

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 149: GABRIELLE BLAIR

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S Curve of Learning in both 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's guest is Gabrielle Blair, a woman whose life has been full of disruption, of playing where no one else is playing. Beginning with her lifestyle blog [Design Mom](#), which she started in 2004. A blog focused on the intersection of motherhood and design, which was a Time magazine blog of the year in 2010. She the founded [Alt Summit](#), the premiere summit for creative entrepreneurs and social media content creators. Gabrielle is a New York Times bestselling author of the book [Design Mom: How to Live with Kids](#), about which the San Francisco Chronicle said, "It's a thoughtful take on how to create beautiful, well organized functional family spaces and a cool parenting handbook to boot." She is the wife of one and mother of six with children ranging in ages from nine to 22.

WHITNEY Gabrielle, welcome.

GABRIELLE Thank you so much, Whitney. What a delight to be here.

WHITNEY So that our listeners can get to know you, can you tell us a bit about where you grew up and what you thought you were going to be when you grew up?

GABRIELLE Absolutely. I was born in California but we moved to St. George, Utah, when I was five. And I am one of eight kids, I'm number five in the lineup.

Growing up I thought I was going to be an interior designer. I knew I liked design and creative stuff right away. And my mom understood that I liked that and that I was good at that. And she would let me design my room and help me, you know, like I remember even being age five, maybe six, we were just new to St. George and she took me to pick out wallpaper for my room. And I just sat with those wallpaper books for, you know, hours just going like, "Wow," like, "What are the options?"

But I got to college and the design program was like a separate kind of category but they had applied to. I applied to it during my freshman year. And so I started in interior design. And I

really disliked the program - like I did not like it at all. It was more - too heavily architecture. I was just doing a lot of drafting and stuff. I didn't love it.

And I was walking around the design building looking at the assignments that were on the wall And was going, "Wow. Who gets to do this stuff?" I was just looking at these beautiful work. And they said, "Oh those are the graphic designers." I had never heard of graphic design. Like never, never heard of it. I'm already a sophomore in college.

I start looking into it and it was like, "Oh, this is, this is for me. This is great." Partly because I knew I wanted a big family. Even in college, imagining, "Okay, well how can I have kids but also work? And how would that work? You know, what would that look like? And you know maybe there's something I can do at home." And interior design had seemed like maybe that could work. But I had worked at, you know, shops as an intern in the summer and knew that it wasn't really a home thing, like you're in other people's homes. You're not in your home, like you're really out and about.

And when I saw graphic design it was like, "Oh you need a computer." That's it. Like, the internet exists, I can do this. And I really, really loved it. And so I re-applied and got into the graphic design program. And that's where I ended up and I ended up doing an internship in Athens, Greece at Ogilvy Maither And I ended up moving to New York and I was art director there. And I worked in advertising for lots of years.

And then, weirdly have ended up doing a lot of interior design since I left that and started blogging. I knew I would be in design. Thought it would be interiors, have ended up there but it turns out the principals of design really work across disciplines. So the same principles are used in fashion are used in interiors, are used in graphic design.

WHITNEY Isn't that interesting? And I do think that is kind of ironic because your book, your New York Times bestselling book, is all about designing spaces for children.

GABRIELLE Yeah.

WHITNEY So it's interesting how the thing that wasn't working so often we end up coming back to in some sort of, we iterate back to it. So you decided you're going to do graphic design, you go to New York, you're having this career. And then at some point you get married and you have children.

GABRIELLE Right, right.

WHITNEY Tell us about sort of what happened and how this idea for the Design Mom blog came out? Set the stage for us.

GABRIELLE Right, right, right.

WHITNEY The year, the feelings, etc.

GABRIELLE So it is, I'm living in New York, I'm working as an art director. It is year 2016 and I've just had baby number five. Now, I'm 31 at this point and my peers in New York, they are just getting married. They are maybe having their first baby. Like that's kind of where they're at. My 31 year old peers. Right? And, here I am, just had baby number five. I was clearly so odd. It would just be these weird conversations like, another pregnant woman that was about my age would see me in an elevator on the way up to ... you know, work in big sky scraper. And of course they'd want to bond. Like, "Oh, how are you feeling?" You know, "How's this pregnancy?" And I know they're going to ask, "Is this your first?"

I'm like, "Don't ask. Don't ask, don't ask." 'Cause if I say, "Actually, it's my fifth," they're going to shut up because they feel like they have nothing to add to the conversation, right? They're going to be like, they, "I've already experienced it all." So I mean, sometimes I would just lie. "Yeah. It's my first. I'm excited." You know, just 'cause it's not worth, you know, making someone uncomfortable. But it was, I was just in this weird position where I had all this mothering experience and my peers didn't. And I was also a designer. And at that time, 2006, there was a particular sort of renaissance of design for everybody. Target was doing its very first, collaborations with designers. You know, now they have a new one every season but like this was kind of the first time they were doing it. Martha Stewart came out with a magazine called Blueprint that was aimed at kind of what, my age at the time, women. And the tagline I'm pretty sure was, "Design your life." It was very, like, it was all about like consciously designing and curating your life.

I had baby number five, I'm on maternity leave and just going, "There, I can't go back to work right now. Like if there's anything I can do at home, that's, I've got to do it now." And I had, you know, remembered wanting to figure out a- a way to work at home The opportunity cost of being at work was not worth it at those ages. I needed to have some years where I could just do the kids or at least have a really flexible schedule.

