family. And, so I don't know that Wayne has really worked with anyone else the way that he has with me. It was a really good fit and I really appreciate him. Like, this guy really rescued me. It's a little interesting looking back. Like, it was total luck he picked up the, he picked up the phone and he came out to visit me. And, he's actually on my board now, here and sleeps in my basement still. It's a better basement. Different house. But this is still the guy. He either has an answer for everything, business is not rocket science, this guy is just really thoughtful around pattern recognition. He asks a hundred questions and he shares some thoughts. And, I get off the phone and I say, "Oh, my gosh. Like, it's so obvious now." it made me want to be a mentor. And there was a time where I did way too much of it.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY Like, I picked up the phone every time because I sort of said, "Number one, I owe it to these people. Wayne did it for me and he was so helpful." And I sort of felt like I needed to do the same until I just felt overwhelmed by it.

WHITNEY So, what do you do now in order to, you know, kind of help people do enough work that they've earned the right to be mentored?

JEREMY Do you know what? First of all, a really thoughtful request, I'll think-

WHITNEY Specific-

JEREMY ... I will think about.

WHITNEY Yeah.

JEREMY I will typically set up a brief phone call. And part of it's like a thoughtful request part. It's like my ability to be helpful. I enjoy the energy of mentoring entrepreneurs who have way more energy than I do, right? I mean, like, who are actually going to this thing for the first time. And, um, part of it is that, uh, I want to find good fit with the people that I spend time with. I just want to select moments where I can actually uniquely be helpful. Being more meaningful in fewer moments.

WHITNEY Right. Well, and it goes back to your product market fit that you talk about, that we'll talk about in just a minute, right?

JEREMY Yep. Great.

WHITNEY That's what it is.

JEREMY Yep.

WHITNEY So, you're now the CEO of Traeger Grills. Tell us how you landed here, how this came about.

JEREMY In the year that I was thinking about other things between Skullcandy and what turned out to be Traeger, I looked at a lot of different non-business things, but I looked at a lot of different businesses. And, that was fun for me to sort of just think about industry, start up, growth phase and Traeger was I think, the confluence of a couple of things. One, I was, like, 9 or 10 months into taking time off. It was the best 9 or 10 months of my life with my family. Like the ability to think and process and write and learn and read and travel, but I was ready to do something again, so the timing was right.

I looked back at Skullcandy, I had this appreciation for the sort of, the magic pixie dust that was sprinkled on top that I didn't control, and I wanted to find something that I thought was really special. Because I think that's ultimately, like, how do you really ultimately disrupt and create product market fit? It's not through great execution. You have to do that too, but I know a lot of really well-run businesses that just aren't moving the needle in what they do. And, so it was important for me to find an opportunity that I felt like I could build something and, like, meaningfully disrupt an industry. And it's actually the reason I passed on Traeger the first time.

Like, the first time I looked at it I said, "From lifestyle, board sports, Skullcandy, audio, media, to the grilling industry."

My perception of the industry was boring, commoditized, bent steel. I didn't like the channels of distribution at the time. Hardware stores, appliance stores. You know, I hadn't spent time there, I didn't know them. I didn't find them very interesting so I turned it down. I was just committed to finding something that I was really passionate about. And, this is part of the problem, when you have a great experience in your career... and, it was a hard experience at Skullcandy, but it was a great experience. Your filter just becomes narrower and narrower and so, the first time I saw it I said, "Yeah, I don't think so. I just need to keep looking." The second time, I had a very different perspective which was... I actually did a little bit of due diligence on the business. And, I looked at the industry and I said, "First of all, what industries do you want to disrupt? Big, boring, slow moving, non-innovating..." Like, I'm not going to go disrupt high tech.

There are plenty of people that are doing that beautifully and not making money in the process. I want to disrupt something. And, I hate to say it, maybe I wanted to be the tallest of the little people. But, I looked at this space and I said-

WHITNEY But, that's what you do when you're disrupting-

JEREMY I guess.

