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EP9 - Kasi Zieminski Nonprofit Marketer, Lifelong Learner, Mental Health Advocate

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BRETT COWELL (host)

KASI ZIEMINSKI (guest)

Brett Cowell: It's Brett Cowell. This is the Total Life Complete Podcast coming to you from the Transformation Room at the Grove. Today I'm here with Kasi Zieminski. Welcome Kasi.

Kasi Zieminski: Hi, thank you.

Brett Cowell: Thanks for coming along today. I met you a couple of weeks ago right here at the Grove. You told a wonderful story about your own life journey and then I asked you if you'd come in and talk on air on a podcast. Kindly, I think you said that you would so let's see how this goes.

Kasi Zieminski: Great!

Brett Cowell: What I ask my guests on the show is, how do you introduce yourself at a party when people ask who you are?

Kasi Zieminski: That's a good question. My name is Kasi and usually that comes with the question of Kasi or Kasey. It gets mispronounced from time to time. So that is my name. I'm from Oklahoma originally. I've been in Texas for about nine years now plus four years from college. I feel like a lot of the times maybe too much we defer to what do you do, what's your job. I'm a director of marketing in nonprofit currently. Married, no kids, no pets, no plants. So that's perhaps a little bit unique for my age at this point, but I don't know. Those are a few of the highlights.



Brett Cowell: So I'd like to know more about this plants and pets thing that you mentioned. You're going down a checklist there of things.

Kasi Zieminski: Usually it's, "Do you have kids?" That's sometimes the question. The answer to that is no. A little bit later maybe there's a question about pets and that's a no too. So my husband and I joke that we have a couple of house plants alive. It's hard enough to keep those alive and the two of us taken care of so we're focusing on that right now.

Brett Cowell: You talked a little bit about what you do at the moment. Do you want just say what that is a little bit more?

Kasi Zieminski: Sure. So currently I'm director of marketing for a nonprofit called the National Benevolent Association. It's a health and social services arm of a Christian denomination here at the Christian Church Disciples of Christ. It's kind of like a Catholic Charities or United Way where we work with health and social service agencies that are affiliated with this particular church. Help them start up. We incubate new health and social service projects, come alongside existing ones, also start programs with other partners in the church.

We have a young adult nonprofit residency, a service residency for young adults kind of like a gap year where they can be in a host community, live in intentional community with other young adults do nonprofit internships in the community and discern what's next for them. So a lot of different ways that we work in community together.

Brett Cowell: Well just go back a little bit now to ... so that's what you're doing now. You haven't always done that as a job. So we'll go back to where did you start off when you're high school or whatever. What did you want to be when you grew up?

Kasi Zieminski: I've gotten to think about this a little bit recently so it's a good question to ask. So I was an only child, am an only child and so I spent a lot of time on my own as a kid reading, writing stories, drawing pictures. I feel like I had a lot of that childhood creativity and imagination that entertained me and kept me out of the way from the adults or not bothering them. It was great for me as well. I always enjoyed that.

So when it came time to think about college and what I wanted to study, I had some of those things in mind, some of those artistic things even though they were more of a hobby than a real skill or talent I guess. Also, got some advice from other folks that I needed to be able to make a living and support myself. So I also had thought of those helping professions. Teaching, social work, counseling and so with that advice from adults in my life, ended up going into



advertising which was maybe not the best way to really make a living with lots of money, but it was a profession that had some job prospects.

My parents didn't go to college and so it was really getting some of those advice from counselors and other adults in my life that maybe a business route was the way to go. So for me, advertising was a way that I could be in a creative space while still being able to put some of my more analytical and practical skills in place as well.

At my university, the communications program were in the art school and so that was a great space to be in to have that creativity around. You just walk in a class and get to hear the orchestra students practicing or see the dance studio as you walked by or see the art studio. So I enjoyed being a part of that even if I was on the account management track in advertising. I also added a journalism major so those were my studies.

Brett Cowell: I was fascinated by that when I did some research on LinkedIn and saw that you did advertising and journalism. I was thinking here about a kind of "*spin* and *no spin*" ...keeping those two things in balance. In 2017, I'm not sure which one is the spin and which one is the no spin.

Kasi Ziemiński: Yeah, I think you can meld them all into one sometimes.

Brett Cowell: So you left your undergrad degree and then what happened then?

Kasi Ziemiński: So I met my now husband in undergrad. He was going to law school in the Bay Area. So I had the chance to start my advertising career in San Francisco which was an amazing opportunity. Never thought growing up in a small town in Oklahoma that I would get to be living and working in California and in San Francisco. So that was really a great start. The faculty that I had an advertising program at SMU, Southern Methodist University, were instrumental in connecting me to alumni and contacts in San Francisco. So I was able to start at a global agency there in account management working on a variety of brands and of national and global accounts. So a 22 year old ad major that was a really fantastic opportunity.