At the same time, I knew very well that I am very prone to postpartum depression if I'm not doing something creative. So I can't just like give up work, right? Like that wasn't an option either. I know I'd go crazy. Very literally. So, um, I was trying to figure out what to do. And blogging was just kind of starting. I mean, it had been around. I remember reading a lot of personal essay blogs while I was on a work break in the, you know, at- at work. And, um, but design bloggers were just starting. I remember Design * Sponge existed, Oh Joy existed and, and the blog posts were really just like an image and a sentence.

Like, there's a lamp and like, "Look at this cool lamp I found." Like that was a blog post. Right? This is again before Pinterest, before Instagram, before any of that stuff. And so, um, I was watching that and I had read these personal essay blogs and been interested but felt like, "I'm not a writer. I don't know how to do that. I'm a slow writer when I do write." Like this wasn't going to work. But the, but design blogging I could see like, "Oh. I could do that. I can do an image and a sentence. I could do that."

So then it was, "What should I do? You know, what would the topic be?" And I knew. I knew what the topic should be because of these peers that I was constantly getting questions from. I'd been a mom for lots of years. They, so they wanted advice on like, "What do you do for a first birthday party? Who are you inviting? Your one year old doesn't have friends yet. Like how does that work?" And, and they'd want to know like, "Where do you find cute toddler's shoes and what ... " you know, just those kinds of questions. And I knew. And they wanted the know, not just because I was a parent, but because I was a designer. They cared that I was going to tell them where the cute toddler's shoes were.

So I knew exactly what I should write about. And so I called myself Design Mom from the beginning. I was at Blogspot, designmom.blogspot.com. And, um, just started writing. The first blog posts are still there, if you go to my blog. And people loved it. I just got really lucky on timing and what people wanted to talk about right then.

And this was before Google analytics. But there was a company called TrackSee that offered analytics and, um, uh, I remember, you know, so, implementing TrackSee and looking and going, "Wait a minute. There are 100 people that came to my blog today?" 'Cause, you know, there might be three comments. Who are these people?" I just was just shocked.

And of course 100 doesn't sound like a lot and I have far more readers now but this was a big deal to me in 2006. And so I was trying to figure out a way to, you know, get more of them to comment or like to participate to ... I wanted other readers to understand that there were a lot more people there than they thought. You know? They might think there's only ... If you see three comments you think, "Okay, me and these three commenters are reading."

And um, and a lot of my local friends assumed they were the only ones reading. Of course, you know? So I came up with this idea and I reached out to a high school friend of my husband's who had a little online shop called, *Darbybird* and I said, "Hey. If I, you know, what if I, um, promote your shop and I, you know, do a giveaway?" Like I, the- the term giveaway didn't, wasn't really a thing yet. But I said, "If I give this prize and they comment and that's how they enter to win." And so she agreed and we did it. And I believe I got 70 comments.

And people were freaking out. Like in the comments, like, "Who are these people?" Like 'cause like people that knew me are like, "What is happening?" And I'm getting phone calls. Like, "Who are these complete strangers that are commenting on your blog?" And it was the first, I've been credited as the first blog giveaway. Which I know then became just a like a thing. But I did this first thing. Because I was trying to figure out how to get them to comment. And the, the way I structured it was like, "You can say anything." You can say cute earrings," which was the prize, "Or you can say, "I love this shop. Or you can say whatever you want."

You know like just tried to make it really easy. And, an it, anyway, it worked. And from then on I, I did giveaways but I also did, um, you know, just got much more comments once people could see, there were a lot of people there.

WHITNEY I didn't realize that you had been credited with, um, starting the giveaway.

GABRIELLE Yeah. So then-

WHITNEY (laughs) that's fascinating.

GABRIELLE So then it was like, and- and within 24 hours I had comments from maybe 50 other bloggers across every, all sorts of fields saying, "Can I do this?"

WHITNEY (laughs).

GABRIELLE "Can- can I co, you know, can I, can I copy and paste your instructions?" I'm like, "Yeah. Go for it."

GABRIELLE And it was just, yeah. So for good or ill, sorry about the giveaways. But, um, yeah. That was-

WHITNEY So I think it's really interesting. I said at the very beginning, you've been a disruptor. And one of the things that we think about is disruption is you, you play where no one else is playing, you take on market risk. Like that is one of the principal tenets that when you take a market versus competitive risk, you're six times more likely to be successful. And so it's-

GABRIELLE Interesting.

WHITNEY ... interesting. Like in starting *Design Mom*, definitely market risk. Right? I mean, you were, you were early. Probably one, like you said, people were like, "What is this?" And then people started commenting, you realized that there was an opportunity. There was no competition, huge opportunity.

GABRIELLE Yeah.

WHITNEY And then with the giveaways, super interesting. And we're going to talk a little bit more about some more market risks that you've taken in just a minute. Um, one of the things I think has been really fun for me to observe over the years, because I've followed you for well over 10 years, is one of the things that you said is you wanted to create a home where parents and kids can thrive.

And I just saw on your blog that you had this photo shoot in Central Park, I think last summer.

GABRIELLE Yeah. August. August, 2019.

WHITNEY August. August of 2019. But you had done a similar photo shoot in the summer of 2009. And so being able to see the growth of your children. And ... so one of the things that I wanted, I was wondering is, as you think about this decision you made to start this blog and you didn't know what it was going to be but you had a problem that you needed to solve and so, and so you said, "I'm going to solve this." What have been some very special memorable moments with your family? Or your children that they've said like, "Wow, I can't believe that we've gotten to do this." Or how this experience as a family that would not have come about had you not started that blog. Does anything come to mind?

