

EPISODE 39

[INTRODUCTION]

“RS: Is this something that is biased? Because you live in a suburban neighborhood and have a high WiFi connection? Well, what about is this going to be a global product? What about people in countries with limited connectivity? Are you considering them if it's like a digital product versus there's things in languages that mean totally different things. You may say something and somebody to another country, it may mean something completely different. So it's understanding who you're building this for.”

[00:00:36] TA: You're listening to the UI Narrative podcast, the bi-weekly podcast that shows the stories of people of color, interface designers and researchers, and their contributions towards creating user-centered experiences. And I'm your host, Tolu Ajayi. Let's get started.

Hey, guys, it's Tolu with a quick word from our sponsor. To design great products, a focus on the user is everything. That's true for me and for the teams at Google. Today's sponsor, Google Design, produces original content, like articles and videos to show how Google's products come to life, and to inspire designers everywhere. For example, on design.google, you can learn how Google Maps streamlined a palette of 700 colors down to 25 major and minor tones, or how an R&D team distilled five years of research into a tiny, intuitive, emotionally intelligent radar chip. How cool is that y'all?

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[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:55] TA:

Hello, everyone. Welcome back to the UI Narrative podcast. Let me tell you a little bit about today's guest. Rachel Smith is a multi-disciplinary, Latina UX design leader and the founder of Design to Combat COVID-19, which is a virtual community of creatives, now over 2000 strong,

who volunteer their skills and time using design thinking to support medical professionals, service workers and underrepresented communities affected by the pandemic. By day Rachel Smith is a senior product designer at Zillow, and previously has worked with companies such as Nordstrom and the Home Depot. The rest of the time, the LA native works on a range of creative projects, both within her local community and globally. Everyone, please give a warm welcome to our guest today. Rachel Smith.

[00:02:45] RS: Hi, thanks so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here and chat about all things design with you.

[00:02:53] TA: Yeah. So let's start from the beginning. And tell us a little bit about your narrative. What's one of your earliest memories about being interested in design?

[00:03:01] RS: Sure. So I was born and raised in an East Los Angeles suburb on the border of Orange County and Los Angeles County. My mom was a painter. She's always been a creative. My dad, he was a musician, but he was also a machinist as well. So he kind of had the analytical side and my mom had the creative side. So I was very fortunate to have parents growing up who kind of had both ends of the spectrum when it comes to that, but one of my earliest memories about being interested in design. It's funny. I remember many, many moons ago, I think this is like in the early 90s, there was a contest going on for Martin Luther King Day that year. I think it was like in 1994. I'm kind of aging myself here. But they presented it to my school. They said, "Hey, anyone who wants to submit in this," it was an art contest, "go ahead and do it."

And actually I didn't realize. I was thinking about this question last night. I think it was pretty formative to who I am today. But I remember my mom saying, "Yeah, Rachel, go for it, like draw something." So I drew this image. It was I think a person being like carried up into the sky, carried by like two angels. I mean, something you'd imagine like a six or seven year old drawing, right? And I called it a dream. And my dad, I remember, he was very supportive, but he was also super realistic. He's like talking to my mom saying, "What are the chances? There're so many kids entering this thing. You know what? Yeah, have her submit, but just like be realistic."

So we submitted. I got second place, and I got to go to downtown Los Angeles. I think it was first or second grade. I can't remember how old I was. And I won this medal. It was on the news. I was a part of like the Martin Luther King Association, like recognize all these artists. In that moment made me realize even if you have a crazy thought or idea, just go for it, because you never know what's going to happen. I think that kind of stuck with me to this day. So even though it's not "design", it was still very formula native and what I think my career in terms of creativity went. So yeah, that's one of my earliest memories.

[00:05:11] TA: Yeah, I feel like a lot of people have some type of entryway into like how they got into design without even realizing it.

[00:05:19] RS: Totally.

[00:05:20] TA: And a lot of times, it's like with your type of story to where it wasn't necessarily like product related. It was just kind of like, "Oh, I did something where I use my creative imagination." Where you don't get that many opportunities with – Well, it depends. Actually you do get opportunities. It just depends on like how – Like let's say you worked at like a regular job, like fast food joint, right? Maybe you get a creative opportunity of like, okay, announcement within the people you work with, like, okay, you're going to use your creative writing skills or something like that. But yeah, a lot of people like they'll have these opportunities and not realize like that was like the entry point of like how they got into design.

[00:06:01] RS: Yes, yes. And I have also seen a lot of times in my path to becoming a designer, there's going to be so many people who tell you, "No, that's not going to work." Or, "You should try it this way instead." But if you just stick with your gut and go for it, that's how new products evolve. That's how new ideas spark. Just stay true to yourself and do the thing. And I'm glad my mom submitted me, because it made me realized early on that like, "Hey, something might come of it." So it's pretty cool.

[00:06:29] TA: Yeah, a lot of people getting into UX and product design have nonconventional journeys into this industry. What was your path to becoming a senior product designer at Zillow today?