I was able to be there for two years. Really learned a lot. Really enjoyed it and had some of those surreal moments as I'm walking down the street in San Francisco thinking, "Is this really my life? Is that where I get to be?" which was really great. Then my husband graduated from law school. We decided to move back to Texas, to Dallas where his family was and we had a lot of friends here.

I think my last day was a Friday in April. This was 2008 and I think on that Monday the agency where I had worked had a whole rash of layoffs. So it was sort of a foretelling of what was to come a little bit later that year and the next



year. We left and moved back to Dallas and I was interviewing for jobs here in Dallas in advertising with a little bit of urgency, because we were moving into a townhouse, getting married. He was studying for the bar so he wasn't starting work for another few months. So I felt this you know "You need a job. You need another job now." Not really knowing that I was probably pretty fortunate to get hired again at that point before the recession really went into full effect here.

Brett Cowell:

How was that? How were you feeling at the time? Did you still wake up in the morning thinking how fortunate you were to do that?

Kasi Zieminski:

So that's when it kind of shifted. I think part of that was becoming a little bit more ... getting to be a little more senior in my career. I think as an assistant account executive and as account executive, I got to be a little bit insulated from some of the bigger stress and drama working in advertising. As I advanced a little bit that environment sort of changed. It was a different agency with a different culture with some of the pressure of the recession coming down on it. In our industry, people are always saying marketing budgets are the first to get cut with that, advertising and sort of the snowball effect of that.

So all of those things sort of combined together that it was a different culture in the agency and a different experience for me that made me think more critically about, "Is this really what I want to do?" The accounts that I was working on were not the most fulfilling for me. On one hand, they were great opportunities for a younger person working in account management in that they were the full service accounts. They were TV, radio, print, outdoor, at the time this is late 2000s full-service advertising accounts and the agency didn't necessarily have a lot of those. So to get exposure to those higher profile facets of advertising made them good accounts to work on.

The clients that I was working with, the products that we were selling, those parts of it were not fulfilling. I think there are some folks in advertising who are skilled enough and appreciated enough for "creativity for creativity's sake" and those that can sell anything, but for me being a few years into my career at that point, I kind of started to realize maybe this isn't what I'm looking for if all those pieces aren't falling into place.

If it's not a brand that I believe in, if it's not a client that I'm going have a positive experience with too, doesn't really appreciate my work or is not going to be polite and professional to interact with on a day-to-day basis, is this really what I meant to do and sort of what I'm meant to be and do with my education and to continue to pursue. So that was the first time a few years into my career that I was starting to have those thoughts.

Brett Cowell:

This thought process had started I think you know you start a job and probably spend the first couple of years trying to work out what to do and be professional



at it and then a couple years down the track. It sounds like a couple of things had happened. You went into a different role where you're exposed to more things. The environment had changed given the financial crisis or just various things that had happened there. Also I guess you really could take a step back and look at what you were doing and look at what's ahead. As part of that, did you look around the company and say, "What jobs do I want to do?"? How did the reality of what you were doing match up with this creative desire that you'd had early on?

Kasi Zieminski:

Right, absolutely. I think when I accepted the job, I only did a couple of interviews. When I was making the move from San Francisco to Dallas and that sort of in hindsight I probably could have been a little pickier. I could have looked around little bit more. I think this is relatable. We feel like, "No, I have to have a job now and you're going to offer it to me, then I should take it. I should be grateful to have this opportunity. No, I'm not going to negotiate my salary higher. Yes, I'll take whatever you're offering me." As a young woman early in her career in hindsight now I can definitely see that was one of these times where this was the offer and I felt like it might be the only one. I needed to take it. So there was definitely that.

Part of it was in my first advertising role at the first agency I was with in San Francisco, I worked on four, five or six different accounts in less than two years that I was there, was promoted there. Got the chance to move around. Worked with a lot of different teams, a lot of different clients. Kind of expected that that's what would be the case in this next role. Whether it was just the way that agency operated or if it was because of the recession, I got in on one account, was able to split my time on to two accounts, but instead of 50% time here. 50% time there, it was really 100% time on both and working longer hours than I was expecting.

My husband is an attorney. He also worked downtown. We would carpool which means I was working his hours and not making his salary. So, yes, the expectation was one way and the reality ended up not quite fitting that. Maybe I could have stuck it out. Maybe things would've come around and changed. Certainly, I feel like I did voice what my interests were. I was interested in working on more cause marketing some accounts for some of our nonprofit clients. Business model wise for an agency, I needed to be working on the clients who were paying for my time. So at that particular time at that particular place, it seemed that I didn't have the opportunities to move around and really take advantage of some other chances than maybe I would have in a different time and place.

