

Ayesha Curry on Building Businesses & Empowering Communities

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Notes:

Sweet July's Evolution: Ayesha Curry discussed how her brand, Sweet July, evolved from a skincare line to a multifaceted platform, including a magazine and local products. The brand focuses on uplifting underrepresented voices and businesses, especially women of color.

Storytelling & Amplifying Voices: Ayesha emphasized the importance of storytelling in her work. She shared her personal experience in the food industry and how being given a platform allowed her to break barriers. This lesson inspires her to amplify the voices of others through her business.

Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation: Ayesha and her husband, Steph Curry, co-founded the Eat.

Learn. Play. Foundation, which focuses on child well-being through nutrition, education, and physical activity. The foundation has made a significant impact in Oakland, providing over 25 million meals during the pandemic.

Focus on Local Sourcing & Partnerships: Ayesha values local partnerships and hands-on collaboration with product makers for her brand. She highlighted her work with local businesses like 676 Candle Co. and others, explaining how these collaborations elevate both the products and the community.

Literacy & Philanthropy: Ayesha announced a \$25 million pledge to provide one-on-one tutoring for children in Oakland's public schools, aiming to address the literacy gap exacerbated by the pandemic. She stressed the importance of meeting children where they are—in schools—and the transformational impact of early literacy intervention.

Speaker A **00:00:08**

Good morning. It's wonderful to have all of you here, and I am so excited about our guests this morning. Please join me in welcoming Ayesha Curry.

Speaker B **00:00:21**

Hello. Hi.

Speaker A **00:00:28**

Hi. So, Ayesha, no introduction really necessary for you, but celebrated chef, successful restaurateur, two time New York Times best selling author, entrepreneur and business leader. So thank you so much for being here today at Dreamforce.

Speaker B **00:00:46**

Thank you for having me.

Speaker A **00:00:48**

So I am, uh, so excited about Sweet July. And I believe it started as a magazine, but it has really developed to be everything. It's skincare, local products. The magazine's continuing. Can you tell us about how this started and this evolution of the brand?

Speaker B **00:01:07**

Absolutely. So it's interesting. Um, sweet July actually started in private as a skincare line, um, and then transformed and evolved into this multifaceted thing. And I think it's so interesting in business how you could start something at a certain point and it's just going

to take how long it's going to take. There's no alternate path. Like, you can't waze app your way through the business world. Um, and so, um, it actually started as skincare. And then we were met with the opportunity to form this magazine. And at first, I was so nervous and kind of, you know, like, why would I be in the forefront of this? Why am I tasked with this opportunity? And then I saw it just as that. An opportunity to represent, um, people who look like me represent, uh, a world of people who their voices haven't necessarily had the chance to be put on a platform and uplifted. And so I was like, okay, no, I have to do this. Um, and that kind of started to become the foundation for the entire business of kind of uplifting the voices and businesses and people around me, um, who may not have had a platform otherwise.

Speaker A

00:02:24

Well, I will say on the skincare, I am obsessed with the castaway cream. So that's my tip for everyone today. Castaway cream, sweet saliva, which has been wonderful. So one of the things I noticed as I was going through the magazine, um, that really came out was actually a focus on travel. And I love the travel stories that were in there and everyone's tips. Is travel something that's meant a lot to you?

Speaker B

00:02:49

I mean, obviously, I feel like we all love to travel, um, but I think it's a great way to also take people, um, on an escape. Um, and that kind of started to culminate during the pandemic when we were all kind of stuck where we were stuck. It was a way to kind of escape, learn about a new place, uh, learn about the people there. Um, and that kind of took off on our platform, both digitally and in the magazine. And so it's been a great outlet, um, to share people, places, and things.

Speaker A

00:03:21

Any personal favorites?

Speaker B

00:03:23

Um, I think for me, well, obviously, we just got back from the Olympics, Paris, and so that was very exciting. Um, very proud of my man. Um, so, uh, we're just grateful to be able to experience things like that.

Speaker A

00:03:40

Wonderful. So throughout the, what you're doing, you have been really coming up with opportunities for people to tell stories, and it's stories of their travel, it's stories, even if they're products and what they're doing. Why is storytelling been the way that you've focused?