[00:06:41] RS: Oh, my gosh! Yes. I can definitely say mine was nonconventional. When I first started getting into user experience design, I don't even know if General Assembly or a lot of these boot camps were around. It was a lot of just learning, "Hey, what's UX?" Talking to other designers, seeing what they were doing. But how I got into product design work kind of going way back, I've always been a bit of a creative. I've dabbled in illustration drawing. I like making things. That's just who I inherently am. And before I even went to school – So I went to community college for a number of years, just really trying to navigate my way through the system. I didn't have any siblings. My parents didn't go to college. So I really was just trying to figure it out on my own. I talked to a lot of my professors, a lot of mentors, and I was really big in the music and art scene in the Los Angeles area as well. We had a little design. It was basically just like an art, not art club, but it was like an art crew where we have shows around the LA and Orange County areas. And I just volunteered. I was like, "Hey, do you guys need flyers?" I think I had like a bootleg Photoshop or like, don't come after me Adobe, but like I had one of those like scan disk. Yeah, I mean, I feel like that's how everyone got their – at least back in the day, like how you got started.

But yeah, I had like a pirated version of like a really old version of Photoshop. And I just made flyers for the shows. And that's how I kind of got started. I got familiar. I learned the tools a little bit. And by the time I decided, "Okay." I kind of felt this fork in the road. I'm like – Everyone was talking about going to nursing schools. "Do I want to go into nursing school? Do medical, or should I like follow this passion of mine and try creativity?" So I tried the nursing thing for a while. I was like, "No, I'm really good. I know I'm good at being creative. So I'm going to go down this route." And eventually, I ended up going to San Diego State University to finish my last two years. I was in college way longer than I had anticipated. But you know what? For anyone who's still going to school, never too late. Keep going. Keep doing it. School isn't for everybody, but it was something that I wanted for myself. And yeah, so I went. I graduated from San Diego State and I applied for any job under the moon just to get my foot in the door. I think that's the hardest part. Whenever I'm talking to folks who are really trying to get into the industry is number one, building that portfolio with real life work. But number two, just getting your foot in the door.

And Arlan Hamilton I don't know if you're familiar with her, but she does Backstage Sapital. She is an African-American lesbian woman who was homeless and learned –Wanted to get into venture capitalism. She literally lived in the LAX Airport for I think it was like a number of weeks

or months before she got her first funding. And now she runs one of the biggest POC venture capital firms. She was on the cover of, I believe it was like Forbes, or Fortune Magazine. Anyways, she said something that really stuck with me. It's a numbers game. Eventually, you're going to get your shot. Like it's just a math equation. You just keep going and you keep going. If you get discouraged, it's a numbers game. You're going to get yours eventually. So whenever I felt discouraged or, "Ugh! Am I going to get my chance?" I thought about that. I kept going.

But I got my first print design role for entertainment and hospitality company out in Houston, Texas. So I'd never even been to Texas before. But I got a job offer. So I was like, "I'm going to Texas." And I lived in Texas for about six years. I started as a print designer. I realized very quickly that production design wasn't for me. I was starting to burn out on the craft that I love, which was graphic design. So I taught myself HTML, CSS with free platforms that were available online. If anyone is looking to get into web development or web design, I would definitely encourage you to check out code Codecademy. They teach free HTML classes, CSS classes. I'm not saying that's necessary for UX design, but it did help me develop stronger relationships with my development partners.

So luckily enough, in Houston, there was a Home Depot corporate base, and I got a job there just doing promo design work. I mean, really they just gave me any job like, "Well, we kind of need a print designer, but we need somebody who's like a junior in web development." I'm like, "That's me" They hired me. And I just eventually ranked my way up. I saw what the other UX designers were doing at Home Depot. I was like, "What are you guys talking about over there?" You're writing out user flows. You're talking about personas. I've never heard about this. And I was really lucky enough to have a female manager of mine say, "Hey, Rachel, I want to teach you more about this." She gave me projects. She gave me a chance to go get some training with Human Factors International, which is one of the first UX folks ever. They've been doing user experience design since the 1970s. They used to design inside of airplanes. So like, if you ever seen it inside of airplanes, it's like 1000 buttons, right? Well, imagine the first prototypes of airplanes coming out with people pressing eject when they're supposed to press go. I mean, they really needed a human factor person to go in there and really help make that more human functioning.

But anyways, Home Depot and worked my way up. I became the cart and checkout designer for homedepot.com. I eventually knew in my heart, I wanted to come back to the Los Angeles area. So I got picked up by Nordstrom, where I was designing web and retail experiences for their apps, for their web platforms, but also omni-channel experiences. So thinking about what does it look like to start shopping online? Go into a store? Work with an associate if you were to hand over your phone to get like a coupon off your app and then going back online? What does that holistic end-to-end journey look like? So I was at Nordstrom for three years, and recently joined Zillow becoming a product designer working on equitable housing for all. So that's a little bit of my background. It was a little bit of a schpeel. But yeah, it's kind of like out there, all over the place.

[00:13:03] TA: What a beautiful journey though. I love how you took the initiative that once you figure it out that UX is like what you've been looking for, and I feel like a lot of people get into this way of like, "Hey, I see you're doing user flows," or like whatever the process is that they see. And they're like, "What is that? That looks so interesting." They're like, "That might be like what I've been looking for this whole time, I just didn't know. I wasn't exposed to it." But I love that like you took the initiative to do some online learning with the Codecademy, and just free courses that you found online to get the experience that you feel like you were lacking, or needed more examples of, and how it helped you build those better connections with developers and also just, I think, confidence too being able to talk about the screens that you're building and any part of the process, right?