GABRIELLE Yeah. A couple of things. One of them is, um, both of them related to photos. But, um, one of them is a practical thing. And my kids talked about, and a, a few of them have mentioned it independently that when they need a photo of themselves, like if they get an assignment at school or they need a family something or they just need a photo, they go to Google and put in their name or my name or whatever and here's all this stuff. I'm not saying that's for everyone. But my kids have loved that that there's just this, this resource for them of that they can show anyone at any time and they feel like it's fun to show off to their friends because their friends put in their name and don't necessarily see anything.

And they get hundreds of pages of just like these photos of their family. But the other thing is, they have really loved the record of themselves. While they were still in New York, so this has been pretty much the history of the blog, I started [doing a what-to-wear-to-school series](#). Like, "What to wear to kindergarten? What to wear to first grade." And really would just photograph my kids kind of first day of school outfit or a couple of outfits they had. And, um, for each grade, and post them.

The content was supposed to be helpful like, "Hey. This is kind of what I'm putting my kids in right now. This is what I think is cute kids' fashion wise. Here are links if you want to shop these." Um, and it was also a chance to talk about, "Here's how we incorporate hand-me-downs, you know, this is what lasts, this is what doesn't, this is what I'm looking for as far as quality." And I've ended up doing that every year.

So my kids have this record of themselves, um, in their s, they, of what they wore that school year and what they looked like, what their hair was like, for really since they were just little kids. And they have, they love it. It's not even professional but, photographer. It's just me with the, you know, with the camera somewhere in our home.

And, um, anyway, that's been lovely. They really do treasure that. I don't have pictures of me in all my outfits every school, you know, every school year. But if I did, he would love that. If my husband had that, my, my kids would love to be able to see that. And I'm glad they have that now. Like, I mean, what a, what a treasure.

WHITNEY Isn't that interesting? And, um, they are being able to have this milestone every year of what they were wearing. And the- the other thought that comes to me as, as you were talking about this is that, I think as a parent, I think for most parents, we want to somehow convey to our children that they matter to us and we continually are resetting and recommitting to put our children and our family and our spouses and husbands and wives and partners first. And there's something about when you said that, I thought, you know, when you take that picture of them every year and also throughout the year, there's something very physical, very tangible that you are saying, "You are in front of me. I see you. You matter." And so they not only have this milestone but there's something I think psychological and emotional that they feel because of that. Does that, does that sound right to you?

GABRIELLE I, I haven't thought of that but I love that. Yeah. Here's, here's proof I was loved and taken care of. You know that- that someone was clothing me and thinking I was beautiful enough to take pictures of and wanted to share this and, yeah. I, they- they really do love it. And what a treasure for me of course, you know, as a parent.

WHITNEY Yeah. Oh. I just got chills when you said that. You know what's really, very lovely about that is that, you know, again, watching you, you've gotten, your- your children have gotten some sort of big opportunities, I think, in terms of being able to go places, etc., as a consequence. And so I think it's very lovely, it's just those small moments of that picture every year that matters to them.

You've lived in a lot of different places now.

GABRIELLE I have.

WHITNEY Can you talk to us a bit about the, um, the- the rationale and- and maybe one or two places that you've moved and, and how that, those decisions, that you and your husband have made, and your family, perhaps, to move, has played into this intersection of motherhood and design and just a little bit about that.

GABRIELLE You bet. So, so in New York, when I started Design Mom, my husband was finishing his PhD. He was at Columbia, but his first full time job once he had gotten his PhD was actually with K12.com which is not a university. And it was a virtual job. They were based in DC but they hired him in New York. And he was just expected to work from home, work virtually. Well he was working virtually and I was working virtually. And, we were still living in New York. And, um, going, "Well it's probably dumb for us to live in this very expensive place," the most expensive place in the country at the time, when we'd barely leave the house.

So, um, so we realized that we could go anywhere. You know, like, it- it was, it was fun but it's kind of weird. Typically in America, your job determines where you live and when you move there. Like that's, you get hired and that's why you move and when you move. And we were just having to decide to move somewhere. So we were, not a joke, we would like do searches for, "Okay, what's the best quality of life? And what's the lowest cost of living? And what's ... ? you know, like, what's, how do you narrow this down?" And, um, doing those kinds of searches, we ended up narrowing it down to Portland, Austin or Denver.

And all those years in New York, we had spent our, any sort of vacation money we had saved up would always get spent traveling west to go see family. But we would always just feel like we were going to Utah or California. So that ended up making us decide, "Okay, well let's go somewhere that we can drive." And Austin and Portland were a little too far to drive to see family. So, that's how we picked Denver. We got to Denver and we really, the intention was we were going to put down roots.

So we got there, started renting a house and looking around, and figuring out where did we want to live. And we couldn't find anywhere. Lots of really darling neighborhoods, we really have only good things to say about Denver and would recommend anyone live there. But we just were having a hard time finding that place to put down roots, that particular house or neighborhood.

And so we were saying, "Okay. Well what else?" And we thought, "Well we've always wanted the kids to have an international experience and maybe this is the time. We don't have any of them in high school yet ... " Our oldest was in seventh grade and we start going, "Okay. We can do this. We could, we'll go, um, we'll leave in the middle of seventh grade and come back in the middle of eighth grade. We'll take a year abroad and he won't miss seventh grade and he won't miss eighth grade, and he'll feel like he's fine."

