

A Legacy to Share Podcast

[00:00:00] I really want to thank you all for joining us. My name is Patience Ajoff-Foster, and I am truly elated and honored to be in conversation with our panelists today to talk about a legacy to share,

[00:00:13] **Patience:** which honors 50 stories, of our black alum, sharing their stories from their perspectives and their lenses. It is intended to recognize and honor their place within Drexel's history.

[00:00:26] I'll say that again. Yes. Their place within Drexel's History, because it is an important place and it is part of what makes us Drexel, and highlights their amazing experiences and explores how they navigated various obstacles, that they encountered along the way. I'm really excited to be joined by Ms.

[00:00:45] Angela Dowd-Burton, who is an award-winning business professional with over 25 years of diverse business experiences and public service, serving in global roles and is a member of the Drexel University Board of [00:01:00] Trustees. I should also note that Mrs. Angela serves as a driving force behind a legacy to share. Thank you so much for joining us this morning.

[00:01:10] We also have Marcella Stokes, whose a native of Philadelphia who specializes in STEM fields, that's science, technology, engineering, and math, of mechanical engineering, cybersecurity and engineering project and program management. A celebrated and highly awarded combat veteran. She has served throughout the globe and has seen firsthand how economic and educational empowerment of diverse communities can positively impact social change.

[00:01:39] Thank you so much, Marcella, for joining us this morning.

[00:01:42] my pleasure.

[00:01:43] And thank you for your service to our country. Richelle Parham is also a member of the Drexel University Board of Trustees and currently serves as president of global e-Commerce and Business Development for Universal Music Group.

[00:01:59] A [00:02:00] nationally recognized leader, in business and innovation. Her 25 plus years of global strategy and marketing experiences garnered prestigious honors and awards from Forbes, Fast Company, Savoy, and Black Enterprise, just to name a few.

[00:02:16] **Patience:** Thank you so much for joining us, Richelle. And so, I'm going to start with you Angela. Really just tell us how the vision for this project came about. **Angela:** Well, it was the spring of 2020, and I think most people recall we were in the convergence of, the Covid pandemic, the social unrest, economic uncertainty.

[00:02:40] People were shedding themselves in, there was the murder of George Floyd. and on a personal note, my husband was suffering from Alzheimer's and his health was beginning to decline. and for me, I'm a perpetual optimist, but the walls felt like they were [00:03:00] closing in and, I think Michelle Obama said it felt like a low grade depression.

[00:03:07] Two things sort of lifted me out of that. One was a Zoom celebration hosted by the National Black MB Association, of which I am a lifetime member and a legacy leader from a decade of service to them during the formative years. They were celebrating their 50th anniversary, and then this guy named Steve Cox had a Zoom celebration in May, and over 50 people attended. And each one talked about their life since Drexel and just shared the joy and it was one of those things that happened in May, and then you turn to June and July and the depression begins to set in again.

[00:03:53] **Angela:** I just reflected back on those two events and decided I needed to capture [00:04:00] that joy, that level of hope in a bottle, or in a book where I could share it with other people and help lift them out of what I felt I was going through. And so by the fall, I reached out to Steve for his distribution list, the Office of Alumni Relations, and Jenny was there to help and called Jerry Martin, president of the Drexel University Black Alumni Council and said, I need to be able to reach

[00:04:32] and invite alumni to tell the stories that they shared during those Zoom calls. And then those, that group of alumni had graduated in the seventies and when the decade of the eighties and nineties and two thousands alumni began to hear, they said, what about us? And so I said, of course you're all invited.

[00:04:55] And so that was the end of 2020. [00:05:00]

[00:05:00] **Angela:** By 2021 in January, I sent the invitation out. I set the template up of what I wanted them to speak about in their stories, set up weekly Zoom meetings. And by May we had a substantial number of stories. And I began to look for publishers and I told them I'd like to publish this book by the end of the year.

[00:05:24] And they said, no, that's not how it works.

[00:05:26] And I came across Scott Stein, who is the executive director of Drexel's, publishing Group, and I tell him, I want this book out by Thanksgiving because I want them to give it out for the holidays. And he said, that's not how it works, but show me what you have.