I think I just realized early on how important it is to amplify voices, um, that essentially helps grow people's businesses, whether it's locally or on a big scale. I even think back to, like, when I, I started out in food, um, and, you know, had this big idea of wanting to, you know, be in food television. There was at the time, quite literally nobody that was in my age demographic, and nobody that looked like me. Um, and it took, like, one person at first. I was told no, like a million times that it wasn't gonna work. There was no demographic, it wasn't what was done on tv at the time. Um, and then, uh, it took for one woman who was experiencing the same point of life in me. She was a new mom, she was a business executive at the network, and she gave me the yes. And she gave me this platform, and it took that one yes. And then all of a sudden, this whole world opened up with food television. And so I think having that, um, experience made me realize that it really does just take somebody uplifting you and putting you on a platform and helping uplift your voice to get the message out there and help grow whatever it is that you're trying to grow. And so for us, having the magazine and having the digital arm helps us do that for other businesses, um, locally, um, for specifically women and women of color. And so it's been a joyous, you.

Speaker A

00:05:35

Know what I love about that is it took one person.

Speaker B

00:05:38

Yeah.

Speaker A

00:05:39

And I think it's really a lesson. People don't realize sometimes the influence that they can have in someone else's life. And oftentimes it's not a huge step, but it's that, uh, one kind thing. It's that, uh, one opportunity to showcase people. And it's something that I think everyone can really challenge themselves is, you know, are you doing that for someone else. And where do you do that? And those stories really come through beautifully. Through sweet July.

Speaker B

00:06:03

Absolutely. And I think what's interesting with that is that you start to realize that you are, in fact, better together. And so while it is great to uplift everyone around you and help lift the voices, what you start to find is that it, in turn, also helps you as well. And then you create this beautiful community, um, and ecosystem within itself that is helping itself, and it kind of just cycles through. Yeah, it's incredible.

Speaker A

00:06:36

I think it also helps people realize that they have a lot more power than they think. Your

power to help someone out, else out is really incredible and can multiply. And that just comes out so beautifully on sweet July.

Speaker B

00:06:48

Oh, thank you very much.

Speaker A

00:06:50

So the other, I mentioned the castaway crane, but the other thing is, I just received a sweet mornings candle.

Speaker B

00:06:55

Yes.

Speaker A

00:06:56

And I saw it was made locally in Bay area, and that seems to be a real theme. Absolutely. Talk to me about that. How are you locally sourcing your different products?

Speaker B

00:07:05

So we have our, uh, flagship store in Oakland, our, um, sweet July flagship store. And in particular, the candles are 676 candleco, a local bay area candle company that we work with. And they do small batch pours. Um, and that's been fantastic. Um, I think there are many different reasons why it's so great to do it this way. One, local businesses need a voice.

Speaker A

00:07:30

Uh-huh.

Speaker B

00:07:30

Um, but two, I feel like it's great to work side by side and very hands on with the people that are making your products. Um, and so we're able to kind of tweak things. We're able to bounce off of each other and make sure that we're making the best product possible for our consumer.

Speaker A

00:07:48

That's great. Do you have a particular product locally that you like the most?

Speaker B

00:07:54

Um, so while they're not local, local, there's a company we work with called people of

color, um, and they do nail polishes. And we were able to work with them, um, and create a, ah, series of our own pantones. And that business was really fun, um, to work with. And we got to work with them closely. We've actually been able to watch them grow, um, into this company that's far bigger than we are. And so that's been exciting. There's another company called 54 Thrones. She, um, was actually featured on Shark Tank. And that's another company we started to partner with very early on. And now they are just massive. And it's just been a joy, um, to work with and to see and now we're at the point where we're, like, bouncing ideas off of each other and trying to figure out how to get to the next step, next level with each other.

Speaker A

00:08:52

So, Mark Benioff, our CEO, often talks about business being the most powerful platform for change, and it certainly seems to be what you're doing. How would you describe your mission?

Speaker B

00:09:05

How would I describe my mission? That's a big bullet.

Speaker A

00:09:08

That's a big question.

Speaker B

00:09:10

Um, I don't think there's a short way around that answer. I think, and I'll speak for both my husband and I, our mission is to create impact and change in the best way we can with the community around us. Um, and so it's so funny, because doing things like this, it's so intimidating, and I want to throw up. And I. Most times, I don't. Like, I don't want to do it, but I understand also how important it is. Uh, because if you're not on a stage somewhere talking about what it is that you do and what it is that you want to see change, then how is anybody gonna know? And so it took me a really long time to realize that it's not, like, self loathing or self serving, ah. To be up here doing. I'm trying to, like, spread the word about what's going on so that maybe, like, out of this big audience, there's one person who's like, hey, I can help amplify this, and I'd love to partner with you guys and help make, um, impact and change for whatever the causes that you're doing, which I know.