WHITNEY ... that's the plan, right?

JEREMY Yes-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY ... and it's changed a lot and I-

WHITNEY Yeah.

JEREMY ... it's like it's become, like, much more competitive. But, at the time I looked and I said, "Maybe this is what's beautiful about this. Everyone likes to cook, everyone likes to grill but like, the customer experience hasn't changed since gas grills came on the scenes in the '70s. Literally, nothing has changed whatsoever. And, I said, "Strange that would be the case. Why is that the case?" And, then I got to know Traeger and what I realize, it had a meaningful point of difference from a product perspective. And, that's not always was good. Like, their products that are different but not in a way that's positive to consumers. They're just different for the sake of being different. What I found when I talked to literally six Traeger owners randomly selected, went up to Oregon to talk to people, six out of six said it's the best product they've ever owned.

WHITNEY (laughs).

JEREMY First person said, "My Traeger changed my life."

WHITNEY And, it's a grill, (laughs).

JEREMY And, I looked up from my notes and I said, "Say that again. What are you talking about? It's, like, your backyard grill." And, what I realized was that something that was so meaningful to so few people just for whatever reason hadn't made its way outside of Oregon. The product solution was really cool. The product was, like, the quality of the experience was like a 2 out of 10 but the solution, like, the platform and the solution I thought was really interesting. And so, I was just fascinated by this big space that no one cared about, and this little Traeger brand that has 27 years of history but really was a secret kept in the Pacific Northwest.

And, fortunately I went back to it, um, because it is a special business. It really is.

WHITNEY What year was this?

JEREMY This was in 2013.

WHITNEY Okay. All right, so just tell us a little bit of the story of what it looked like when you got there and, you know, sales, kind of culture, just kind of give us a picture of-

JEREMY Yeah.

WHITNEY ... what it was like. And, then it's so fun reading what you've said about the business, because there's so much excitement. Like, I can just feel it, so I want you to kind of share that with people.

JEREMY I had spent more time in sort of my own ventures or startups, I didn't really have an appreciation for the fact that I had owned and built culture. And in a second-generation business that had evolved over time with ownership changes and with people, I didn't really think to ask any questions about that. I just looked at this business, said, "This is an amazing space and operationally, this business just feels so broken. I can fix this business and build something." And, then I was 24 hours on the inside and I said, "Ooh, this place doesn't feel good." It was about a \$70 million-dollar business. Modestly profitable, and just really, operationally, just really broken. But, what I didn't realize was that being broken operationally was really more of a symptom of just being dysfunctional from a leadership and a cultural perspective. And, there was a very rude awakening and unfortunately, I didn't get it until I'd already hired four of my good friends from Skullcandy. They had left good jobs. And, they got on the inside of this thing and I said, "Guys, this is tough. We have a problem."

And, the biggest problem was that the majority owner, my partner, let's just say he and I saw the world very differently. Like, I was fascinated by this guy, you know, probably in his mid 60s at the time. Very successful entrepreneur. You know, very abrasive in our meetings but it didn't bother me. I was fascinated by how much he had done across so many different business categories, business spaces, from banking, to Hollywood, to lawn care, to grills. I mean, I was fascinated by it and I said, "I can learn from this guy and this guy is going to be an interesting partner." Like, 30 days into it, it was just this very, you know, a sort of, aggressive, abusive relationship. Every time the phone rang my, like, my stomach sank. It was like, "Here he is again."

Every conversation was hard. And, boy, 30 days into it, like, in Traeger years in those days, it felt like years. And, I didn't need the money, I didn't need a job. I was doing this, again, because I wanted to be better, but it was hard for me to be better when I felt anxiety because of my majority partner. I stepped back and I look at this and I said, "How's this doing \$70, \$80 million of revenue in, like, so dysfunctional cultural, and from a leadership in an operational perspective?" So, I loved the bones of the business more and more each month and I struggled more and more with just how I felt when I went to the office.