Brett Cowell:

Did you try and find another job straightaway or did you stick with it and then that kind of led you in a certain direction after that?



Kasi Zieminski: So I was there for a couple of years total I think which now seems a little bit short but at the time felt long, because of the way that it was. I was kind of getting this inkling “Maybe I should look around. Maybe I should make a move.” The truth was I was getting so burned out in advertising because of the environment that I was in. I didn't know if I wanted to go to another agency. I was afraid that it was to be the same way. That may or may not have been the case but at the time that was thought. Like maybe I really need to make a move.

I felt called to the nonprofit space but didn't really know what exactly that might entail. If I wanted to do marketing communications, if most nonprofits need fundraising development help and I didn't really know if that was the direction I wanted to go. So I was having these thoughts but nothing was pushing me to really go for it and actually get my resume in order and start applying. But this particular moment was kind of a tipping point which I shared a little bit with you before. I remember vividly ...

Brett Cowell: Tell us what happened. So you were going along then and doing your job. Just tell us a little bit more about the context and what happened.

Kasi Zieminski: So it was a February evening. It was cold and rainy. My assignment was to supervise a street team that was overseeing a launch at a gas station. So we had a few different teams out in the Metroplex. So it was my job to go out into the Dallas suburbs to a convenience store gas station and oversee the street team.

Brett Cowell: What's a street team?

Kasi Zieminski: We would contract out with young adults usually teenagers, young adults and they would be on the grounds to promote a product in different ways. So we had a team out there. They were on site to have games at the gas station to have free pizza. We have balloons and we had a whole setup.

Brett Cowell: Quite a party.

Kasi Zieminski: Quite a little bit of a party except that it was this freezing rain February afternoon/evening. Not really the best environment. So the street team was there but as the ad agency person, we wanted to be there to supervise to make sure everything was going well. So not the most plum gig. So that's not TV commercial, not a TV shoot, not recording some great radio spot. I'm standing in the rain at a gas station with some cold pizza and balloons.

Brett Cowell: That's the glamour of advertising.

Kasi Zieminski: Yeah. So not necessarily glamorous, but more than that, it was really just sort of this out of body experience. This is what I'm doing creating an ad that's going to go on TV or go on the radio or go on a billboard very far from you. I found is



different than when I'm actually the one that standing there on the ground intercepting someone on their way home from work potentially or their way to work on this cold rainy night telling them they need to spend their hard earned money on a ... ticket.

So that was sort of this aha moment for me that for me at this particular time in particular place this was not what I signed up for. This was not what I felt like I was meant to do with my life, with my education, with my skills and talents. I felt like I could do more and. I'm just one person but I felt like that was not where I needed to be. So I remember driving home and I remember calling my husband and I was like, "Yeah I think I'm done with this. We'll see what happens."

Brett Cowell: So you had this out of body experience where ... I think in a lot of professional work you can be quite detached from what's happening and I think you alluded to that. The work that you do gets executed elsewhere and you don't necessarily say, "Look, this is what I'm standing for" [in] doing a report or a spreadsheet and submitting that by email to somebody else or whatever it is. Sometimes you might see that come into fruition, but it's different than the physical embodiment of what you're actually doing which is convincing people to do something and standing behind that with your life, with your time and your energy and things like that. I think ... was that what was you were feeling with your out of body experience? Was that that kind of stuff?

Kasi Zieminski: Absolutely. It was just I have always been in my career very much of I wear many hats. We roll up our sleeves. We get the job done. It was never really a sense of "Oh this task is beneath me" or this is "I do this. I'm not supposed to do this in my job." So it wasn't a moment like that. It was just exactly as you said like this is not just putting something out there and I can be detached from it. This is me personally standing here selling and that was something that I wasn't comfortable with, with that particular product.

Brett Cowell: I know it's something that it comes up again and again when you talk about the story of your life. Again professional work as you were saying. You do so many different tasks, disjointed your tasks and then you have this moment of clarity. I know for me ... I ask this question about how do you introduce yourself for a lot of reasons. It's one that we get at a party. As you said, people talk about their job. I stopped asking people to respond to what do you do because people are more than their job. I think that's one thing to realize.

For me, I would start "I worked as a management consultant in strategy and operations." Try to explain that to people was just puzzling for many, many years. I just started saying, "I help big companies make more money." That's essentially what I do. That is in a few words exactly what I was doing. There's nothing wrong with that. The economy we're living in etc. but the second part to that: is that how you want to spend your life. Is that what you know here lies X, spent their



life helping big companies make more money. Is there anything else behind that? What else did your life stand for apart from that? So that was the kind of thing. So you had this. You talked to your husband. You got home and what happened the next day and the next week and the month after that?