[00:05:48] **Angela:** And I began to feed him the stories. And the rest is history. But, I will tell you, the people that you will hear from today just [00:06:00] inspire me. Every story is an inspiration.

Patience: And so Marcella, you get an email or a call or some sort of invitation to share your story and why'd you say yes?

[00:06:14] **Marcella:** I never tell Angela. No. When people like, Angela and Dr. Cox and many others pour into you when they ask you just to pour a little out of your cup by sharing your experiences, then Yes.

[00:06:31] The reason I wanted my story told is because of course, Drexel is a phenomenal university. It is diverse because it represents, I think about 150 countries. But when I was going to Drexel, I wasn't always represented. And so I wanted to tell my story so that people could know anyone that read it knows that I'm just a regular, everyday person doing extraordinary things, just like all of you.[00:07:00]

[00:07:00] And I also understand that, as I stated earlier, I was poured into, so it's my responsibility and my duty to give back. and that's why I said yes without a doubt it was challenging. And as you ask your questions, I'll share a bit of that, but it required me to go back to places that I had purposely.

[00:07:22] let's just say, put on a shelf somewhere, closed the door, places that I didn't want to revisit, but places that makes me who I am today and able to add value and contribute.

[00:07:35] **Patience:** And I have to say, as I was reading your story, it was like all of your humanity was a part of it. There was that piece and then there was like all those different layers, and I truly appreciate it. It came across that you actually held up a mirror and went to some places, with that.

[00:07:54] And I look forward to hearing more about it. And so Richelle, it also happened at [00:08:00] a time where I think for you, if I remember correctly, it was in some ways a transitional time career wise for you, right? there was this

new offer that was looming. And so transitions usually are interesting periods in our lives.

[00:08:14] There's a lot going on. And then you said yes. Why'd you say yes?

[00:08:19] **Richelle:** Like Marcella, when Angela asked you to do something, you just do it. And number one, I was going to do whatever Angela wanted me to do, but number two, I really thought it was important to share my story, to help people to understand where I came from and how I landed at Drexel and what that actually meant for me and my career.

[00:08:38] And I was able to do so much in what feels like a very short amount of time. And I wanted to articulate that anything is really possible. And that all these opportunities are available for you if you just go after them. And so that's why I wanted to share the story and I was just honored to see [00:09:00] all the other alumni who were doing the same thing and the fact that out of it came this beautiful book that we are also proud to be a part of.

[00:09:08] It's just, it's so important and it's an important time in our history. And you're right, I was going through a transition at that time and often when you go through transitions, you're in reflection mode. And so I spent a lot of time reflecting on who I was and what I had been. But the one thing I think a lot about is my legacy and what do I want to leave behind and what do I want people to remember about me?

[00:09:32] And so being able to share my story was a bit about me leaving droplets of my legacy for people to remember along the way.

[00:09:42] **Patience:** That's beautiful. Now, a constant theme in these pieces is the importance of finding your voice. And I think all of you started hinting at that.

[00:09:49] What does this concept mean to you and how does it help you develop?

[00:09:55] **Marcella:** For me, I've always been outspoken and honest, about how I feel about things and what my thoughts are.

[00:10:02] But what it requires to find your voice is to understand what your true north is. We've all been raised, whether it's by single parent, dual parents, or just extended family and community. And we know we have values. And so

for me, having my voice is me knowing my north, understanding my values and also my intentions.

[00:10:23] The woman that sits here in front of you today has a lot of experiences that has colored my perception. And so it's been through those, experiences and what I've learned from them.

[00:10:35] **Marcella:** And first and foremost, understanding that it's not always about me. It's about me being successful through helping other people be successful. So it is, it's, it is almost like a metamorphosis of sort because we learn, we grow over the years. I talk about my experiences during the Gulf War and that require courage.

[00:10:55] So I take that courage with me on the corporate battlefield, understanding my position, understanding my why, most of all. and then lastly, understanding how I can help others through that.