WHITNEY So, what did you do?

JEREMY I went to my first board meeting in New York in my private equity partners office and I presented a hundred page PowerPoint deck that-

WHITNEY Yay, consulting. So, that three years of consulting served you well.

JEREMY There was value. It was a beautiful day.

WHITNEY (laughs).

JEREMY But there was great substance in this deck. And interestingly, I was committed to being incredibly honest about what I saw in the business. About the people, the culture, you know, the strategic deficit. You know, the channel concentration, you know, product liability, China's sourcing issues, IP issues. So, I was five- five months into this thing and part of me said, "I love this." Like, "I love what's here." And, the other part said, "This is a ticking time bomb."

And I remember going in this meeting and the majority owner wasn't, he wasn't there yet. And, we all sat very uncomfortably waiting for him. I sat at the head of the table which is typically where I like to sit just to present so I can see all eyes, and I was asked if I would move and leave that space open for this guy. And, by the way, my partner, my private equity partner, they were amazing. They were just overly accommodating to a tough situation, and they're still on my board and they're awesome, like, the best partnership.

WHITNEY Do you want to give them a shout out?

JEREMY Trilantic Capital Partners.

WHITNEY Okay.

JEREMY Best, like, honestly, I would do business with them a thousand times over.

WHITNEY Okay.

JEREMY The seat at the end of the table, uh, was open. The majority owner walked in and chose not to sit in that seat because it was next to me. He was clearly angry because he had read the deck, and he sat in his seat two over from me with someone in between us. And, so for four hours, I presented 98 slides.

This guy didn't say a word. You could see steam coming out of his eyes and his ears. And, I was there to be fully transparent and to bring this thing to a head. One of us was going to leave. And at this point, I didn't care if it was me or him. I wrote a very meaningful check for the business and I said, "You know what? I don't care. If I get it back, I get it back." We got to the end and this guy just started pounding his fist on the table and he said, "I disagree with every blankety blank word on every blankety slide." And he's, like, spitting across the table in this conversation, uh, just because he's angry. And it was really awkward.

And we sort of wrapped up in 10 minutes. Four hours and, like, 10 minutes is like, wasn't much left to say. And, at this point, like, I'm done. I don't expect to see this guy ever again. I put my backpack on, everyone started walking out, and he says, "Jeremy, can you stay and talk?" I'm like, "No, I so don't want to." I felt good about just delivering the news.

I didn't pull any punches just because, like, it was done. We sat next to each other on the same side of the table, we turned to each other. I scoot back a little bit because it's a little too close for comfort. He scoots forward a little bit. Our knees are bumping and proceeded to have a really odd conversation. Which was, you know, he starts yelling at me, "You're the only CEO who hasn't been deferential to the owner," on and on and on. And, I said, like, "All due respect, I don't view my role as being deferential. I came in here to give you my thoughts on the business."

WHITNEY And, I wrote a check so I'm also an owner.

JEREMY And, yeah, I'm an owner. I may be a minority owner. And then it quickly transitioned to, "I've been doing a lot of research on you and your family. I can't tell you how much I admire you." You know, "Your great, great, great-grandfather crossed the plains with Brigham Young and..." then it was like he knows a lot about me and my family and my heritage-

WHITNEY Your pedigree, (laughs).

JEREMY And, but at this point he's being really soft and kind. And I've never seen him again. 45 days later we, my private equity partner and I owned the business. It's a great partnership and we control the destiny. Like, we can build this thing. All we need to do now is build a plan and be thoughtful and reasonable and smart.

WHITNEY Okay. You went from, "We had this conversation where he was in my face-

JEREMY Yeah.

WHITNEY ... "incredibly-

JEREMY Literally, yeah.

WHITNEY ... "in your face," to soft spoken, "I admire you." Who made the... who made that, like, "We want to buy you out"? Like, how did that unfold?