'Cause our kids are very social, they have, they make friends easily and quickly and then they don't want to leave them, right? So, um, so but they- they could get on board with a year abroad. They thought that was okay. And we, we ended up picking France 'cause we both studied some French in high school so we at least had a little bit of head start there. So we had to put in a search on a website called sabbaticalshome.com and we put in that we wanted a house that would, uh, sleep eight people, fit eight people. We had baby number six in Denver, so now we're a family of eight.

So we're looking for a house that'll fit eight people and we wanted like in two hours of Paris and it needs to be furnished - one house came up with that criteria. And it happened to be in a little town called Argentan, it could, right outside of town. And it was stunning. It was restored by this artist, this local artist, and it was just gorgeous and this artist had a couple of little kids so there's a tree house in the backyard and a trampoline. And it was the same price rent as our rent in Colorado.

WHITNEY (laughs).

GABRIELLE So it was like, "Oh, this is amazing." And, um, so we moved. And we assumed we were going to do a year. And, uh, we loved it. And we kept extending. So we'd do six months and then extend again six months and extend again six months. And we just loved it.

It was this really magical time. We started a video series while we were there. That ended up changing my husband's whole career. We lived in the countryside and our kids didn't have a ton of other kids around them during the, you know, unless they were at school. And they just bonded and were so close and did constant projects, they're constantly making movies, art projects, um, but, you know, going on hikes in the country, riding bikes. It was just ... I don't know this incredibly bonding time.

And then France has this amazing school schedule as well where you get ... every six weeks there's a two week break. So since we could both work at home, that means we could also work on the road while we were traveling. So we'd take these amazing trips, we'd just jump in the car and, "Let's drive to Switzerland. Let's drive to the Netherlands. Let's drive to Ireland." You'd get, you know, drive around to a ferry and the ferry takes you to Ireland.

So it was this really magical time and definitely changed our whole family in really positive ways. And the kids are really frank about like, "Oh yeah, that changed everything."

WHITNEY Yeah.

GABRIELLE We assumed we'd move back to Colorado. We ended up getting recruited to Oakland by my sister who lived in San Francisco. And I had a brother also in San Francisco. And so it was like, "Oh come on, let's have our little [crosstalk 00:31:19]."

WHITNEY I love how you say, "Recruited. They recruited us."

GABRIELLE They did (laughs). They did. And again, we ended up in this amazing house. And, just remarkable and also was a- a- a big influence on us during those years. So we're in Oakland for, for six years. And that really ended up being ... it sort of the same decision as when we left New York. It was like, Oakland, even just in the six years we'd been there, has ... house prices have doubled, maybe more than that. I mean it's just, every ... And when the house prices go up, everything goes up.

Again, we're both working at home, why are we living in this town that has horrible commutes? Like, you know, if we do need to go to the city to go see my sister or just for a meeting, it's just a nightmare. You know, like, d, why are we doing this?

So, so we said, "Well where should we go?" And we ended up going, "Well we really miss France." And our younger three didn't have the same memories. They were really young. And they didn't have the same memories as the older ones. We said, "I think we gotta go back to France." So we moved in August. And, it's awesome. We love it.

WHITNEY Yeah.

GABRIELLE (laughs) we really do love it.

WHITNEY Yeah. So I- I- I see many more six month extensions in your future.

GABRIELLE (laughs).

WHITNEY (laughs) All right. Let's talk about Alt Summit. I've been, just for everybody who's listening, I've been a couple times. And I'm not a creative, like in the traditional sense of being a creative.

It is so much fun. And so much joie de vive. And just color and creativity and it, it really is that intersection of creativity and definitely has this large contingent of, of mothers, etc.

GABRIELLE Yeah.

WHITNEY But I'd love for you to share how this started. I know you've got one coming up this year. Just tell us a little bit about Alt Summit and how it happened.

GABRIELLE Sure. So I love talking about Alt Summit. So sorry, I'm gonna jabber, jabber, jabber. But I was living in New York still. Design Mom was about a year old. I went on a trip with my brothers and sisters and our spouses. It was really fun. I'm not the only design blogger in my family. My sister's also a design blogger. And my sister in law is also a design blogger. So we were all there.

WHITNEY Wait, wh- what are their names for everybody who's listening?

GABRIELLE Oh sorry, sorry, sorry.

WHITNEY In case they wanna go.

GABRIELLE My sister is Jordan Ferney. Her blog is ohhappyday.com.

WHITNEY Okay.

GABRIELLE And my sister in law is, Liz Stanley and her blog is [Say Yes. Sayyes.com](http://SayYes.Sayyes.com).

WHITNEY Okay.

GABRIELLE And they've been blogging for as long as I have. In fact, Jordan started two months before me.

Anyway, we're in Mexico and we're talking about conferences. And my sister and sister in law were not mothers yet. But I was. And I would go to mom blogging conferences. Well like BlogHer, which was almost all moms. And then I helped to put on the very first Mom 2.0 conference. Mom 2.0 summit. And I would go to these conferences. I loved them. It was just really fun to talk shop about blogging and you know, like you don't have coworkers. So it was like so delightful to just go and, you know, hear about Blogspot and WordPress updates and say, "Wow, Blogspot's been bought by Google." And I mean, just like stuff that you, you know, was so exciting to us. And, and talking about Tracksee, you know? And just, and all this stuff.