[00:13:52] RS: Oh, yes, that absolutely comes in time. Yes, it was a lot of hard work and navigating. But I 100% just give so much thanks to my mentors who I didn't even realize were my mentors at that time. If you have somebody helping you in your career right now, just tell him thank you. You will pay it back eventually. But yeah, I've reached out to those folks. And I think you made a really good point too, because what I didn't realize, and doing that production design work, is I think I was getting burnt out because, yes, there are inherent design choices you make when you learn about color theory, the way that there's like Gestalt theory and you're placing things next to each other, even in poster design, right? But what's different with user experience design and something I didn't realize until I started learning about it was the human aspect. Well, why is it that some people are navigating towards this web page, but this other web page, it only looks a little bit different? And because there's a smaller amount of text copy

and it's cleaner overall, it's winning in this AB test. So it was that human side that I didn't learn in any of my college courses. That's what I first started learning about user experience, that design that drove me to it was the humanizing aspect to it. That really interests me.

[00:15:13] TA: I feel like we have similar journeys as far as like the graphic design part.

[00:15:18] RS: Oh, really?

[00:15:19] TA: Because I started off as a graphic designer as well. And that's how I got my in into UX. And it was just because of a co-worker who was a UX designer. I was like, "What is that?"

[00:15:29] RS: Oh, my gosh! Totally.

[00:15:30] TA: I haven't heard about it. And then that's how he had told me like, "Hey, I think you actually be interested in it. Because you're always asking why in like every meeting." And I'm like, "Yeah, I didn't know." Like there was a whole thing behind this.

[00:15:42] RS: Yeah, yeah. And I remember at my first job, if you asked why, they're like, "Well, because we pay you." And I'm like, "Well, that's good enough reason." So turn this red thing blue because you told me to. But being that user experience designer, you become the expert for the user. So you're the one who's being able to dictate your design decisions, and talking about design thinking and already solving for the right problem. So it's definitely a shift of thinking in that regard. But I do think having that graphic design background helped tremendously in terms of the visual design aspect. And I know there are many of you access to UX. But if you are looking to go that route, for anyone who's listening, like that's definitely something that you can read up on that could help you as well.

[00:16:28] TA: Yeah, as product designers, most of us get into this career to make an impact on the products humans use, because we care about the human experience behind everything. And Rachel's company, Design to combat COVID-19, is an excellent example of how designers and researchers, developers can make a difference by solving problems in like your local community and nationwide.

So Rachel, I listened to your talk with the Maryland Institute College of Art and Design, about design and COVID-19. And I really enjoyed hearing about the ways you've helped so many during this pandemic. And y'all – Okay, let me catch y'all up and tell you what Rachel's been up to. So, Design to Combat COVID-19 is a virtual community of over 2000 plus creatives working globally to support communities affected by COVID-19. She also founded Masks for Docs, which delivers free PPE to health care workers and underserved communities globally.

Okay, so I must ask you this, Rachel, product designer to a product designer. What was the initial design thinking process like while building Combat COVID-19 compared to where your company is now a year later with several shipped products?

[00:17:46] RS: Sure. I wish I had like a put together statement of, “I had a plan, and I threw stickies on the wall.” Honestly, I had no plan. I had no idea what I was doing. Here's a little background on me. So yes, I was working in the retail space for years. But I am very big into human advocacy. I've been a volunteer on many organizations before. I donate time, and I help underserved communities where I can. That's just inherently who I am. And so when the pandemic came, or started really coming into the states, I heard – Obviously, most people heard about it happening first in China. And then it was happening overseas in Italy and such. But once it started creeping into the US, personally, I saw friends of mine, especially in creative industries losing their jobs, getting laid off. I had friends in the healthcare industry who did not have proper equipment to protect themselves. They were using trash bags, as personal protective equipment, which to me growing up in the states being told, “This is like one of the best countries to live in in the world, and you're providing your doctors and nurses trash bags to protect themselves?” Like it made me mad. I felt helpless. I felt angry. And personally, I couldn't wake up, going to work even remotely every single day. For anyone who's listening that I used to work with in my past companies. Sorry, I'm saying this, but I didn't want to just live my purpose to have a big box corporation make money. Like I felt like there was more to me as a human than just feeding into the system, pretending like this isn't happening when it was.

So personally, I was at this point where I was getting overwhelmed. I was anxious. I was super fucking depressed. And I said, “What can I do?” I've built a few websites in the past. I have like a small agency, like I know how to manage groups and build up a team and such. But I was like,

“I'm going to buy this domain. I'm going to set up a Squarespace site and I'm going to put it on Twitter and say, “Hey, anyone who wants to join me, let's figure out solutions of how we can help our fellow people.” I was overwhelmed at the amount of folks who joined overnight. There was 100. In a week there was 1000. To this day, 2200. It's much different from the first week that I built that community to where it is today. I had never grown an organization of that scale before. I've never had over hundreds of people join me at once looking for direction, looking for guidance with ideas, wanting to bring the same amount of passion I had to the table. It was a lot.

But we have evolved since then. We've been able to ship products. It was crazy. I mean, I don't want to use the term. It was very intense at first really trying to navigate and figure out where we're going. But what I learned was being okay with ambiguity, taking it one step at a time and leaning on your partners and folks who are willing to help you to really navigate and see how you can do moving forward. But yes, we've been able to ship products. We've been able to found other organizations. We've been able to distribute over 100,000 pieces of personal protective equipment globally. So it's been a very humbling experience. And I don't think it's fully hit me yet, just the amount of impact that we have. But maybe in a few years, I'll sit back and say “Shit, we did that.”