JEREMY You know what? Very quickly. I mean, I called-

WHITNEY Did he offer?

JEREMY No, he did not. But, I called my private equity partner and I said, "I will give you whatever." I just called and say, "Hey, listen. Life's too short. I'd love to do another deal with you down the road. I'm not leaving tomorrow but we're either buying this thing or let me help you find another CEO." And so, we started a conversation with the majority owner and literally the deal was closed six weeks later.

And, there was nothing in that deck that wasn't 100% honest, and as much as he didn't believe a single word on the hundred pages, I actually think he believed it. You know, he was running this business from South Florida over a phone, based in Portland and Springville, Utah with an office in China that turns out had some not so savory things going on. And, I think he looked at this deck and he probably... he didn't acknowledge it, but he said, "Well, this is pretty thoughtful, and this could be right."

WHITNEY But, he was so, probably angry and embarrassed and frustrated and he just didn't even know. And yet, he respected you immensely.

JEREMY You know what? So, this is... yes -

WHITNEY All of those, right?

JEREMY ... he was angry with me because I didn't respect him the way that all of his other CEOs had. And, I wasn't disrespectful, I just, at that point, I just didn't care what he thought.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY And, I've actually gone back and looked at email, our email exchanges early on where he's just, like, ripping me to shreds over email and my responses were measured, they were respectful, they had positive tone. I couldn't do it again, by the way.

WHITNEY Mm.

JEREMY But I really did try my hardest to make it work.

And, I haven't seen him since we got the deal done. It was a risky deal to put another dollar in the business, um, but, you know, we were either going to fail out of the gate or we were going to, continue to invest and we're going to fix it. And, we kind of looked at each other and said, "Do we believe in this business?" "Yeah, as much as we did day one." "Can we fix these issues?" "Well, it's the two of us now." And, we did. And we did it together. Interestingly, I actually believe that, I'm going to reach out to him one day and take him to dinner.

And, by the way, I actually think he genuinely liked me. I mean, like, we spent a lot of hours together just talking about the business before we started and the partnership got off on the wrong foot quickly, and it just didn't let up. And, we were just stylistically so different. But, I would love to go back to him, take him to dinner, number one say, "Thank you. This was, like, the best moment of my career. You were right, thank you. Tell me, like, this thing was in much worse shape when you bought it What did you see? Like, you've done all of these interesting, random things. Tell me more about..." Like, I'm actually interested in this guy and you know what? It was a bad partnership and I'm glad we worked it out. I'd love to go back to him and just thank him for the opportunity.

WHITNEY Yeah. So, I would like to dare you, or challenge you, to do that in the very near future.

JEREMY Ooh.

WHITNEY You and I both have a mutual friend, Clayton Christensen-

JEREMY Uh-huh (affirmative).

WHITNEY ... who just passed away.

JEREMY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY And, I think there are probably things that we wish we would have said to say, "Thank you, we're grateful." I know I do, and I suspect you do as well. And, so this gentleman that you're referring to, you said he was in his 60s. I would encourage you to have the dinner sooner than later. Would you consider that?

JEREMY Let me take a deep breath. Um, yes, I will reach out and, um, I don't know if he will respond to me or not.

WHITNEY It doesn't matter.

JEREMY But, I know how to find him.

WHITNEY Yeah.

JEREMY And I'll let him know why I want to sit down with him.

WHITNEY Yeah. Good job.

JEREMY The thought of it is a mix between, uh, excitement and intrigue and anxiety. Like, PTSD, the-

WHITNEY Everything you like, (laughs).

JEREMY ... the worst five and a half months of my career by far.

WHITNEY It'll be good, though.

We talk about the S-curve of learning in our work and we spend a lot of time with people talking about what does it feel like to be at the launch point of the S-curve, and what does it feel like to be at the high end of the S-curve when you're about to jump and it's time to do something new? But, we don't spend a lot of time talking about what it's like to be in the sweet spot of the S-curve, and I would argue, that's where you are right now.