Kasi Zieminski:

I can't remember the exact timeframe now though I feel like I had February in my head and maybe ended up making a change by May maybe. So probably there in the spring the next few months. Started doing a little job hunting. Was looking in the nonprofit space but was also finding for a lot of nonprofits they are a leaner staff team. You probably have a director of development or a director of marketing and you maybe have an assistant, but there's not necessarily all these levels in between coming from advertising. You've got the whole strata to find a place to fit in and find opportunities to move up. So at that particular time, nonprofits in Dallas I didn't necessarily know where I would fit with four years of advertising experience.

So the position that ended up opening up and was a good fit for a variety of reasons was that my alma mater at SMU in development, but in an office of what was called endowment and scholarship giving. Doing reporting to the donors who have funded endowments for the university and then particularly for donors who funded scholarships at the university. That felt very meaningful to me because I attended SMU on scholarship. With need based financial aid, I never would have been able to attend a university like SMU without that financial support.

So particularly being a few years removed, having been working, I appreciated that at the time I was in school and certainly appreciated it even more being on the other side. So this felt like an opportunity to give back, an opportunity to say thanks and to be involved in something good and something better while getting some development fundraising experience to perhaps inform what might come next in the nonprofit space. So that ended up being a good fit for that time. SMU was in the midst of a big campaign and celebrating its centennial as a university. So that was an exciting time to work there. A major benefit of working in there was to be able to pursue a Masters and tuition benefits as a staff member. So took full advantage of that.

Brett Cowell:

So let's talk a little bit about that. So you did a Master's degree and what was that in?

Kasi Zieminski:

So it was a master of liberal studies and I focused in human rights and social justice. So it was a chance for me, I consider myself a lifelong learner. Always loved being in school, good student. So I also found myself in that position working which was great and had its busy seasons and cycles of reporting, but also I found myself with a little bit more time to work with compared to my previous job. So I was looking for what else can I do that is stimulating and after



working for a few years it felt good and nice to get to go back to school and to be back in that kind of learning environment versus a working environment.

It was also a chance to take some of those courses that I didn't necessarily get to take in undergrad with my double major that was more professionally focused to be able to take history classes, to take human rights classes, explore social justice, literature courses and then how all of that comes together in a holistic way. And to be a few years older, have some more life experience and context to really appreciate it and put behind it and to be in a school program because you want to be, not necessarily just because you have to be there. So all of those things combine to make that a really enriching experience and to come with the Masters at the end of it without paying tuition is always a plus.

Brett Cowell: Did you know what you wanted to do next or do you follow your interest? What was the decision process? Even without tuition, a Masters is a lot of effort as anyone who's done one knows.

Kasi Zieminski: I think I was following my interests. The thought was if it can benefit me professionally that's fantastic. I felt like I had been pursuing the professional career and was interested in something that could satiate that other part of learning and of interest and learning for learning's sake. So I think that was what was driving me at that time. I worked at SMU for five years and switched over to the Cox School of Business. So particularly once I moved over there, then the question was, well really, do you want to do your MBA while you're here? That potentially would have been a more lucrative choice and rigorous in a different way.

At that point, I felt like with my professional experience I could continue going down that path with my career in a good way, but this was a chance to enrich myself in a different way that is complimentary and that it's all related. Certainly liberal arts help us be critical thinkers and can inform the work that we do in a lot of different disciplines. I definitely felt that way in the program. I felt like I learned so many things that I hadn't learned before in my coursework particularly related to human rights and social justice issues that were never really covered in other courses.

So that was very eye opening to me. Then really did solidify what I maybe wanted to do next. Working in higher ed was very fulfilling and enriching in a lot of ways. I still felt like there's something else I could be doing and what was that next thing.

Brett Cowell: What about sharing this [with] your friends and your parents and others around you, what was their view about this journey that was going on? Were they like, "Don't do it. Get back in there and make some money where's our retirement coming from." Were they supportive or happy?



Kasi Zieminski: They're very supportive. A couple of my friends actually came to my graduation which was super sweet and not expected and not required by any means. So they are very supportive. I think I'm in a friend group of high achievers. So there are doctors and lawyers and people in prestigious places. If I were really concerned about comparing the names and numbers of my degrees with my friends, then I may not get very far. Thankfully, they are not people that are overly reliant on those credentials. So everyone was very supportive and interested in the journey. It was work.

It was what I chose to spend my free time outside of work doing. So it was rigorous but not as rigorous as an MBA or a law degree or something like that. So I enjoyed what I was doing. I enjoyed reading the books and writing the papers. Even though it was rigorous in its own way, I was glad to be doing it and enjoy that and enjoy the sort of switching of hats from this is what I'm doing at work and then this is what I get to do in the classroom or outside of work.