WHITNEY Right, right.

GABRIELLE And, um, but my sisters hadn't gone because it was really so mom focused, number one. And number two, so writer focused. It wasn't visual. And a lot of these things didn't really have a visual element yet. When Twitter launched, there was no visual element. When Facebook launched there barely visual. Like it just wasn't, um, where all these design bloggers were so visual. None of the- the speakers were- were- were women that, um, my sisters wanted to, to hear from. You know, at the conferences that I went to.

GABRIELLE Whereas for me it was, I lived in this mom world and design world. So we're sitting there going, "Well why don't we do a conference for design bloggers. Let's do that." And my sister Sarah, who's great at organizing and has done a lot of political event planning, said, "Oh great. We could do this. Like I'll, I'll plan it and you will do the, you'll do like the content. You know, you'll invite the speakers. You know who to invite."

GABRIELLE So, um, so we did. And it was awesome.

WHITNEY (laughs).

GABRIELLE I mean like even from the beginning. Like we, our- our first panel at the first conference had Grace Bonney of Design * Sponge, who, you know, really established the whole design blogging community. And Maxwell, from Apartment Therapy, which is still out there, going strong and, you know, he's, again, hugely influential. Um, I mean, it was just a big, big deal. And I mean, we didn't know at the time but it was a, it was a big deal. And, and I loved it. I got to hear from all these women that I had been following and I got to meet them in- in real life and it was wonderful.

And, um, but then I went home and I realized, "Oh they're expecting us to do it again." Like I hadn't really thought-

WHITNEY (laughs).

GABRIELLE ...beyond the first one (laughs) you know, it was like,

WHITNEY "That was fun."

GABRIELLE Right, "Can we just pull this off?" Right? You know?

And so that was this weird thing. Because like I already had this business. I had Design Mom and it took up a ton of time and I had this big family, I was actually doing a lot of stuff. So I shared this

company with my sister and she would handle the organization, and she would run the sales team and then I would just do content.

And then about three years ago, my sister was ready to retire. Her husband was retiring from politics. She was like, "Okay. I'll be done with Alt Summit too, we're going to go onto this next phase of our life." So she sold her, her half the company to me. And all of a sudden now I'm like in charge.

WHITNEY In that transition, um, what was the biggest challenge for you of, of you taking that stake and ... What was scary about it?

GABRIELLE Well, um, so the scary thing was, um, I just had been able to share that responsibility. Right?

If something wasn't working, it never felt like it was all on my shoulders. Uh, there was some, I- I, we shared ownership of the company. And that's awesome. And all of a sudden it was just me. So if it's failing, or if there's a financial risk, it's all on me. Versus just sharing. And there's something lovely about having a business partner. Right? Like to share some of that, share some of the pressures, share some of the risks. It was all on me. And we were trying new...

WHITNEY So what did you do? What did you do?

GABRIELLE I reinvented, really, is what we did. We said, "Okay. Let's go to Palm Springs. Let's pick a hotel that's less expensive." We'd been at a really luxury hotel in Salt Lake City. And we said, "Let's go to a less expensive hotel because we need to kind of ... " we needed younger audience coming in. We needed, we just needed some kind of fresh, fresh attendees. And we knew lowering the cost of the hotel would really help and then that also allowed us to lower the cost of the tickets. So we dropped the price of the tickets and really thought, "Okay this is for kind of people that haven't been before."

We also chose Palm Springs and this particular hotel in Palm Springs 'cause it was just so Instagrammable. The who, the whole hotel, it's called the Saguaro Hotel, it's a rainbow. It's just literally rainbow. You know, every wall was a different color and there's this beautiful spectrum are, you're surrounded by the whole time. And our social shares went up that year by 30%. And it is 100% because we changed the location to this place where most of the common grounds was outdoors. And Instagrammers love natural light versus like being in a conference room where it's really hard to get a great shot. So we had so much stuff happening outside, where you're getting great light in this rainbow backdrop. I mean, it was just gorgeous. And Palm Springs was like the hot town to visit. And was super cool. It was like, you know, towns get popular and this was, it's- it's been, it's still in its heyday or its second heyday. So, um, so we ju, we just said, "Okay. This lowers our cost and lowers our risk. And we sold out in about an hour.

And then once that happened it was like, "Okay." And I could really calm down. But then it was also just this ... A different workflow, a different, um, balance. And I didn't want to give up Design Mom. I- I- I still have it. I love Design Mom. And it was also ... And Design Mom had been my main source of income. Alt Summit was the supplement. But I needed to work more in Alt Summit so how ... ? Just trying to figure that out. Like, "How much money should I be trying to earn from Alt Summit versus Design Mom to balance, um, that out." So and that just took figuring out. And it's always, I'm still always figuring that out.

WHITNEY Do you feel like you've made the shift now from a business model perspective?

GABRIELLE Yeah. I would say I'm now more Alt Summit funded than Design Mom funded. But could always switch it if I needed to. I mean like, like, design mom is all ... can make money when it needs to. I just have to put time into it. You know what I mean?

WHITNEY Yeah.

GABRIELLE So that's nice.

WHITNEY Yeah.

GABRIELLE That's really nice. Um-

WHITNEY That's interesting. That, and good that you got the- those two streams of income that you can-

GABRIELLE Yes.

WHITNEY ... toggle back and forth between.

GABRIELLE That also helps me feel like all of this is less of a risk.

WHITNEY Yeah.

