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Women in Business: Courtney Klein Co-Founder & CEO of SEED SPOT

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Courtney Klein is Co-Founder and CEO of SEED SPOT, a nonprofit incubator based in Phoenix that works to increase the odds of success for passionate social entrepreneurs who are committed to solving important societal issues. SEED SPOT launched in 2012 with the dream of building a safe place where social entrepreneurs would go to find the right resources to bring their ideas to life.

Previously, Klein served as the Co-Founder & CEO of New Global Citizens, a nonprofit that empowers young people to create social change. The organization now holds a \$1 million endowment at the Arizona Community Foundation, and has a presence in 30 countries and 14 states.

In 2013, the Phoenix Business Journal named Klein as one of the "25 Most Dynamic Women in Business." In 2011, Splashlife Magazine recognized Klein as one of the nation's "Top 30 Civic Leaders Under the Age of 30." She has also been named one of Arizona's "35 Entrepreneurs Under 35," one of "20 Women to Change Arizona by 2020," and one of "Arizona's Most Intriguing Chief Executives."

Today Klein serves on the Advisory Board for HATCH, a Montana-based think tank of passionate and inspiring people across the globe who are committed to nurturing creativity and shaking the world by its ankles. She also serves as an Advisor to the Center for the Future of Arizona and is an Entrepreneur in Residence at Arizona State University.

Klein is an Arizona native and graduate of Arizona State University's Barrett Honors College, where she received her undergraduate and master's degrees in nonprofit management. She resides in Phoenix, and completed her first Ironman Triathlon in November 2013.

How has your life experience made you the leader you are today?

Growing up, I always wanted to make my mom proud. My parents divorced when I was young and while they both worked hard to raise me and my sister, the benchmark for my mom's approval was always high - impossibly high at times.

Years later, I recognized that my desire to seek approval at a young age perpetuated into my adult life. I found myself working hard to make other people happy. I would agree for the sake of agreeing, or be quick to apologize for upsetting someone - even if I knew the decision I made was the right one.

Like many women who may be reading this, I am a people pleaser. But now in my early 30s, I am coming to understand that there are things that are easy and there are things that are meaningful. It is easy to tell someone what they want to hear; it is meaningful to tell them the truth.

Working with entrepreneurs every day, it is easy for me to tell someone that their idea is great. It is meaningful for me to tell them that their business model won't work. Last week I upset someone and - to my great surprise - the world didn't end.

How has your previous employment experience aided your position at SEED SPOT?

When I was a senior in college, I launched a nonprofit organization to educate high school students about global issues. I wanted to empower them to take action and create change in the world. Within a year, I had full-time staff on board, a significant operating budget, operations in two states, and major pressures to scale nationally. I worked ridiculous hours and some would argue that I bit off more than I could chew.

When you have a dream, you believe everything is possible. And it is.

But it only becomes real when people jump on board to help you. My experience at New Global Citizens taught me to lean on mentors, advisors, community leaders, and really anyone who would return my phone call or take my meeting request.

No one has changed the world singlehandedly. No entrepreneur has built a successful business alone. It takes an army of people. And when launching SEED SPOT that was the first order of business: build an army of people who will rally around social entrepreneurs in Phoenix. Today, we have thousands of people connected to our work.

What have the highlights and challenges been during your tenure at SEED SPOT?

The biggest change has been dealing with "wantrepreneurs." If you are serious about solving problems - go solve them. Forget about what your business cards look like, how long your business plan is, or how fancy your prototype looks. None of those things change the world. The only thing that moves the needle is when you get out there and actually make things happen.

The greatest highlight has been working with a 17-year-old entrepreneur named Connor Willey who completed our High School program this summer. He and his team identified that there are 1.5 million amputees in the country. What happens when an amputee buys a pair of shoes? If they do not have a prosthetic limb, many of those single shoes sit idle or end up in the landfill. Thanks to TradeMyShoe.org, amputees can now connect online, find their "sole mate," and trade shoes with someone who has their same shoe size. This teen entrepreneur is crushing it.

How is SEED SPOT making a difference for entrepreneurs?

We are increasing access to expertise, and decreasing the need for entrepreneurs to build infrastructure and take on overhead costs early in their journey. SEED SPOT runs two program cycles every year. Eighty-eight percent of SEED SPOT alumni are still in business, and 93 percent of them are still in Arizona. We are really proud of the fact that we are building a cultural center of gravity in Phoenix for social entrepreneurs. We've provided more than 25,000 hours of mentorship, positively impacting the lives of more than 107,000 people.

What advice can you offer women who are seeking to start their own business?

Years ago, a good friend quoted something to me that I will never forget: "Never doubt yourself - plenty of other people will do that for you."

How do you maintain a work/life balance?

I see my days as all interconnected. I think that is when you know you are doing something you love. Life is work and work is life. It all blurs together for me, which actually creates more time to live.

I've done some things that require a ton of personal time - like training for and competing in my first Ironman last year (while pretty consistently rocking out to Katy Perry) - but I find that my five-minute detour to get my favorite green juice can be just as important.

Major lesson learned: find an extraordinary team to work with, and if you don't have one, keep looking. Working with my colleagues and board members at SEED SPOT gives me the opportunity to trust the people I work with, which allows me to actually take some time for myself.

What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?

The fact that we still get asked this question.

The identifier of being a woman is no different than the identifier of being Kurdish. I don't think of my friend Avein as being a woman in the workforce. I don't think of her as being a Kurd in the workplace. I think of her as a bold, brilliant and fearless CEO of a healthcare company.

Every human being should be recognized for the quality of their character and the impact of their work. Go be you,

How has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life?

There are some really specific problems that mentors have helped me solve - both personally and professionally. It is incredible to know that I can pick up the phone or have a glass of wine with a mentor and trust that the conversation is held in confidence and that they are going to be honest with me in their advice.

I have had mentors, men and women, as old as 85 and as young as 16. Lots of people have mentored me in different ways.

I believe mentors are incredible for shaping your personal and professional culture. Who you associate yourself with in general matters, but it is particularly important to surround yourself with mentors who don't tell you what you want to hear. Gravitate toward the people who are being real with you versus the people who are being nice to you.

Which other female leaders do you admire and why?

I admire so many female leaders. Most of the names I would add to the long list you would not recognize though. They don't do their work for the glitz or glam. The female leaders I admire the most are the ones in the trenches and on the front-lines.

What do you want SEED SPOT to accomplish in the next year?

We are working hard to scale our high school social entrepreneurship program. We really believe in the power of young people to develop solutions to real world problems. This spring, we are piloting our social entrepreneurship program as a semester-long course at Tesseract, a leading independent school in Arizona.

We are currently fielding inquiries from schools across the country that want to roll out a similar program on their campus in the fall of 2015. Let us know if you want to be added to our waiting list!

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