Speaker A

00:10:21

We're gonna talk about impact and change. Not only are you doing it through business, but you're doing it directly through philanthropy.

Speaker B

00:10:26

Yes.

Speaker A

00:10:26

And I have loved what you were doing with eat, learn, play, which is great name to start with.

Speaker B

00:10:31

Thank you.

Speaker A

00:10:32

And the goal is to transform the school experience for Oakland and for children going through that program, I think about five years. Since you was.

Speaker B

00:10:41

Five years. Yeah.

Speaker A

00:10:42

Okay, so tell me about, um, some of the work at the foundation and some of the things that you're most excited about.

Speaker B

00:10:47

So, we started eat, learn, play back in 2019. My lovely, uh, partner, Chris hell Fridge, who is the CEO of Eat, learn, play, is here today. We knew it was going to be him before eat, learn, play. It was eat, learn, play. And we sat down with Chris and we said, here is what we're interested in. How do we make this happen? And what he quickly realized. Our interests, mine. I'd worked a long time, many years, with an organization called no Kid Hungry. Um, that was fighting to end childhood hunger. And we still work with them today. Um, Stefan's interests were in getting kids to be active, um, getting them to get out there and play, because you understand how imperative movement is throughout your life to stay healthy and to stay highly functioning and focused. And then, um, from there, he looked at everything and he was like, well, these are the fundamental pillars of a child. It sounds so silly, but eating, learning, playing, um, this is what makes a child. This is what makes a child's childhood. And I think that we should cover all of these things. So we were like, yes, that's great. How do we do that? And so we quickly realized we do that slowly, um, by really doing a deep dive into the community, understanding what people need, um, and starting that way. And so for us, a lot of people, their initial idea would be like, oh, let's go big. Um, but our thought was, no, let's start in a place that's nurtured us for so long and where we've seen firsthand the disparities and seen firsthand, um, the people that need the help. And that was within the Oakland community. And so we said we would start

there and we would start what we considered small. Um, and we launched in July of 2019. And so, of course, a few short months later, this Covid-19 hits and the pandemic is in full effect. And we are an infant of an organization. Um, but I think it's quickly what became our strength, because we had to act quickly and our team learned so rapidly, and we're boots on the ground, um, and so what ended up happening was we unlocked our eat pillar first, um, and we, um, ended up serving over 25 million meals, uh, throughout the course of the pandemic. But what it taught us was that we can do it locally. And what it taught us was that it's important to, again, create that ecosystem within the community. And so we were able to bring together during that time, restaurants people, um, community workers. And we were able to actually keep restaurants open, give people their jobs during the pandemic, and feed the kids within the school system. And so now that gave us, like, our legs, basically. And so now we're at the point where we're, you know, highly functioning. We're running really well. So we've unlocked our play pillar and we've built all of these, rebuilt all of these beautiful school grounds within the OUSD community. Um, and now we finally unlocked our literacy pillar, our learn pillar, um, and we're tackling that now. There's still a lot of work to do, but I think the pandemic helped us in that we quickly realized that we can do it. Um, and we've been so grateful for all of our partners. Um, we just realize how important that ecosystem and community is.

Speaker A

00:14:42

What I love about that you mentioned earlier kind of virtuous circles, but each one of those is so critical. If the kids aren't getting food, if they are hungry, they're not going to learn, they're not going to play. And I think play is also so critical.

Speaker B

00:14:57

Yeah. Uh, it's something, when you say it, it sounds so silly to the naked mind, the naked eye. Like, eat, learn, play. But it really is the fundamental for everything. If you can't eat, you can't learn. And, um, if you can't learn, you can't thrive. And if you're not active, it's all just gonna fall apart. And so it really is. And every parent wants to be able to provide those simple things for their children. And unfortunately, we're in a system where some parents just are not able to do that, and no parent should feel like that. And so we're more than happy to, like, be the village for. For, um, those families within the community that just need that extra help.

Speaker A

00:15:39

And I love the word play. It's not just exercise. No, it's not just get out there. There's something about the word play that brings to mind joy.

Speaker B

00:15:51

Yes.

And I think joy has to be part.

Speaker B

00:15:54

Absolutely. I, um, would say that that leans the most into, um, the realm of, like, mental health and making sure that, you know, kids are able to free their mind for that bit of time between class. Even when we're experiencing this with our son, children learn in different ways. And so even with these beautiful playgrounds and play spaces that we've been able to build, we're able to implement outdoor classrooms and different spaces for nature where kids can have that alternative space to learn in.