[00:11:08] **Angela:** I think finding your voice really means understanding who you are. I agree with Marcella. it takes, a bit of reflection, but it also means being able to speak out and speak up, for things that you believe in, and giving others a voice, who may be voiceless. I think it's important to use your platform wherever it is, to share experiences, to expand the horizons. I think, fanning the flame and finding the light, which is again from Michelle Obama's, conversation it's finding that light in other people and speaking to that and sharing with them the common agenda that we have for getting things done.

[00:11:56] **Angela:** I think that's what inspires people to say yes, because there's this innate understanding of the need for getting certain things done. And part of that is developing and leaving a legacy, which becomes a navigational system for the next generation.

[00:12:16] **Patience:** I love that concept of light because there's plenty of room for to shine. I'm always saying that. And if I help you like turn the switch on because I'm closer to it than you are, it just makes the room brighter and it attracts even more, positivity.

The next question that I have is, we often hear about taking risks, and how important is it to take risks and what does that look like in the real world, whether you're a student or working as a black professional? And we're diving a little deeper now, right? And I think about in your case in particular where as I was reading at one point, I was like, whoa, she took off from work and then didn't go to another job, like really just took off from work, right? [00:13:00]

That is a risk. And so as you think about this concept of risk taken as a black professional, again, how important is it to take risks?

[00:13:10] **Richelle:** So first I'd say it is incredibly important, but not everyone does it and not everyone feels comfortable doing it. I have taken risks throughout my career. I took risks at Drexel, so I knew I was going to do co-op, but I didn't. Go through the co-op program at Drexel. I found my own co-op job, and so then I had to figure out navigating, getting to New York, working in New York, living in New York, making very little money in New York and how to eat in New York.

[00:13:41] Like I had to learn all these things, which, was challenging. When I looked back on it, I'm like, how was I able to do that? I had enough money to just pay my rent plus a hundred dollars. That's what I got paid every month, enough to pay my rent plus a hundred.

So,

[00:13:59] **Patience:** in New York? [00:14:00]

[00:14:00] **Richelle:** In New York City, and I would go to the bodega in the morning and I'd get rice because it was 99 cents and I'd put butter on it and salt and pepper and that's what I'd have for breakfast.

[00:14:10] My company fed us for lunch if I was lucky and stayed late. They fed me for dinner. If not, I had to figure out dinner, which was usually rice because it was 99 cents. that is how I lived. I looked great. I was in Valentino head to toe because I worked for Valentino, but I had no money. and so that was definitely a risk, but I knew I needed to do that, to lean into what I wanted to do for my career.

[00:14:32] When I got back to Drexel, I also knew that I needed to know more about design and fashion. I was a business major and while I always loved design and. I wasn't a design major and so I started taking design classes. No one had ever done that before. No one in the business school had taken classes at the design school.

[00:14:52] But I started doing that and there was a conversation that I overheard a little bit ago about the experience that folks had at Drexel. [00:15:00] And I, my experience was very different and very unique from my friends who got to hang out and party and do all types of things in addition to their work. I worked all the time, I worked doing business homework.

[00:15:13] I was up all night doing design projects. Like I worked all the time. And so when I think about like my friends who like had these great party experiences, I didn't have that. I just had so much to do. But I again, took a risk. I knew that I needed to succeed in the fashion industry on the business side, but I needed to understand stuff about fashion and so I took that risk.

[00:15:35] The next thing I did, which was a huge risk at the time, is we started a digital agency that was doing early days of e-commerce.

[00:15:44] **Richelle:** I'm talking 1996, 1997, early, early days of the web.

[00:15:51] I joined this agency and everyone said, that internet thing will never take off that information super highway. Like those people over there are [00:16:00] strange, you don't wanna work there, you're gonna lose your job. Like people told me point blank, I was gonna go there and then that internet thing would never take off and I was gonna lose my job.

[00:16:10] But it seemed so cool. It was like paving the way for what the future could be and I was gonna be a part of it at the ground floor. And because I was a part of it at the ground floor, I had this meteoric rise in my career. And so again, just another time that I took risk. And then you just mentioned the kind of, probably the big one is I quit my job. I've done that twice now. Quit my job when I didn't have another gig. But you know what, you talked about values and how important your values are and when you start to, when you wake up and you realize you're not in the place you're supposed to be. When you wake up and you realize that there's so much more that you could be doing or you realize that where you are, they don't understand your worth.