Brett Cowell: How much of this was making who you wanted to be a reality through what you were doing and how much of it was by doing it? The other way around if you know what I mean. Like actually having the experiences and doing that. Said, "Yeah, this is really me."

Kasi Zieminski: That's a good question. I do think there was some intention at the beginning feeling like this is a learning experience that is different than advertising, is different than fundraising or communications. So I want to broaden my perspective and broaden my experience. So I'm pursuing this education because of that. But then certainly getting into the coursework and really having my eyes opened to some areas particularly in the human rights space. I mean learning about genocide that I had never experienced.

It was sort of a little bit of a joke at my friend circle. You see my bookshelf and you can see the reading list is pretty dark and depressing at times, but it was eye opening because I felt like we all have some of the challenges and things that we have to overcome in our lives. Overwhelmingly, I have been able to experience quite a bit of privilege and good fortune growing up where and when I did and thought I was a pretty well informed person about global issues.

But being able to sort of dive deeply into those issues and subjects with the faculty there, really consider them and also consider why haven't I learned about this before, why aren't we talking about these issues, that experience opened my eyes more than I expected that it would. I don't think I went into it thinking "I'll study human rights." It was getting in there ... Rick Halperin is one of the amazing faculty at SMU. Taking his courses and other faculty, learning from them and learning what I didn't know and what we should know and what we should be talking about even though it's difficult. So that was ... I wanted to broaden my horizons but that went deeper and wider than I expected it to.



Brett Cowell: Yeah, I think you can't always predict what's going to happen. You go in maybe with an idea or a direction about where you want to go and then you get into the details and it's something even more or just different from what you expect. What happened then?

Kasi Zieminski: At this time, I'm cautious about not changing jobs too much and not just leaving when something gets harder or isn't fun anymore, those types of things. But, I feel like in this discipline and just the way the world is now as everybody says people aren't starting at a company, retiring from the company with a pension. In the areas that I found myself, it was often you have to move on to move up. Not only that, not just about a title but to have new experiences and new challenges, new opportunities.

I was fortunate being at the university I could move into two different areas without changing the employer. So that was really great. I was at SMU for five years. Also at the time that I was there, external factors happen. So it again just sort of felt like, "Okay, maybe this is the time to think about moving on." Had some feelers out but looking for a job I saw a lot of work. It's a full time job on top of your job if you're fortunate enough to be doing it in that order. So I was just kind of seeing how things went.

A friend of mine just shared this job posting with me. The job description sounded great. A director of marketing position looking for just my experience and that I could bring in outside perspective and some corporate experience to the nonprofit area I thought could be valuable for them. For me, it felt like this perfect melding of "I've done advertising. I've done development. I've done marketing and communication. I have this human rights and social justice degree and now here's a job looking for a director of marketing for health and social services nonprofit. This could be a great fit."

So I pursued it, but with some of those cautions that I've never heard of it. I don't know what their budget is. I don't know what the opportunities are. I don't know if I'm what they're looking for. So we'll just have to sort of go with it and see what happens. I think kind of to your point earlier about identity and putting so much of that on what we do I mean it is a little bit of an adjustment particularly in this high achieving sort of friend group and social professional areas to launch into an explanation of a place that's no one has heard of with a pretty narrow but also very broad scope.

So there are more prestigious places I could be working and more blue-chip organizations. I could go back to the corporate side and probably make a lot more money. I'm aware of all of those things. Who knows what will happen down the road. For now, it's such a cool feeling to feel like this is a pretty perfect blending of my skills and my past experience and my personal passions and



interests. There's actually a job out there that exists and that I could maybe do it. So that's sort of how it has come about. I've been there for about two years now.

That has been a great experience with great people who are passionate and who are kind and who truly want to work together and be a team and be a community and to sort of walk the walk and not just talk the talk, and who also are living out and working in social justice, activism, advocacy areas. So it's taking things that I learned about in a book but can actually see an action and be part of even if just a small part in the work that I'm doing, but to be part of that community and to learn from that every day has been wonderful.

Brett Cowell: Looking back over your journey to now, I'm just going to throw some words out there. Some people talk about serendipity. There's the famous Steve Jobs "when you look back everything seems connected". Just some perspective on that. Compare how you explain your story now to how it felt as you were going through it and what have you learned from that.

Kasi Zieminski: Absolutely. I think at the time it always felt like "Either this is what I am doing because that's what I'm supposed to do at this point in my life or this is what I'm going to do because I'm at a little bit of a crossroads and I need to make a decision about which path I'm going to take." It did feel very linear and just sort of "Okay, I'll start this and I'll see what happens." Get to a point "Okay, now maybe I need to reevaluate it or now this is the natural time for something new to happen." Since being in this job in and to have some intentional chance to reflect because that is built in to a little bit of the work that we do which is also different than some of the organizations that I've been with. So I have appreciated that.