[00:21:22] TA: Yeah. So I imagine since you have such a large community with Design to Combat 19, you get a ton of project requests. So as a volunteer run business, like what's the process like for approaching a new project?

[00:21:38] RS: Sure. So in those beginning days, as I mentioned, it was literally a Slack group that I had opened up, and a pouring of like hundreds of folks coming in saying, “Hey, I have an idea, or I want to help, but I don't know how.” And at first, I was taking the approach of, “I'll just let people naturally collaborate and come up with ideas together.” But I learned very quickly that not everybody is – I don't want to say a leader in that regard. But some folks want to contribute just a set amount, especially when you're working with volunteers. And other people are really good at project managing. And I didn't realize the first couple of weeks in that organization that I felt that I needed the project management side, right? So I was lucky enough to have a volunteer, Branden Byers. He is incredible. He is the founder of cKeys and also the founder of FermUp. He joined my community. So instantly that I needed the assistance, he pinged me on

Slack and was like, “Hey, I have a few organizations with myself. Do you need assistance trying to organize these projects?” And I'm like, “Yes, please.” Like, “I need help. People are looking for guidance. I feel the energy, I just don't know how the guidance.” Like, “Okay, let's come up with a system here.”

And we were very lucky enough to have utilize a lot of project management tools and such that were being the costs were being waived because of COVID to try to solve for issues related to what was happening. So we were able to get this product called Airtable to basically be used as an intake form. So what we did is we took a relook at our site and said, “Okay, we just put this up into two avenues, people who want to help, and people who have ideas to help.” So whoever submitted that to the site would get put into this table onto Airtable and then we were able to pair folks to projects. So then what happened behind the curtain is Branden and I were actually manually saying, “Okay, these folks are really good at graphic design. They're good at user experience design and they have a developer, and this project request is looking for all those people. Let's go ahead and connect the two.”

So now, if you go to Design to Combat COVID-19, what happens is you actually fill out a form asking you how you're available if you're a volunteer. And if you're needing assistance, or you have a project idea, you give a small product brief. Meaning what is it that you exactly need? Can you give us a background of the project information? Who all's involved? In like the timeframe so that we can go to the volunteers and say, “Okay, here's what you're working with.” Because if you leave it open to everyone, like it's not going to get shipped, right? Like people need structure. They need to understand what it is in the realm that they're working with. So yeah, it evolved. At first I was like, “Oh, people who just get together and come up with ideas,” but very quickly, we realized that we needed that project management structure, or at least some sense of requirements to really get those involved. So yeah, that's how it is today. It all goes into a survey and it's still being handled manually, but at least it's getting handled. So we're still figuring it out. But it's working so far.

[00:24:47] TA: Yeah, I've taken a look at the website and it's definitely super structured. So it's amazing that you have come so far to having such an organized like project management system of how they are going to tackle projects. Now, it kind of makes me think of like hackathons. How –

[00:25:04] RS: Totally.

[00:25:06] TA: Is it pretty much like it?

[00:25:07] RS: It's like the world's biggest hackathon, except it never ends. I mean, but it's a cool. Like folks get inspired by ideas. And it depends on the folks of groups who are together to like motivate each other to get it out the door. I mean, we have some projects or products that have launched that were over the course of like three weeks, and some that are continuously ongoing. But I think the important part is creating that space to let people help or feel like they're helping or to even just have a community to lean on and say, "Hey, we're here to really impact people's lives. Let's work on this together." But yeah, it is absolutely like a hackathon. You hit the nail on the head.

[00:25:47] TA: Which project are you most proud of as far as like impact?

[00:25:51] RS: Oh, goodness! So you did touch on the fact that I helped to co-found Masks for Docs, and that's probably the biggest organization that stem from Design to Combat COVID-19. It was just so – It was a whirlwind, how that incubated. But basically what happened is my husband, he knew someone who was really big in the mutual aid and social impact space on Twitter, and his name is Chad Loder. He's the CEO of Habituate. And my husband said, "Hey, Chad, my wife's working on this thing. You should come check it out." Chad was like, "I'm in." He came into our group. He said, "My friend is a doctor in Italy." This was before it really hit the US. I think it was beginning of March of last year. And he said, "They're running out of personal protective equipment, and it's only a matter of time before it reaches here. What can we do to solve for this?"

Initially, it was about 30 of us, saying, "Okay, let's have a web campaign. Let's create posters. Let's get folks to donate to their local hospitals." And literally within 48 hours, it completely shifted to web campaign isn't enough, posters aren't enough, like showing knowledge that this is going to be an issue isn't enough. We have to take action for ourselves. What we did is we created Masks for Docs on a very basic Webflow site saying, "If you have – Check your earthquake emergency kits, check your art kits, go to your local nail salons, see if they have

masks, see if they have gloves. Ask if they could donate it. If so, input it onto this form, and we will get somebody to go pick it up from you.” We had no idea what we're doing at first. So we're just like, “Let's see if this works.”

We launched the site I believe on a Tuesday or Wednesday. We had our first donation to Torrance Memorial with their first case of N95 masks. And that's when we knew we were onto something. And we were just collecting so much information at once. And we eventually had to launch a 2.0 version of the site. And we gained over 5000 volunteers into the Masks for Docs ecosystem. They ended up having to create their own separate Slack channel. And yeah, they had 5000 volunteers. They created over 100 Global chapters. So basically, there was an Austin Masks for Docs, there was a Los Angeles Masks for Docs. And next thing I know Vice picked up an article on us because there was a Brooklyn Masks Doc's run by this organization called Moto Valley. They were basically conducting an underground motorcycle crew PPE distribution. And you have to understand that a lot of these hospitals, they didn't want to accept the personal protective equipment because it wasn't – There was certain health standards that had to be met. And so we have doctors and nurses meeting us in alleyways literally at one in the morning and motorcycle crews like secretly dropping off this PPE to them because their directors were saying, “No, it has to come from the government.”