GABRIELLE You know like, because, um, I- I, it's not all, all my eggs aren't in one basket.

WHITNEY Was there a book that you read, um, when you were figuring out how to shift that was influential for you? A book that you read or a person that you talked to that really helped you in make this transition from being, having a business partner to being the, you know, the- the CEO of the company on your own? Was there something that was influential in your business thinking?

GABRIELLE More than a book, I was talking to other, um, conference owners. So about that time - I don't even know how this came about. But basically this, back to Mexico for this little retreat-y thing. But it was a- a bunch of us that had started conferences at about the same time. We got together in Mexico and did a, it was organized by Barbara Jones, who had founded Blissdom. And she basically gave us all a spotlight. You know, we all took a turn, where basically said, "Here's this history of my company ... "

WHITNEY Hm.

GABRIELLE " ... here's the problems we're having, you know, here's the challenges- "

WHITNEY The mastermind.

GABRIELLE " ... that I need to ... " Yeah. I guess, yeah. You're right. I'd never, I'd ne, I don't think I've ever officially participated in a mastermind but I was essentially that. And that was incredibly helpful.

WHITNEY Hm.

GABRIELLE That was incredibly helpful. And that, that really helped me get a vision for, "Okay, what is it I want out of this and what am I doing?"

WHITNEY Hm.

GABRIELLE And it ended up, um, we ap, we did two years in Palm Springs. And then last year's conference made a major shift that, um, that was maybe the biggest disruption I think I've done with Alt Summit ever.

I was looking for another location. We would sell out at this rainbow hotel in an hour. And then we, people were furious at us for the next eight months that there was no other tickets. But we were just maxed out. It's not a huge hotel. And I knew, 'cause I looked at every locale in the country that your options are, gorgeous luxury hotel, but everyone's in conference rooms, or cool quirky, you know, more boutique hotel, but you are maxed out at 500, 700 attendees. You know, like something like that. And your keynote's probably going to be like outside by the pool. There is no room where you can all be together.

And that limits your growth but then if I go to the, if I go to a big, you know, luxury hotel, I'm going to lose all those Instagram share, I'm going to lose all the social. It's just not going to have the same feeling. So it's, I was really stuck. Just stuck. Like, "What do I do?" And I could not solve this problem. And then I remembered I had gone to South by Southwest for a few years in there. And I remember all of a sudden went, "Oh. You go and you go to the, the conference center and you get, you get, you know, your badge, and then you're like at 10 different venues around town." Like you're never back at, it's not like at one location. It's everywhere. There are classes in every hotel, there are classes in a, you know, anyone that's got AV and a meeting room has, housed South by Southwest content.

But they have like 50 classes going at any one time all day long, right? And that just did this click for me. And I was like, "Oh. I could use all the cool hotels in Palm Springs. None of them are big enough. But if I'm using all of them, I can have 2,000 attendees going instead of 500 or 700. Because there's classes all over the place." Now, we still needed a place for a keynote. There still has to be a place where all the attendees, if I have 2,000 can be together. And so we basically said, "Okay well if you, you can do a conference hotel," one of those big luxury hotels with a conference rooms, "As long as we have these other cool places where most of the photos will be taken." Does that make sense?

And if 3,000 people want to come, I just add a few more cool hotels. There's a million of these smaller hotels that have meeting spaces. Just not big enough for 2,000 people or 3,000. But anyway. So I tested it last year. It was awesome (laughs).

WHITNEY (laughs).

GABRIELLE It was super scary. And we didn't make any money last year, 'cause it was like (laughs) a whole new thing. It was for sure the biggest risk that I've taken. We were just at these amazing locations that we couldn't fit a whole conference at. And I felt like I was giving this gift to these attendees who got to see these locations they wouldn't have gotten to go to. You know, like lovely hotels or just play, you know, parties at these wonderful spaces that they would have no reason to be in if they didn't have something like this conference. And it makes it scalable.

WHITNEY Yeah, yeah. So you learned, Alt Summit learned from this South by Southwest model, which is-

GABRIELLE Absolutely.

WHITNEY ... is just massive. Yeah.

GABRIELLE Yeah.

WHITNEY And last year something very special happened There was a very sweet Instagram post by Fixer Upper's Joanna Gaines. Tell us that story of what happened last year.

GABRIELLE Absolutely. So it actually starts with Design Mom. So Design Mom and Alt Summit are separate entities but sometimes they do have some overlap.

On Design Mom, typically every Tuesday I publish a home tour. And yes, it's got tons of pictures of someone's home but it's also like a parenting interview where they're talking about how they live with kids. Like, "What are your tips? How do you organize things? What's, what's the part that, of your home that you hope your kids never forget? And what's the part you hope they don't remember?" And we'll have lots of moms saying, "Well I yell. I hope they forget I yell."

It's a beloved part of the, the blog. And one, several years ago, I featured a designer in Texas called Joanna Gaines. And we did a home tour. It was her first kind of public home tour. She was starting a, trying to start a design company. And about a week after I published the home tour, she got a call from HGTV. Folks that were like looking, you know, scouting and they read my blog and they were scouting and they contacted her. And I got an email from her saying, "Hey, because of the home tour, I've got this pilot with HGTV." So I wrote a blog post about that, "Look, how cool. You know, we did this home tour and now she's got this pilot."