JEREMY Yeah.

WHITNEY When you took the business over it was \$70 million in revenue. Where is it today? Roughly?

JEREMY Half a billion dollars is [crosstalk 00:53:02]-

WHITNEY Half a billion dollars?

JEREMY ... yeah.

WHITNEY And, you've gone on record saying you want to get to \$1 billion.

JEREMY Yep.

WHITNEY So, you could argue, you're in the sweet spot-

JEREMY Oh, we're just getting going.

WHITNEY ... in that period of hyper growth.

JEREMY Yeah.

WHITNEY So, what are some, what are some exciting things, some challenges, some things that are sort of unique to being in this hyper growth, everything's working, sort of phase?

JEREMY So, boy, the everything's working, um-

WHITNEY Is that an overstatement?

JEREMY It's, uh, you know what? Right now, yes. Not an overstatement now. It feels really good right now.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY Is everything working? No, we have a thousand problems.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY When I hire leaders I say, "Hey, I just want to set your expectation for all of the things that we should be doing better at this size."

WHITNEY Yep.

JEREMY It's not a matter of everything working and this great confidence that, although we have all of this risk in front of us, we're resourcing our business the right way. We have a strategy, it's going to change but we have an unbelievable platform of people that I think is going to allow us to get to the right place. So, we're investing deeply, I feel so much confidence that we're going to win. I don't doubt it at all. Like, not at all.

I had a particularly busy week a few weeks ago and I think I crossed paths with my wife for the first time awake at, like, 10:00 at night. I'd left early, had a business dinner. She'd put the six kids to bed and, like, 10:00 I see her in the closet as we're sort of getting ready for bed. And, she said, "How was your day?" And she's quiet and I said, "You know what? I love everything single day of this." And, then it was quiet. And, she got kind of nervous which was, "Okay." Like, "What's the..." Because, we had a different conversation. I remember walking the streets of Boston at my 10th business school reunion where I said, "I've got to leave Skullcandy." And, she said, "What?" Like, "Everything you've... like, this is so important to you." And, so I think she was waiting for that next. And, I said, "No, there's nothing else. Like, today was crazy and chaotic and parts were hard but it was awesome. I loved it."

And the combination of these two things, we're swinging big and I have confidence where we're going and I actually really love the problems we're solving. That, to me, is the sweet spot. And, I say that because there are things that we should do so much better and we'll figure it out. And we're moving in that direction. Traeger's been interesting in that the early years were tough and I didn't know how this thing was going to turn out. I thought there was something here, and then we hit this sweet spot and we could do no wrong. And, then a year came along where I felt like we could do no right.

Like, 2018 came along and we have China tariffs, we have steel going up, we have low cost competition that's knocking us off in a very offensive way. You know, we grew a little not a lot, profitability went backwards. We've got debt on the business. And, I remember getting four or five months into the year and saying, "We have to reinvent ourselves. Like, literally six months ago, we could do no wrong. And, we're still a good business but for me the measuring stick isn't... can we grow a little bit here and there and sort of make money?" It was, "Can we really win?"

And, in 2018 we weren't really winning. And, it was the first moment in my career where there were sort of two thoughts that I had on an ongoing basis that were important to me. One was, if we just continue... what I did at Skullcandy is optimize and it wasn't winning for me. Like, it's a great start up story but we didn't win in the end. Beats won. And so I said, "In the moment where we're feeling the most pain, the easiest thing to do would be to optimize and we need to just the opposite. We need to swing bigger at product experience and brand." That's hard to do when, you know, you've got leverage and interest payments and you're not growing profitability. Just did a deal 10 months ago.