So having those opportunities to reflect, having 10 plus years of experience behind me now which is still early but is enough to really be able to reflect upon. I do feel like there's a little bit of a full circle element to it. Whether things are meant to be or it's how it turns out or it's how we make them but even full circle back to the "Yeah when I was a kid I thought about being a social worker or counselor." I kind of remember those "Yeah as a kid I like to write stories and read books." So perhaps the fact that I do some storytelling and I am writing and helping other organizations tell their story, good there's some connection there.

Even back to thinking about what to do in college and to think about when I grow up I want to help people. What does that look like? Could it be counseling? Could it be social work? I didn't go in that route specifically but I'm working in that space after all these years. It feels very natural. I'm able to do that in a way that I can bring as I've said those skills and talents and experience that I have to those organizations and work with them and alongside them, learn from them but also to share my side of things is a good fit for me. That probably was a long



time coming. It wasn't just "Okay, I thought about that two years ago and decided to move into this organization."

There's actually roots of that from many years ago that I wasn't necessarily actively considering, but now once I think about it make a lot of sense. So I do appreciate that. I think I have more of an appreciation of that just with years and having more of a community focus versus just the individual driven focus which I think I had to have that orientation for a while, just doing college and getting a job and getting started in your career and really focusing on what you have to do, what you bring to that and then hopefully getting a little bit older and wiser and realizing none of us are an island. We're all in this together. The connections are important and they make sense and is sort of a holistic journey.

Brett Cowell: When you look back at this, do you have regrets about the path that you've taken and asking that in a more positive way, what do you wish that you knew back then if anything that would have changed the path that you'd taken or not?

Kasi Zieminski: I do think about some of those ... the decision to not just to change jobs but to move away from advertising and the agency world. Was I making that decision because it really was what I felt called to do or was I deciding that because I felt burned out and I felt bullied by mean clients or I was just frustrated that I hadn't gotten a raise in a couple of years? Those things were part of it. I'm still young but I was young and still fairly green in my career. So I sort of think, "Did you just need to grow a stronger backbone and did you just need thicker skin? Could you have fought through that? Could you've gotten to a point where you could have had a little more agency and really vocalized what it was you're looking for and made that happen?"

This feels like the natural progression. It feels like where I should be. So I don't think it was the wrong choice necessarily but I do recognize those times especially earlier on in the career where as a young person, as a young woman, I don't think I necessarily stuck up for myself as much as I would like to think that myself now would be able to ask for what I want and need and to recognize that I deserve it and that I have the experience to back it up and the credibility of that. I do wonder about some of those things.

Maybe I could have gone to a different agency. It would have been a different experience or what if I stuck it out there for a little bit longer and I could have ended up on some other path. We all have those sorts of questions. I trust that that usually the right one prevails and it's what's supposed to happen. I do take those learnings seriously for whatever comes next and to continue to inform me and strengthen me in my decisions and to trust that my experience has value. That I do know some stuff and that I'm good at what I do. I can trust those instincts and stick up for myself when it's appropriate.



Brett Cowell:

I think you're already starting to answer the question we're going to come to in a second which is maybe advice for others and advice to your younger self. So I'm going to get there in a second. Before we go there, I think it's always interesting and it's very real ... We've got this illusion in society that people whatever they're doing now, they're fully formed. They come out of the womb and they always wanted to it. They were doing that as successful and happy and all that sort of stuff whereas absolutely that's not true in a lot of cases.

It's difficult along the way to get there. You're putting a lot of hard work and there's a lot of uncertainty and a lot of personal growth required a lot of times to get there over time. So now I can say for myself "I spend a long time in a career." which had many great aspects to it. I traveled around the world and worked with lots of interesting people and did lots of interesting work. Was stimulated by that. Now I'm doing something different and I've gone back to square one. In some sense, you've gone from a quarter of a million people organizations or one to two people organization now. Nobody, people are only starting to find out about it and that's definitely a different experience than working in a big company so I'm like...

I don't think anybody that's ever made a change has said, "I wish I had taken longer to make that decision." It's the opposite. It's like, "I wish I would have 20 years ago done this." You can get caught up in a circle of that because you're a different person. Everyone would like the knowledge of their older selves in their younger body and what experiences would you've missed out in life and have done my life of work. Then shortly after that is I started on a more focused path on working out what's next. That led me to what I'm doing now. Coming back to the question now, given all of that, what life advice do you have either for your younger self or just for our listeners?