[00:16:56] Like sometimes you have to make a risky move. Each time I did that, I ended up with the next best amazing thing. And so I do have a history of taking a bunch of risks and every time it's paid off.

[00:17:09] **Patience:** I think that values like knowing starting internally, is a key theme I remember all those years ago at my HBCUs, one of the great things about HBCUs is that alum want you to succeed, et cetera. and really are there similar to what you all are doing here and this idea of believing in a power higher than one self, I think that helps to really be able to take that risk.

[00:17:38] Although we know that black professionals don't always get that benefit of the doubt, when it comes to being able to take that risk, whether it's by financial, enough financial resources to be able to take time off and take care of yourself without certain worries, or even just getting the benefit of the doubt

that maybe you too can decide that a place is not good for you and leave it while you think about, what is that good place for me?

[00:18:03] **Patience:** So I wanna come to you. I'll go to you Angela first. how might, how have you approached dealing with the potential consequences that come with risk taking?

Angela: It's very interesting, early on, my parents when I was a teenager, put a sign on my door, that said the secret of success is to never accept failure as final. And so I was in a quandary wondering, what's the relevance of this? Because I never planned to fail. But what I understood over time was that if you are not failing forward at some point, then you're not reaching high enough. And the goal for me that was embedded by my parents, was to live up to your full potential, find out whatever that is.

[00:18:57] And that means to reach and to stretch. I was fortunate, I am fortunate to have a family that is my personal cheering section, and my mother said this morning, when you do that podcast, you make sure you stand, you speak up, because sometimes your voice trails off. And so I'm still being coached, by my parents.

[00:19:20] And the bottom line for risk taking, it means that there is a benefit that you're going after. And if you fall short, there was this saying you reach for the moon, but it, if you land among the stars, that's not half bad. And so you just use those lessons learned for the next opportunity that you pursue.

[00:19:49] So that's the way I treat risk. That's when I left mobile oil to come to Drexel to work on my MBA and to commit to doing it in a two-year program in one year. That's what I did. and that was a risk. I decided not to go back to mobile who gave me that one year leave of absence since I went to Sun, another petroleum, chemical company.

[00:20:16] That was a risk. And then I went to, into the public sector. And so each one of those stages of my life was, a what if? and it's what if you fail? learn from it. What if you succeed? Then greater things begin to happen. That's why when I read Richelle's stories about her taking time off and then leapfrogging through industry and time, I'm like, the woman's a superhero.

[00:20:45] And then when I look at Marcella, who's standing on the front line, whether it's North Philly or the Gulf War, it's, that's risk. Her life and the lives of others were in her hands. [00:21:00] as I say, these are my sisters here.

[00:21:03] **Patience:** And I was like, I was, I remember, before you came back from your MBA, it was like a challenge or, I read it as a challenge where someone had said something about you not being eligible for a certain role or to be considered for certain roles because you didn't have an MBA, and so you said, I'm going back to Drexel to get my MBA, so you showed that person too. And I think, failure is just a part of our growth. And what I'm also hearing you say is the importance of a support system as a part of that. So that if I reach for the moon and don't even land in the stars and land back where I started, it's gonna be a soft landing. I'm not gonna fall completely flat. So the importance of having, whether it's family, whether it's a network that we build around us, whether it's, sister circles being intentional about the relationships that we cultivate so that when things don't work out as they will, sometimes we can fall back as we do an AR. An after action review to figure out what went wrong. yeah. Marcella, just tell us a little bit about when you think about this idea of risk, how you've approached dealing with

[00:22:14] **Marcella:** Oh, head first. For me, I didn't have a plan B coming to Drexel. It was either I was going to graduate or I'm not sure what I would've did. I'm just saying that. I've grown accustomed to taking risk. You're taking a risk on yourself and the possibility for success. And so leaving the military, yeah, there's some things with, going to war. You come face to face with fear, but you also come face to face with the possibility to how, understanding how to overcome that and perform despite whatever emotion that you may be feeling.