[00:28:57] TA: Wow! Undercover missions going on.

[00:28:59] RS: Yeah, I mean, it was intense.

[00:29:03] TA: That's crazy.

[00:29:04] RS: We had these like ninja motorcycle guys running around New York like delivering illegal PPE to these hospitals. Yeah, I mean, like it was punk rock as hell. Like it was really cool. It was terrifying. We were like, “Are we going to get in trouble by the government? Because we're providing people things that are protecting them, even though our own government isn't protecting them?”

[00:29:23] TA: Yeah.

[00:29:24] RS: I mean, it was just so overwhelming. But yes, Masks for Docs, it was an incredible organization. I've stepped away as somebody to run day-to-day. I will always be the co-founder. It was one of the most amazing things I've been able to do in my lifetime. As mentioned, we delivered over 100,000 pieces of personal protective equipment. We even had chapters in like Kolkata, India. We had folks in Serbia. I mean, we connected with other mutual aid organizations. But yeah, I mean, I could go on for days. But again, like I think that's going to be one of those moments in a few years from now where I'm like, "Wow!" When the government really failed us, when health care government agencies weren't stepping up to the plate, designers and creatives. We were the ones protecting our communities, and that's something that will never be taken away from me. And I'm incredibly proud of our volunteers for that.

[00:30:19] TA: Yeah, that's amazing. Extremely amazing work.

[00:30:21] RS: Thank you.

[00:30:23] TA: Let's take a short break.

[BREAK]

[00:30:25] TA: So one of the top questions I get about product design is how do I stay inspired? And the other day I decided to take inventory of what I'm doing routinely. The biggest thing that stood out to me was how I'm always investing time to understand products that are advancing in design and technology. Today's sponsor, Google Design, produces original content like articles and videos to show how Google's products come to life, and to inspire designers everywhere. On Google Design, you'll get to know how the products used by billions actually get made. And hear from desires behind some of your favorite products like Chrome, Google Maps, and Nest. Head over to design.google to get inspired. That's design.google. Or follow them on Twitter and Instagram @GoogleDesign.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:31:19] TA: The work that you've done with Masks for Docs, like all listeners, that should make you feel proud to be a designer or a researcher, because side projects like this are a great

example of how you can make a difference in the world with the UX problem solving skills that you have. So designers and researchers have the tools to build for impact. Rachel, do you have any advice for them? If any of them are sitting on an idea, a product idea? What should be their first step to get started?

[00:31:50] RS: Oh, my gosh! First step to get started. I mean, not everybody's going to have a fire under their butt, like a pandemic happening every year, hopefully not. Hopefully, it's like a once in 100-year, once in a 200-year thing to get people thinking they have to do things on an emergency level. But honestly, to get started in any project is just do it. That's honestly the hardest part. I always like to run quick and dirty user testing. Doesn't even have to be on a formal tool. Literally, call your mom, call your friends. Say, "Hey, what do you think about this?" Like, "If I asked you this series of questions and get their feedback that way, depending on the product, start prototyping, see how it works. Get your brain meshing and molding."

One thing I've always learned and starting anything, is it usually is going to be iterative, meaning it's probably going to morph, it's probably going to change contingent on the new information that you might get from testing, or new timelines or whatever. But the hardest part is getting started. It's just I think a lot of folks sometimes – I know, for me, I get motivation from other people who are super psyched on it as well. But don't look to outside voices to get you wanting to do what you want to do, right? Like, let it come from yourself. If you believe in something, do it. By no means does that mean work on it solo and don't include other people. Like, absolutely, you are building products for humans. If a person doesn't know how to use your product, then your product is going to fail? Right? So absolutely get it in front of hands of people. Get feedback. Feedback is critical. But the hardest part is getting started. And once you get started, it'll all fall in line. Definitely.

[00:33:37] TA: Yeah, I strongly believe that you can use the skills that you've applied to products at your job, for your own products or ideas too, especially if it's something that you feel that you can have the discipline to follow through with it. Because it's a one thing to be like an independent contractor, right? And maybe you have like more of a free time to just do your own thing. But if like you're working a nine to five, it has to be something that you're really passionate about, because you're going to have the days where you're being pulled from both sides. And it can feel like is it really worth the time?

[00:34:15] RS: Yeah, that brings up a really great point. I think time management is key. And also here I am, again, just being like, “Go for it and like just start it.” That doesn't really give structure, right? So for anyone who's starting this path or is wanting to build their own product, or organization or side hustle or whatever, having a design process or just a process in general really helps. So for me, I like to – I get really excited in ideas and I go for them really quickly without sometimes, I will admit, doing enough competitive research. Has someone felt this before? Am I just building a better mousetrap? So, if you do have an idea and you want to get started, see what's in the competitive landscape. Find Anything that's existing? Maybe it's something new? And even if it is existing, do you have like a twist on it? That makes it different? Right?