The second piece of it was, I didn't fear it. I was so intrigued by what we were trying to solve. And, there was all sorts of risk. 2019 we started to harvest some of the investments that we'd been working on for a while, but we really doubled down. We took a really big risk on launching this connected product at a much lower price point. Hit the gross margin, more complicated from a tech perspective, but we really believed we needed to take a risk based on all of the consumer work that we had done, and it worked. And, what was interesting about that is, Skullcandy, we

went from white hot to, like, painfully, how do we eke out growth and profitability? And, I didn't know how to reset.

And, in 2018 we reset. And, it was methodical. And, my strategy is not perfect every time. It worked out perfectly for us.

WHITNEY But, now you know how to reset.

JEREMY I know how to reset and I don't fear it.

The confidence I feel from that, like, is more important than any lesson that I've learned, from a strategy perspective. I've been there when I feared I was a deer in the headlight. There was no resourcefulness, there was no innovation because fear and innovation are not highly connected feelings."

WHITNEY (laughs).

JEREMY It's like, "How do I do this a little bit safer?"

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JEREMY And, then we got a win, and the reinvention had just started, because I'm looking at the market saying, "Okay. This was the answer. We've created a moat around product experience. There's complexity to it, but the consumer sees it as simple, not complicated. Let's double down on this." And, so we now look three, four, five years out and what we're thinking about doesn't look anything like what we're doing today.

Had I not reset in '18, we would be not only at optimization but we'd be in hyper-optimization mode.

WHITNEY Interesting.

JEREMY And, so now, like, our growth... it's the first time I have been in a business where growth accelerated after a number of years of growth and then slowing. And, so this is why I have confidence in the future. Then, I started rebuilding the team. We had a lot of work to do. We had a lot of gaps on our team.

And, I'm getting- I'm getting the sense for what good looks like from a people perspective. And, I didn't know that, like, this many years in my career. I loved risk and swinging big around a business problem but I was very risk averse around people.

And, I realized that the outcome is connected to your people and you can't take risk on the model and the product and not be willing to continually take risk on the people. And it's better people, it's making some changes. Although not every pattern is the same in business, there are a lot of similarities with patterns. But, if nothing else in problem solving, the approach is, I think, consistent. But, these two things around reset and swing big and make sure that you have a team that's high quality and is good as the size of your vision.

WHITNEY Yeah.

JEREMY Like, these things to me are repeatable.

WHITNEY Yeah. Disrupt-

JEREMY Even if the innovation has a lot of uncertainty to it.

WHITNEY So, you disrupt yourself and you build an A-team?

JEREMY Yeah. It... well said.

WHITNEY (laughs), thank you.

JEREMY That's not the first time you said that, is it?

WHITNEY No- no- no. Definitely, I mean... yes, it's the first time.

JEREMY (laughs).

WHITNEY Okay, final two questions. For those who are listening, who are intrigued and want to buy a Traeger grill, what's a good starter grill for people?

JEREMY It's the Ironwood. You've got to buy the Ironwood.

WHITNEY Ironwood.

JEREMY It's middle of the range in terms of price point. In my opinion, it's the highest value. I cook on it. I love it.

WHITNEY Okay.

JEREMY And, it will make people really masters of the craft of cooking up at home, which is fun.

WHITNEY Any final advice or final words that you'd like to share?

JEREMY I want to go back to a couple of things that we talked about and I think this encapsulates, really sort of the evolution that I have gone through in my career and part of what makes it satisfying. So, you've heard me talk mostly about the business, the problem, you know, the solving, the strategy. And, I love all of that stuff. I never want to get a job again. Stuff is so fun. The piece that's become meaningful to me is doing it alongside other people and ensuring that I'm not the only guy having a great experience.

As a CEO, I got so wrapped up in, "I've got to pay off my business school debt. I have to be successful. I have to be a CEO, it's what I decided to do." And, there are a lot of moments I didn't enjoy because I was so driven by the outcome. I'm not driven... like, for me there is an outcome but it's a daily build and it's, like, enjoying this moment with these people every day is so important to me. And, it's making sure that they are enjoying it the same way that I am. And, that for me has been game changing. That was just, as opposed to aligning interests of people to create a business outcome, doing the right thing for people and caring about their, like, whatever it is.