Well, the pilot was successful and, I mean it was just ... It has just taken off. And so Joanna Gaines, we had never met in person, but we'd always exchanged emails, whatever, just like, "Oh congrats on this." Or, you know, "This is huge." And she was always sweet. Like I'd get all of a sudden a bunch of emails from someone going, "I didn't know Joanna Gaines, you know, was discovered on your blog." But she would have mentioned it in her university magazine. Or, you know, things like that.

So she was always really cute to mention it. And for the last few years I had invited her to come to Alt Summit and be the keynote speaker. And she hadn't been available. She's, you know, she's shooting or she's, something's going on. But she was always very sweet about it and I said, "Well don't be mad, I'm going to ask you again next year. So just just be prepared. I, I'd love you to come."

So, um, so last year I reached out and said, "I'm back. What's your schedule looking like?" And she wrote back privately and said, "I'm told them I definitely want to come this year, to clear my schedule, I'm coming." It was wonderful to meet her. Like I feel like she's a, a longtime friend and business for all these years but had never met in person.

And we both have these big families and our kids are, have a lot of similar ages. And it was, um, anyway, just delightful to meet her. And she's every bit as lovely as you hope she would be in person and she brought her little baby and it was just wonderful. She did an excellent keynote.

WHITNEY Oh. The, and this was your 10th, 10th conference right?

GABRIELLE This was the 10th and, well it was our 10 year anniversary. Our 15th conference and 10 year anniversary. Yeah. It was all so, so special to have her there.

WHITNEY One of the things that I love and, and Macy, our podcast producer and I were talking about before the conversation is that one of your, your missions, your just cause, if you will, if we put in Simon Sinek's words, is to elevate women's voices. And I just wanted to give you a quick shoutout and on that is that sometimes we think about elevating women's voices as elevating our own voice. And one of the things I think you've done so beautifully is you've elevated other women's voices. And so just thank you for that.

GABRIELLE Well thanks for saying it. I definitely feel like, if I have a mission, that's it. If I have this on purpose, I'm out here and I'm supposed to, elevate, amplify, you know, get these women's voices out there so I, and I love to do it. It makes me feel awesome. And I, it's just really important to me.

WHITNEY Yeah. I want to come back to, um, the conference Alt Summit, where people can learn more about it. I want to just ask one more question as we start to wrap up. And that is about Ben Silbermann and Pinterest.

I've heard anecdotally a little bit of the story. But I think our listeners, you know, everybody who's listening to this, knows of Pinterest. And so I think it'd just be really fun to hear about the intersection between Pinterest and Alt Summit.

GABRIELLE Absolutely. Absolutely. So let me just start by saying Ben Silbermann is just a standup guy. Just an awesome, awesome guy. And, um, it, at an early Alt Summit, I feel like it was year number two, Ben Silbermann came. And he just came as an attendee. He was definitely looking for, you know, visual social media people. So that would've been design bloggers at the time. And he had, he showed up at the conference as an attendee, he had his laptop with his tiny beta version of Pinterest.

And it was, you know, it had his family and friends using it. He's a pretty introverted, shy kind of guy, and he would just have these little conversations one-on-one and say, "Hey will you check out this project I'm working on?" And this crowd was eating it up. It was a badly needed tool for visual people. Like it was like, yeah, I mean I was using Delicious, I was trying to save stuff, I'd have a file on my desktop of visual stuff. Like I was constantly trying to save visual things. And there was no good way to do it.

And so this crowd was all design bloggers. And they had all the same issue. So when he would go show this little beta and, instantly people were like, "Oh yeah. H- How?"

WHITNEY (laughs).

GABRIELLE Like, "How can I sign up?" Right? He didn't know who- who he was meeting. He was just talking to any attendee. But he, he, um, ended up aligning or connecting with some really influential people. Everyone was kind of a small design blogger at the time. But a lot of these ended up having huge audiences like [SF Girl By the Bay](#) and [Joy Cho of Oh, Joy](#). And he really connected with some of these design bloggers with this tool that he had. And he came, so people started using it.

And the next year he came back again. He was a panelist, talking I think just about startups in general. And then the next year he came back again and this time he was the keynote. Pinterest has taken off and every power user of Pinterest at that time is basically in the room. They're all Alt Summit attendees. They're all design bloggers. And they are using Pinterest daily, constantly. And they're making Pinterest a gorgeous place. These are, these are women with fabulous taste, great visual eye and Pinterest was just stunning.

Now you get on and there is a lot of like type on the images or things like that, you know, that it's not always beautiful. I have to go and curate my feed, um, but at the time it was just stunning. And it was stunning and it was only stunning. And Ben said that Alt Summit is the soil at which Pinterest grew. The, this is, this is where he planted the tree and that's where it grew. And still, if you look at the top Pinterest users with the top followers, they've all come to Alt Summit, most multiple times have been speakers or even keynotes themselves as their, their audiences have grown.

And, um, yeah, we love it. They're coming back this year as a sponsor. We're so glad to have them. And we, we love Pinterest. Such an amazing tool for anyone visual, of course.

WHITNEY Hm. I love it. It- it makes me wonder, who else is going to get discovered by Gabrielle Blair. I'm sure there will be more. All right. So Alt Summit. Tell us when it is this year, what you've got coming up and if people do want to participate even at this late date is that even a possibility?

GABRIELLE Yes. So it's happening March first through sixth. And because of the scalability, we have a policy where we don't sell out, like on purpose. We say, "Keep coming. We have so many people that want to speak and so much attendees that we will just continue to scale it." We had over 1,400 pitches this year for speakers for our pretty limited number of spots. So you can still buy tickets.