So I think, seeing what's out there, applying it to your own thinking of, “Okay, how does this affect my product?” But then after doing competitive research, really just starting to think about your design process a bit more. So what's the next step you would take after that? Talk to some users. Get a gut check? Is this something that is biased? Because you live in a suburban neighborhood and have a high WiFi connection? What about, is this going to be a global product? What about people in countries with limited connectivity? Are you considering them? If it's like a digital product versus – There's things in languages that mean totally different things. You may say something and somebody in their country, it may mean something completely different? So it's understanding who you're building this for, right? Like, who are your users? Does it apply to them? Get a gut check? Once you have that all straightened out, start wireframing. Start prototyping. And again, just keep cycling in that user feedback. Because as a product designer, you're building for humans. And if they don't like the product, then you don't have a product to work with at the end of the day.

[00:36:17] TA: Yes, process is everything when getting started, because it's going to help you understand from point A to B, like how you're going to get to the goal of actually launching the idea that you have.

[00:36:29] RS: Yep, plus a time management as well.

[00:36:32] TA: Oh, completely, time management, just life management too. In your interview with Pop-Up Magazine, you mentioned how you dealt with empathy exhaustion. And you said, “We had folks we knew personally who were contracting COVID, who were getting sick, it felt like the circle around us was getting smaller and smaller. Our volunteers were dropping left and right. You feel like you want to help constantly, but it ends up taking a toll on you mentally.” I imagine that was really tough, a really tough time that you were going through. And I'd like for you to dig into this experience a little bit and tell us how you were personally able to cope and keep the business up and running.

[00:37:17] RS: Yeah. So when we started formulating Design to Combat COVID-19 and Masks for Docs, one thing we realized very quickly is there's strength in numbers. And we started pairing with other organizations as well. Taylor Fairbank, he leads the efforts out in Serbia for an organization called Distribute Aid. And he was the one who shared this term empathy exhaustion with me. And basically what this means is when you are so empathetic constantly, you're wanting to help, you're wanting to give, and you give and you give and you give, but then you hit a wall, and it starts taking a toll on you on your mental health on your well-being. It's literally exhaustion from being overly empathetic.

And I never realized what that term was. But I definitely felt it. As mentioned, we had folks who were showing up to our meetings crying because they were worried about losing their job. And as someone who runs an organization, you're essentially like a manager, and people are coming to you. And these are like your one on ones essentially, right? And they're giving you – I've never really managed a team of like 2000 people before. So when folks are coming to me and they're sharing their personal struggles with me, which I was so open to hearing and honored that they're feeling this close to me, but I worry about them, and I worry about their health. So you do all that you can. And also running a volunteer organization, you have to realize that people give what they can, and they only have so much to give. And for me when I started the org, I felt like it was my obligation, which is fine for me. But boundaries are very, very important. I think for anyone who is just constantly wanting to give back, that's great, and that's wonderful. But if you do not set those boundaries for yourself, I guarantee you you will burn out and it may leave a bitter taste in your mouth or it may be something that you don't want to approach again for a while. Set boundaries for yourself. I had to learn that myself.

I was working a full time job and doing this at night, in the mornings, during work. I probably didn't sleep for weeks at a time, and I don't know how I got through it for me personally, and I'm not saying this as a healthy coping mechanism, but I think it helped me channel my anxiety was just staying busy. And being able to see what we were producing, it helped me not worry about the family members that I knew were getting sick or the folks who are losing their jobs, wondering if I was going to lose my job. Am I going to have a home in a few weeks? So, for me just staying busy. And again, not saying this is a healthy coping mechanism at all. I have many conversations by therapist about this. But it was the one thing that kept my mind going was just focusing on the work. But the advice I would give for anybody who wants to give back or is constantly thinking about how they could help other people is absolutely do what's in your heart. Give what you can. But setting boundaries for yourself is absolutely key, because it's only going to create a healthy working environment for you. But then other people are going to see that you're setting those boundaries for yourself, and they're going to do the same. So it's going to create a healthy working environment for everybody involved, which is absolutely critical.

[00:40:42] TA: There still is so many anxieties around COVID. And I think it's so important that, especially when you're ready to start like a business, you make time to help yourself personally so that way you can fully be present for other people, because it's one of those things that like creep up on you, burnout, and not realizing that you're going through something like empathy exhaustion. Especially like when you're a person that's just trying to always be there for people, you have to put yourself first in this situation, because these people look to you as like the rock, the foundation of the company. So making that time for yourself. And sometimes therapy is what you need. Having that person to talk to you weekly or monthly or frequently.

[00:41:30] RS: It works for me, might not work for everybody. And this term empathy exhaustion as well, and we're talking about the COVID sense. But in the midst of summers last year, there was riots happening constantly. There's the Black Lives Matter Movement. We just had that attack on the Asian community. There's so –

[00:41:48] TA: [inaudible 00:41:48].

[00:41:48] RS: Oh, my gosh. Make the time for yourself? Yes, you have a job. But I'm sorry. This is what I say. I hope it doesn't offend anybody. But I just feel like it's a business relationship.

If it didn't work for the business, they probably wouldn't have you. So for you, you need to take the time for yourself. If you are personally affected by things that are happening in society today, if you just need to walk away for the day, and really reflect upon what's going on because it's affecting you personally, or people that you love. Take that time for yourself. Set those boundaries. There are a lot of things happening in this world today that is devastating, that is heartbreaking. But it's also making people question, what's really going on in the world and provoking change. So create that space for yourself if you need it, take it because it's just a job at the end of the day.