And, actually you mentioned Clayton Christensen. And, I didn't want to go there because this... I get a little bit tearful. It's so recent. Someone I admired so much. But, when I was thinking about reinventing myself, um, I read his book, *How Will You Measure Your Life?* And, I remember seeing him speak at Harvard Business School. I didn't know him well at Harvard. I came to know him afterward. And walking into Burden Auditorium, hearing him speak not long after having had

a stroke with his cane, to a thousand people in the auditorium, five hundred overflow. And it was the first time I'd heard him talk about this, and I'm looking around me at all of these, like, super type A, very driven people.

And, you see this in increments of five years, people change. They have success, they fail, they get divorced, they have kids. And, these are very driven people - they're all good people. But over indexed in terms of the importance of career in their lives. And, I'm sitting there, like, soaking in what he's saying and hearing it for the first time, and looking around and saying, "I wonder what these people think of this." So, I went and I bought his book and- and I'm thinking about, like, "What's important to me? What's next?" And, there's a line where he said something like, "Management's a noble profession, and it's noble not because you create jobs and pay payroll. It's noble because you have this far reaching impact on people." And, it's just, it's not just people in the workplace, it's when people show up and they are their best selves because it's not an abusive environment, it's an inviting environment. It's, like, you're there to win but not at all costs. You're there to create an experience and help people stretch themselves and grow, and be remarkable.

And, then they go home and they may not be at home talking about grills incessantly the way that I do, but they go home with a good attitude, feeling good about themselves. They're better at whatever they do and wherever they interact." And that to me was sort of the answer of, "Do I need to go carry water up a hill in Guatemala to do good?" and, I said, "The intersection of my passion and the ability to do good is this. It's building a business." So, um, it took me a long time to really understand that. It's only in the last couple of years where I've said, "This is it. I get to love it every day, love what I do." But, part of the reason I love it is because I'm helping create an experience for other people. They've got to work every day, too many hours a week. We might as well love what we do and become better at the same time.

WHITNEY Jeremy Andrus, thank you.

JEREMY Thank you. I enjoyed the conversation.

I really loved this interview for a number of reasons.

First, because I haven't interviewed a guest in person for several years—because, you know, logistics—it was delightful to speak face-to-face--there's a photo in the show notes if you're interested.

Second, as we've been developing new products and offerings for WLJ, several of our team members pointed out that we don't really have a lot of interviews with people who are in the sweet spot on their S-Curve of Learning.

One of the things I love about coaching clients in the sweet spot is there is a lot of possibility and room to grow and learn. Which is what we are all wired for. It's fun. You can hear that in Jeremy's voice. When he was talking about how exciting it is to get better at what he is doing every six months. That's what the sweet spot can feel like. When things are humming, it's hard but not too hard. It's easy but not too easy. You may not love every single day, but you are more likely to come home feeling fulfilled every day.

You also—and I want you to really pay attention to this—you also are in a place where it's easier to reinvent. To disrupt yourself. At Skullcandy, he said, when they were in pain. he optimized. At Traeger, because he'd been to this school of Skullcandy experience, when things slowed down a bit 2018, because there are curves within curves, he didn't say, let's optimize. He said let's take a step back, they invested in this connected product. Which has turned out to be a slingshot.

There's another layer as well - if you can be in the sweet spot of a learning curve you really thought about, searched for and that feels like it's connected to your deeper why---which by the way, wasn't that a lovely, lovely tribute to Clayton Christensen—When you are connected to your why, there's a bigger meaning and purpose to what you're learning and accomplishing, and then things are really sweet.

Thank you again to Jeremy Andrus for being our guest --- (p.s. We did buy the [Ironwood Grill](#))—thank you to Josh Anderson for recording our interview with Jeremy in person at Traeger Headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.