Kasi Ziemiński:

I think that's right. I think obviously we have a lot of pressure on us most of the time for what we feel like is successful. We have those real-life pressures of needing to pay the bills and to keep a roof over our head and support our families and all of those things. We absolutely had to take those things into account, but I do think it's important to try not to get so caught up into what that idea of success is what we've been conditioned societally to understand as success. I feel like I've always been a driven person, an achieving person. A student, hard worker, always wanting ... a pleaser to please my teachers and please my family. I think that is a big part of my identity that is being successful is to always be moving up and to be recognized for that.

With time, with age, a little bit of wisdom, with yoga probably over the last few years like I appreciate balance so much more than I did or that I thought I needed to. Maybe success is being able to take some time away from that sort of striving and just to be able to be present and to see the little things. I guess that sounds a little bit cheesy but I think that there's some real value to that,



because the constant striving is not sustainable for a lot of us or I think when most of us would look back that may be that path would not be the way we had wished we had spent our time.

So I think it's important to find that balance in every day and the balance between what we think success looks like or what the world thinks it looks like and what that really means for us. Knowing that we have to like do all that in the real world but at least being aware of it and thinking about it, hopefully injects a little bit of that balance into your life, then that's a good thing. That's the first step.

Brett Cowell: The next question is about Dallas. I ask all the guests about trying to explain ... most of the people listening to this around the world I think I have to say hello to people in Japan and Finland and Romania or in Australia, in the UK and elsewhere. There's a list of places where people are listening in from. How do you explain the heart and soul of Dallas and how you've seen Dallas change as you've been through your personal journey?

Kasi Ziemiński: That's a good question. I think sort of the first step in experience I have with Dallas was coming from a small town in Oklahoma about 35,000 people. So Dallas was a big city. When I was starting out, when I first came down here for college, one of the pieces of advice or questions that I got coming to SMU was, "You know that's a rich kid school, right?" I was like, "Sure, whatever. There's rich people everywhere. There's rich people in my town of 35,000 people." That's a different kind of wealth than those ...

Brett Cowell: So those people have libraries named after them and name and buildings and art centers....

Kasi Ziemiński: I guess most towns do. It's a different scale. So coming to Dallas, coming to SMU as a financial aid scholarship student, that was certainly eye opening and a little bit of a culture shift. So Dallas has its flaws. Certainly is not without them as all places do have their flaws. So I think that there ... I mean there is that wealth. There is the conspicuous consumption sort of this idea sometimes that Dallas wants to be New York or LA. It wants to be a city that is different or more than what it is. So there are some of those challenges.

I live in East Dallas. I love that neighborhood. We moved there nine years and are still there and love it. Dallas does have culture. It does have that deeper layer that's not shallow and surface level. It has that but you might have to work a little bit harder to find it. Once you do, that's really enriching. You have an opportunity to be part of it and build it and to really experience that maybe it could be more accessible to you in a way that in a bigger city maybe it's not. I don't know. So I think it does have its flaws and its challenges, but we found it to be a good home. Cost of living that's better and more reasonable than some of



those other cities. So we are able to be comfortable here to enjoy other aspects of the city.

Being at here at The Grove was fun to come back down here because I had a distinct memory in college of again sort of being the small town Oklahoma girl, I didn't have a car when I was here on campus so I didn't drive around the city as much as maybe some the other students did. So I was on campus quite a bit of the time. One of my classes was exploring this blend of English literature history course that was examining the JFK assassination. So one of our assignments for class was to go to the Sixth Floor Museum a few different times for research and to visit.

So I took the DART downtown to go visit because I didn't have a car. It's not that transformative of a moment except it really has stuck with me that here I was, this small town girl. I was taking the train down into downtown Dallas to experience part of this history, this living history of the city. That was just a small moment from college that still sticks with me of the way cities can be alive and be impactful in your experience.

Brett Cowell: For the listeners, we've alluded on the show a couple of times already, but where this co-working space is at The Grove is across from Dealey Plaza and the "grassy knoll". We walk past that every day to get in here. It's certainly something in the subconscious or even the conscious of the city that is interesting to explore. I'm sure continue to do so on the ... and to explore Dallas's past but also its future. You got any plans to move away from Dallas or you ...?

Kasi Zieminski: I don't think so. We've been potentially open to that and not having some of those things that might tie you down into a place.

Brett Cowell: Like plants and pets and children.

Kasi Zieminski: Right. Those plants ...

Brett Cowell: We covered that at the start.

Kasi Zieminski: Right, exactly. I think we're here for the long haul. We love East Dallas. White Rock Lake is my favorite place in the city. I love to walk over there and get that little bit of nature in the city and diversity. That's one of the places that I see some of the most diversity in the city is there at the lake. So I think were here for the long haul for now at least and are enjoying being part of that and finding ways that we can be more involved in the community. At least for me, find ways to volunteer ways to get connected and know my neighbors and be involved.