[00:42:47] TA: Yes. And something I like to tell people on this show, I've said it a lot of times, but it's staying at a job for a year to get experience is not worth the effect it will have on your mental health if it's not the type of job where you feel you can show up and have that psychological safety. This is one of the previous episodes we just did, talking to you Abadesi about how at companies, you need to feel comfortable voicing what you're going through. And it's not necessarily like it needs to be therapy at work. But you should have that level of comfort to say, "Hey, I need to have day-to-day." Because life, right? Things are going on in the world that are affecting you mentally, and companies, they expect you to show up and bring your 100% self to help them make these amazing products. But it's like if I can't even show up and do the work. And it's like why am I clocking in? Because it's just kind of like we're wasting each other's time here. Yeah, I think it's something that more people need to be vocal about, even though it's an uncomfortable conversation, because, sadly, a lot of employers won't understand. But I feel like the more of us that do it, change will happen.

[00:44:04] RS: Yes. And if you feel like there should be space for that at your work, say something. I mean, if you think there needs to be more equity in your work environment, be the person that speaks up because that's the only way change is going to happen. And you're a human at the end of the day. We need to be treated like such. Yeah, I think you touched on a really good point there. But it's key to set those boundaries and to be self-reflective of yourself and what you really want out of your life.

[00:44:36] TA: As a Latina designer and woman who is making a way for yourself and not taking no for an answer, do you have any advice for our listeners that want to become a product designer?

[00:44:50] RS: Sure. I mean, gosh, you say don't take no for an answer. I've been told no so many times in my career, but kind of going back to that earlier point I made with Arlan Hamilton, founder of Backstage Capital, she shared a really interesting story. She said, when she grew up, she was a Jehovah's Witness. And she knocked on doors constantly. And she knew that 100 times out of 101, people are just going to be like, "Go away. I don't want to talk to you." She said that she just got the door slammed in her face so many times. So she applied or experiences and just knocking on stranger's doors to her career. And just as I mentioned earlier, on our conversation, it's a numbers game. So if this is really where your passion lies, keep building up your portfolio.

And one other thin adding on to that, in terms of building a portfolio is I think use cases are great in educational settings. But if you can get real life work in your portfolio, that just speaks so much more to. People who are going to be interviewing with, right? If you don't have real life work, ask your favorite florists. Go to your favorite bakery. Ask them, "Hey, do you need free design work? Or do you need like a survey to be done?" And I know working for free isn't fun. Nobody likes it. But if you look at it as an investment, like if I put in the effort to get this piece in my portfolio and I can show the impact that it made, right? So let's say you go to your favorite baker and you say, "Hey, I noticed your website looks like it's like from 1986." Don't say that, obviously. "But can I help you get an upgrade? Like I'll do it for free. All you have to do is, I don't know, like listing it on your site for someone who just –" I don't know, you can negotiate the terms. But then let's say, because of that website change, they got like five more customers in that week. And then the next week it was more. You can put that in your portfolio and say, "Because of the changes I did, track your efforts, track the impact that you made," because that is so much more telling than a hypothetical situation. So I definitely encourage folks who are starting to get into this area to get real life projects under your belt. Get that impact on there. And also, I've been told no a lot in my career. Some folks get really lucky the first time, but don't get discouraged. You just have to keep going, have to keep trying. It's a numbers game. Stick to it, and eventually you'll see yourself there.

[00:47:31] TA: Yes, definitely. Consistency is what you need to get the practice on a job that you want. And also, too, getting feedback from other people. Don't stay in like in the dungeon just creating your things and not asking anyone like what they think about stuff. Because I

mean, as a UX designer, you have to get comfortable with those types of conversations. But yeah, I think it's really important to have that real world experience as well. And look at it this way, like, either way, you need a project on your portfolio, it could be a hypothetical one, or could be a real one. But either way it can get to your portfolio and help you get the job. But you might get a job that falls more into like a dream job you have compared to the one that you're trying to get for experience if you get that real world experience,

[00:48:15] RS: Definitely. And something else I'd like to add to is, I see a lot of folks who are trying to break into the industry and say, "Well, do I have to have a graphic design background? Or do I have to know how to code? Or do I have to be great prototype or a researcher? Or all these things." And there's no – Like product designers, they are all the same. So you can be a product designer who specializes in content design, or prototyping, or user interface design, or user experiences. I'm sorry, pet peeve, but like UI/UX, like I feel like they should be separate. A lot of folks combine them. It's okay to be good at both, but they're not the same thing. So it's okay if you're a product designer who has a strong foot in user experience design, but maybe your prototyping isn't the best. Or maybe you're excellent visual designer and prototype, but you need help with your research. There's no one umbrella, perfect unicorn product designer. Sure, folks can dabble in a lot of those lanes or efforts, but everyone has their own flair to them. And that's something I realized within myself too is I thought I had to fit this mold to. Be yourself. If you're really good at a certain aspect of product design or design in general, then that's your thing. Make it your thing and own it and make that be your differentiator. It's okay to be different. That's why we're designers. People like our creativity. They like the idea of different.

[00:49:43] TA: Next we'll get into listener questions. I asked on Instagram what question do you have for a product designer, and here's what one of you asked. May3.ai asked, "I have absurd work from when I interned. I was only asked to try out various colors on the app screens and make the wireframes. Is that even worth putting in my portfolio?"