[00:22:54] It could be self-doubt. it could be, do I have the ability to develop the skills in order to be successful in what I'm doing? So for me, every risk was about overcoming an obstacle when I was in junior college, because I started at CCP, I figured let me test this engineering and science waters out at a junior college.

[00:23:15] I was, someone shared their opinion with me, but as it's said, often another person's opinion of you is really none of your business, right? So this person felt that I probably shouldn't be an engineer, that I should think about just moving into technology instead of research instead of, looking towards advanced studies instead of doing innovative type of activities with other students, they thought differently.

[00:23:40] I would think the risk to reject that, move beyond that and not allow that to become a part of, the tapestry of who I am was a risk. You don't see my worth? That's okay. I know my worth. That's all about understanding your

north, sometimes risk that you have to take in order to springboard to another successful opportunity or another successful reality.

[00:24:05] It's necessary for the level of growth. That occurs as a result of that. and that's pretty much how I've taken my risk. What's the worst thing? I mean, even if you fall to the earth, you're not gonna fall through it. So if I'm rock bottom after I've taken a risk, because all risks don't work out.

[00:24:21] There's just nothing but up to go from there. So that's how I view risk. Take 'em often. Make sure they're calculated, and they make sense. But take 'em.

[00:24:31] **Richelle:** So, one of the things I did probably about 15 years ago, is, maybe longer now -15 years ago - is I formed a personal board of directors, and my personal board of directors is made up of, some of them are ex bosses. Some of them are just people who I've had tremendous respect for in my career, and some of them are friends who, I respect what they do and the contribution that they make.

[00:24:59] **Richelle:** And so this personal board of directors formed, formally in 2007, like they'd been around, but I formally called them my personal board directors and I told them they were on my personal board of directors. and what they've been doing for me all this time is just helping me think through some of the things that I'm trying to do.

[00:25:19] We talk about risk, I put these ideas in front of them and I don't take everything they say and do it, it's just that they give me inputs based on what they know about me, based on what they know about my career, based on the things that they know I'm great at and the things they know I'm not great at.

[00:25:35] **Richelle:** And they come back and they just give me their thoughts and advice and that gives me just more information to work off of. So the way I make a lot of these decisions is I get all these inputs, I analyze each one, I put it back together. Sometimes that takes weeks, sometimes that takes minutes. and then I come up with my idea of what I'm going to do for me.

[00:25:54] And, the challenge I've had, which is probably different from a lot of women is, and you all probably know this, that mentors speak with you, sponsors speak about you. And often women have lots of mentors. I didn't have any mentors throughout my early career. I didn't have any mentors. I only had sponsors, so I was moving up, but I didn't have anyone to talk to about it.

[00:26:16] And so finally I got to a place in my career where I had people to actually talk to, that I could bounce things off of. So those earlier risks that I took in my career were real risks because I wasn't making the decision on my own. And then later in my career, I was making the decision with the input of experts.

[00:26:34] And so as you're thinking about how you navigate, just make sure that you surround yourself with people who you trust, who will give you great advice, who will give it to you straight, and who can help you as you try to navigate what sometimes are choppy waters.

[00:26:49] **Patience:** And I think this idea of the board of directors is incredibly like that way of viewing it.

[00:26:54] Because if you think about a board of directors, when I was reading your bios, like finance and human resources, community relations. When you're thinking about your personal board of think about that cheerleader, that person who's gonna give you the truth, who know? Because you've already, that foundation of trust is there.

[00:27:13] Who's gonna give you the truth even when you go, ouch, I don't ever wanna talk to them again. But then you come back to them the next day, right? You want that person who gets you. And sometimes you have the same person who's really good. Like you can have one person play multiple roles, whose really good and knows when you need a cheerleader, and knows when you need okay, you've been in that pity party a little too long, get up.

[00:27:36] But that you trust that foundation of trust is really critical. And knowing what are those areas that I need to surround myself with so that when you go with that decision, you're getting all of those perspectives because the other one is, and those that will keep you grounded, right? Like at one point I had my niece and nephew on my board of directors, because they will be like, that is so boring... who wants to hear that right? Where you can never get too serious or think of yourself as so big and miss that north that you're talking about. So I really like that you mentioned that it's not a journey that we travel alone, but that there's always a community, when we see success.