Brett Cowell: White Rock Lake comes up a lot. I've certainly written about it a lot and talked about it on the show. For some reason and it's going to happen in coming episodes too. I know with our guests plan to be on the show, seems to be a magnet of people around there. It's a different type of Dallas and there's many different types of Dallas but it's a lovely reflective spot with interesting things going on. It's slightly different from where we are and other parts of Dallas.

Kasi Zieminski: Yeah absolutely. We would go on vacation often to cooler climates and visit friends in Colorado and liked to do hiking up there. There's this one year that we did this 10 mile hike and it was so fantastic. I was thinking, "Well if I can do this hike in the mountains, I can walk around the lake that's a mile away from my house." Yeah, it's a good reminder that you don't always have to go far to find that little bit of peace and rest in nature in your backyard.

Brett Cowell: I read that you were involved in a suicide walk. Is there any specific reason for that cause in particular?

Kasi Zieminski: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for asking. So I lost my mom to suicide 11 years ago which is actually two months before I graduated from college. So I'm an only child and we were pretty close. She struggled with depression for a long time. Had a lot of challenges through her years. She was 46 years old. So, yeah that's been part of my journey in a variety of ways and is a layer really to everything I've kind of talked about. She didn't go to college so it was a big deal that I went to college. She was very proud of that.

Not having her here and feeling like I'm living in her memory and in honor of her life and everything that she gave for me and loved me, that drives me to try to be the best version of myself and to do good with what I've been given to be grateful. To be very grateful for the life that I have because many others are not as fortunate. Many others are not able to live their full lives. Grieving her loss and dealing with the aftermath of that was right in line with graduating from college and starting my career. Moving to California was sort of the best of times and the worst of times. Sort of really exciting highs, getting engaged, getting married. Starting my life with my partner.

Doing all of that without her being there and knowing that she would've been proud. Obviously being very disappointed that she was not there to be part of it. Suicide, there's still such a stigma with suicide, with mental illness. So it was something that people that were close to me knew about but was not something that I would just talk about in small talk or random conversation or a podcast in those earlier years. So I feel very fortunate to be at a place 11 years later. I was 22 when she died.

So to be a little bit older, to have that perspective and to be more comfortable sharing about it and talking about it. Part of that was being involved with the



American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, AFSP, which does community walks. They do an Out of the Darkness Walk and an Out of the Darkness Overnight Walk is one of their big fundraising efforts. So that name is significant because we're trying to help bring mental illness and suicide. To break the stigma and to make that less of a taboo and to bring that out of the darkness. They have a lot of great research and advocacy work that they do as well as education awareness building work and then as well as healing and support work that they do in local chapters and around the country.

So, yeah we've done two of those overnight walks which are 16 plus miles at night. It came to Dallas in 2015 and then we did that just last month in Washington DC. So it's a really great organization. I've been proud to work with them and grateful that ... just being part of a walk, to have to fund raise for it, it gives you an opportunity to talk about it and to make that feel okay and make that easier and to connect you with others who have been through something similar that you may never have met otherwise. So I'm so glad to be a small part of their work.

Brett Cowell:

Thanks so much for sharing that. I certainly did not know that. I guess thanks for putting that online because I think there's definitely something to sharing who you are and what you're interested and what you stand for in all sorts of life. I hope this podcast as has happened surprisingly a number of times on the show so far I think we're doing ourselves a disservice to only talk about our jobs and how did this persona of how to be successful and what that should be and not show that we're vulnerable and we're human. These things happen to us.

I think it says a nice message about this conundrum or paradox that it's never too late to change jobs or to change your life in a way that is meaningful and you're going to live out until you're 70 or 80 or 90 or I think some stat saying 100 now for people in their 20s now it's never too late. But we are living in a fixed era of time period that we're going to be on the planet. We have to deal with that as well. Whether you want to say that you need to seize the day or just be real, there's no time to be messing around and delaying that before coming to terms with reality of who you are in the world that we're living in to try and react to that in whatever way.

Kasi Ziemiński:

Yeah absolutely.

Brett Cowell:

We've covered a lot of ground already. Is there anything else you want to leave the listeners with?

Kasi Ziemiński:

I don't think so but thank you for this. This was a real treat. I'm glad to have met you and glad to have had this chance to chat a little bit. Thanks for the work you're doing.



Brett Cowell: Also thanks for doing this. I put you on the spot a little bit. After talking, it's such a privilege to hear people just speak about their lives. I'm grateful to have met you a couple of weeks earlier here and to put you on the spot to do this because getting this on air and sharing it with other people is the way to get the word out there. So I appreciate that you actually walked in for a chat and have decided we've done that with a few hundred or thousand people that are listening.

Kasi Zieminski: Yes, thanks for listening.

Brett Cowell: Thanks so much.

Kasi Zieminski: Take care.