[00:50:06] RS: Yeah, I think that's a great question. Thank you May for asking. Yes, I think it is worth putting in your portfolio. And this is why I'm going to say even if you're thinking, "Oh, I only worked on the screens of various colors and wireframes." Well, you had thinking, to get to those colors to those screens and those wireframes. So something I would encourage you to do is even if the output you only have are these three things, add your thinking to your portfolio. What

was your design process to get there? And talk about that. Something I see whenever I'm interviewing in portfolios that really sticks out to me is the art of storytelling. Yes, that's a really beautiful screen that you built. But how did you get there?

So if you're able to articulate the process you took of, "Well, I was really inspired by like I was walking on the street, and the sky was so beautiful that day, and it really inspired me, and it reminded me of this app. And so those are the colors I incorporated." Put that in your story? Or how did you get to those wireframes? Well, you didn't just spit out wireframes. And that was it. Right? It was probably a process. Maybe it didn't work the first time. And so write about that. So, the first wireframes, I tried, I realized very quickly that the UI wouldn't match like the bigger design system. So I scaled it back. I added this, and then this was the phase two. Being able to tell that story of the process of how you got there to me tells a lot more than just the screens themselves. So I would absolutely put them into portfolio and just grow on how you got to that point and talking about the design thinking that you use to be able to create what it was in your portfolio. But yeah, you should absolutely show it. It was hard work.

[00:51:58] TA: That's all the listener answers we have for this week. As a reminder, you could be included in the next episode. Make sure to follow me on Instagram @UINarrative. I randomly asked questions that will be featured in an episode and answer your questions live on the show.

Alright, so I like to end guest shows with a random question that is completely unrelated to what we've been talking about. So the question today is what's your favorite cartoon character and why?

[00:52:26] RS: Okay, so I thought about this for a while and I read the question. I really loved a lot of cartoons growing up. I mean, like any kid did, right? Sailor Moon was like one of my favorites. It was super fun. Gosh! I don't know, I grew up on PBS too. So I feel like I was very limited in my – I just have like CartoonNetwork or anything. I was very jealous of kids who did. But when I really thought about this question, growing up, my dad used to bring home these old VHS of like old timey cartoons from like the early turn of the century. And one of them was this cartoon, it was called Little Lulu. I don't know if you're familiar with her, but she's like a 1940s cartoon of this small girl. She's got like black curly hair. Basically, she's kind of a jerk. Like she like plays hooky in school. And she just goes against all rules and regulations. And I remember

watching this cartoon of her where she was supposed to be in school, and instead she like use this like dummy to like set up her spot on her desk, and then she goes fishing for the day. But then she ends up like an apple hits her head and she passes out and she has a dream about why playing hooky is bad. But she was just like a bad girl who didn't want to conform and always ended up getting a life lesson out of it. And going back to, "Okay, well, this is why." But whenever boys would pick on her, like she would like kick them in the rear end and tell them to like sit down. Like I just thought she was such a badass and didn't conform to society. And I think part of me just kind of relates to that a little bit. So I would have to say my answer is Little Lulu. She's hilarious. She's a badass, and she doesn't take no from anyone. So I like her. I think that's my answer.

[00:54:09] TA: So I also too, grew up in a lot of cartoons. I didn't have cable to growing up. But I would have to say like a more recent one is one of my favorites, which is Jake from Adventure Time.

[00:54:21] RS: Oh, yeah! I love Adventure Time.

[00:54:24] TA: Because he is that dog on that show. And he's just like the hilarious best friend. And he's always giving like questionable advice to –

[00:54:33] RS: He keeps it real.

[00:54:35] TA: Yeah, he keeps it real. He does. He's a good mentor, but then also a questionable mentor to Finn. But basically he's like his ride or die. No matter what, he's always there for him. He helps him with all of his adventures, traveling and all that stuff. So yeah, Jake, from Adventure Time.

[00:54:53] RS: They're like Yin and Yang. They have to balance each other out.

[00:54:57] TA: Yes. All right. So where can we connect with you online?

[00:55:01] RS: Oh, yeah. So guys can – If you're interested in Design to Combat COVID-19, you can go to designtocombatcovid19.com. We have some of the initiatives that we've produced

out there. Some of the organizations we started. If you're interested in starting your own volunteer, or you can message us on there, and we'd love to give you some advice. Me personally, you can find me on Twitter and Instagram, [@rachelsmith](#), and you can check out my website at [rachelsmithdesign.com](#). That's me. Yeah, come say hi. I'd love to see who's listening and have a chat.

[00:55:34] TA: Yeah, guys. So make sure to tag Rachel on her handles or me [@uinarrative](#) on Instagram or [@uinarrativeco](#) on Twitter. If you have any questions about the topic today, or if you know any woman or people of color, anyone that's getting into product design that has questions, tag us, we'd love to talk to them. So yeah, I appreciate you so much for taking time to join us on today's episode, Rachel, and I can't wait to see more initiatives that come out of combat to COVID-19.

[00:56:03] RS: Yeah, thank you so much for having me and letting me talk about our org. I'm just so thankful for the volunteers that we have an impact that we've been able to create, and we'll definitely keep you posted on everything.

[OUTRO]

[00:56:17] TA: Thank you for listening to the UI narrative podcast. If you like what you hear, make sure to share this podcast some love by commenting and subscribing where you listen. You can find me on Instagram and Facebook [@uinarrative](#) or Twitter [@uinarrativeco](#). I also respond to emails at hello@uinarrative.com. Talk to you later. Bye.

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