Go to altitudesummit.com. The original name was Altitude Summit. But, um, everyone just calls it Alt Summit for short. And so you can go to altitudesummit.com, which is the URL. And tickets are there, info's there, you can see. It's not too late. So jump in if you want to.

WHITNEY Okay. And then anybody who's listening, we'll include in the show notes, you know, the Design Mom blog etc. so that you can, you can find Gabrielle. Okay, um, as we wrap up, um, I- I have two final questions for you. One is, what are you most happy about when you think about the work that you have been doing for the last 15 years? I'm not going to ask you about your children-

GABRIELLE (laughs).

WHITNEY 'Cause I know you're gonna say your children and your family.

GABRIELLE (laughs).

WHITNEY So professionally, what are you most happy about.

GABRIELLE I get an email at least once a week, or, you know, just some kind of message of someone saying, "Hey, I just launched a company because of the, a partner I met at Alt Summit." Or, "You featured my shop on Design Mom and we sold out at Christmas and we've just grown and expanded." Or, "Hey I just launched a, a TV show with the Jim Henson company because we met them at Alt Summit and we pitched them an elevator and I just get it constantly. And it, it just couldn't make me happier. I have a platform. I didn't know I was going to have a platform. But I have one. What can I do with it? How can I, um, you know, help as many people as possible? So I love it. And I especially love that so many of the emails I get are related to these women's businesses. Like I think that's such an empowering thing to have women earning money, growing a company that they own and they have control over, that's, I mean, that's just as powerful as you can be. Like that's it. And it's an independence that's so important for women. And I, anyway, that makes me super, super happy.

WHITNEY That's beautiful. Any final advice for, or any final words, as we conclude?

GABRIELLE My best advice is if you're doing anything on the internet, really anything at all because it's all, you're going to have a website, you're going to have some kind of internet presences, start. Like stake your claim. Because no one's watching at first. So just get out there and start and have the website that's not quite perfect, or the Instagram feed that's not exactly what you wanted, but just start, because it's the internet. And you can go back and edit it, constantly. So you don't like your logo, change it. It's not like printed letterhead. Like we used to have to really invest in signage for the outside of your shop and your printed materials and now it's all so digital that you can change it so quickly that that's it.

And by putting it out there publicly, by saying, "I'm gonna open this shop on this state." Or, "I'm going to start this conference," or what- whatever it might be, it kinda forces you to, to meet that goal and to, you've made this public promise and you- you have to do it. And, um, and if it's not perfect, it's so changeable and editable. Just start. Just get out there and start. Don't hesitate. And, uh, that's my advice.

WHITNEY Start. Wise words from Gabrielle Blair.

GABRIELLE (laughs).

WHITNEY Thank you for being with us all the way from Normandy, France. And best wishes for this year's Alt Summit.

GABRIELLE Thanks Whitney. Thanks so much. This was a, this was so, super fun.

The ability to design and thoughtfully curate is a powerful, but often underappreciated skill. One that Gabrielle has in spades. When we zoom out and look at how she's designed her life and been discovery-driven along the way, it's remarkable. She knew she wanted to do something with design that would allow her to choose to be a mother, but interior design ended up not being a good fit. So she pursued graphic design, became a mother and then pivoted again to design blogging. From choosing where her family would live to creating Alt Summit, you can see her being driven by discovery again and again—knowing where she wants to go, setting off on that path, and making adjustments along the way. Then reconsidering and adjusting again.

And wasn't it delightful to hear that in Gabrielle's mission to amplify women's voices through her blog and conference, she's been part of the growth and discovery of some remarkable people. Our producer Macy said as we were prepping this episode, that as she's gone to Alt Summit over the years, nearly everyone has a Gabrielle story. She made an introduction, or she gave them the opportunity to speak, or provided them with a platform on her blog. And actually, I have a Gabrielle story too. Back when I was writing my Dare, Dream, Do blog, I decided to advertise on Design Mom and wanted to make the most of that investment by having content every day during the month that I advertised. By curating stories of women who were daring, then dreaming, then doing, I got the idea to [write my first book](#) which then set off a chain reaction of events that in part, has led to the work I do today.

Which brings me to the last point - growth happens faster in relationships. We are each growing on our own S Curves of Learning, but when we can come together and help one another in mutually beneficial ways - whether in our places of work, or at conferences like Alt Summit - we can accelerate that growth.

Practical Tip:

Design an experience where you can be in the same room as people who are going to help you grow. Whether that's a lunch you schedule with a colleague, a conference like Alt Summit or something else. Commit this week to getting something on the calendar that will help you better design your own growth.

As we wrap up, here's the review of the week. We recently had a big bump in our listenership. That is in part because you are sharing your favorite episodes and takeaways on social media and are [generously taking the time to leave 5-Star Ratings and Reviews on Apple Podcasts](#). This week's review from Max Brown. He says:

Your Simon Sinek interview went to another level with your vulnerability and lessons learned. I enjoyed the whole conversation, but your reflection at the end was awesome!

Thank you Max. This definitely was a risk to say what was actually happening for me. But I realized that I cannot encourage each of you to disrupt yourself, if I'm not willing to do the same. For those of you who want to listen to past episodes, including our interview with [Simon Sinek, Episode 143](#), everything is available on our website at whitneyjohnson.com/podcast. There's a complete transcript, links and show notes for every episode.

Thank you again to Gabrielle Blair for being our guest, thank you 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.