And so another common theme throughout the book is the importance of leaving a legacy you started saying that on yours. Can you speak a little bit about what that means so much to you and to our university?

[00:28:27] **Richelle:** Sure. so when I got to eBay, so I was chief marketing officer of eBay and one of the executives, the first week I was meeting with all these folks and one of the executives sat down with me and she said, so how long are you gonna be here?

[00:28:40] She said, because our last CMO was here for seven weeks. So I was like, huh,

[00:28:47] that's all they remember seven weeks.

[00:28:48] **Patience:** Someone should have told me this before I took the job!

[00:28:51] **Richelle:** the thing that really struck me was, was that person's legacy. It struck me that their legacy was seven weeks.

[00:28:58] **Richelle:** And so what was I gonna do? What was I gonna leave? What were people gonna remember me for? And so that's how I think about everything I do. Like when I step away from it, number one, will I be proud of it and will I be, and how will people talk about it? And so as you're thinking about and navigating your career, or your life, think about what you're leaving behind and what people will say about you.

[00:29:22] On that journey. And I just always wanted to make sure that I was doing the right things for the brands that I represented, for the teams that I represented, and then also for myself. And so that legacy is so important to me and I think about it for every single one of my roles and everything that I touch.

[00:29:39] And, and so that's why the name of this book was so important to me too, because this was all about all of these different legacies of these incredible, people and what they were able to leave behind, but also what I'm able to take from them and take forward.

[00:29:58] **Patience:** What about you, Marcella?[00:30:00]

[00:30:00] **Marcella:** I had mentioned earlier that it's very important for me to stay grounded and understand it. It's not just about me. So when I speak of a legacy, is it a legacy of support that will help another person that looks just like me or have similar experiences and understand, that they too can do it?

[00:30:18] If you're not leaving a legacy, if you're not influencing properly, if you're not helping others, what is your purpose? So when I think of legacy, I

also think about purpose purposely and intentionally moving the needle forward and benefiting others.

[00:30:37] **Marcella:** I like to say that growing up, where you begin isn't where you are always going to be. And so when we talk about legacy making, when we talk about America and the American dream, that within one generation you could totally springboard into a total different economic and educational class.

[00:30:59] That's one of the things that when I got here to Drexel, I started interacting with different people of different ethnicities and also different social and economic classes. My understanding expanded. And so through legacy also is an expansion of communities, homes, and institutions.

[00:31:17] **Patience:** So, I have one last question and that is, I know you all enjoy opportunities to join us here on campus and the memories that coming back here brings, right. How would you describe your experience here on campus?

Richelle: So, so when I come back on Drexel's campus, it is not a campus that I'm familiar with. The, the campus that I was in, in the late eighties looks nothing like the campus today. and the campus today feels global.

[00:31:48] It feels more diverse. It feels bigger. It feels like it's a part of a bigger community. And, it feels like there's so much more access. I mean, we didn't even have restaurants, you know, so just the fact that like, it feels like you're really a part of this world and able to connect with so many different people in different environments.

[00:32:10] I feel like the university today is truly a place of community and connection and really feeling like it's a part of a big world, but it's a small part of that world. And so I love being back on campus. I love, getting to know students. I love guest lecturing. I really just like being a part of the community because it really does feel like home.

[00:32:36] It feels more like home now than it did when I was here in the eighties. And so I'm just really proud of where the university has gone and the curriculum that's being created and the students that it's attracting. It's really a special, special place. And I rep Drexel Dragons all day. I'm so proud to be, a Drexel Dragon and to be a part of this because we are really doing something that is unique and is world class.

[00:33:02] And so just glad to be here all the time.

Patience: Well, I'd like to thank our guests for joining us, to learn more, about a legacy to share. You can get your own copy by going to drexel.edu and searching the book, A Legacy to Share. It's also available in both hard and soft cover proceeds from the book, support Drexel University's Black Alumni Council scholarships for current and future students.

[00:33:28] **Patience:** Again, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you so much for engaging in this conversation Thank you all so much.