Speaker A

00:16:29

I think it's perfect. Well, in terms of learning, you've also been incredibly generous with the Oakland unified school district, and I believe you, uh, recently announced a \$25 million grant. Yes, you tell me a little bit about that and why it was important to do that here.

Speaker B

00:16:44

So, through the past five years, we've realized that, you know, we can meet children and kids and families where they are. And we took a step back and we said, well, where is that? And at first, we thought, maybe at home. Can we. Can we drive into communities and give people what they need? We started to realize no kids are at school like 8 hours, 8910 hours a day. Let's meet kids where they are at school. And what better way to do that than to partner with the Oakland unified school district? And so, um, we've done that over the past year. Two years, um, and it's been wonderful. Um, but we most recently, um, have made our \$25 million pledge to be able to provide one on one, um, tutoring for kids within the school system. Um, and so, um, we did a tremendous amount of research, um, so this is not a fly by night decision. So much research put into, um, this decision and there's been pilot models put out within the Oakland community to prove that this works. That one on one tutoring, um, to help with, um, the literacy issue, um, within the community. And so we're seeing kids who were two, three grade levels behind quickly move ahead. Um, and so, um, it's just going to be so instrumental in making the change when it comes to our learn pillar and when it comes to the statistics in the OUSD, um, community. And so we're already starting to see a shift. And it's just crazy to me that a little bit of one on one tutoring can make such a difference, um, in a single child's life. So, essentially, if you're not reading at your grade level by the third grade, I believe it is, your future essentially is wrecked. Like, everything starts to fall behind, um, and unfortunately, the statistics within the OUSD community, especially post pandemic, are so low. Kids are two to three years behind, um, in their literacy. It almost feels like we're setting them up to fail. And so with this one on one tutoring, we're gonna be able to tackle, um, the kids that are the lowest on the totem pole and we're gonna be able to get them that tutoring that they need free of charge. Um, and I think it's just gonna be incredible. And I can't wait to see the shift.

Oh, I'm so excited about that. Um, I have three sons and one of my sons really struggled with reading. And you're right, it's around that third grade level. You realize it's gonna be make or break. And it was one on one tutoring that really made all the difference.

Speaker B

00:19:40

Absolutely.

Speaker A

00:19:40

The idea of being able to extend that is life changing.

Speaker B

00:19:44

We're doing that with our son right now. And like, every single time, he has a triumph in that space. I have so much joy in that moment. Like, I'm gonna start crying. But I also think about all of the other kids and, and the parents. Like, I think about the mothers who are, like, working so hard and their kids are in the same space. They're trying to get them to read, and they don't have the same avenues that we have. It, like, breaks my heart, and so I just, like, I can't imagine how it feels. And so I'm just. I'm just grateful that there's going to be this resource.

Speaker A

00:20:22

Well, I'm thrilled you're doing that. And it also goes back to, sometimes it's even just a small amount. That's the difference. That's the thin line between the success and the failure. So thrilled that you're doing that with Ohklyn.

Speaker B

00:20:35

Thank you.

Speaker A

00:20:35

Now you've got these incredible projects. I got to work with some of your team this week. I know that you've got an amazing team. Um, 25 million meals developed. You've put together a lot of incredible teams over time. What's your philosophy behind hiring, recruiting people, managing people?

Speaker B

00:20:53

Values. Values. Values. Uh, I think if the values are aligned, that is what matters first, especially when it comes to, uh, you know, deciding to enter the scary world of philanthropy. Like, you have to be aligned. I feel like the skillset can be learned if the drive and the passion is there. I. But if you're not aligned on your values, it's all going to fall apart. And so it's been very important for us, even through, like, hiring, to make sure that

we're bringing people on our team that have that same passion and, like, make sure that their hearts are on fire for the change that they want to make. Um, I think that's been the most important thing for us. Cause skills, skill sets can be. Can be learned. I kind of learned that when I started on my food journey. I was. I had an insane amount of imposter syndrome when it came to the hospitality side of things that professional, because I was always cooking at home, and it was great. Um, but when I got into the kitchen and started doing it on a professional level, I would look at my mentor, chef Michael, and I'd be like, I don't. I feel silly saying I'm a chef. And he'd be like, you are a chef. You are a chef. And I'd be like, I think I should go, like, back to culinary school. And he'd be like, you have the best school here. Like, this is your school. You're going to learn on the job, and it's going to be great. He's like, you love being in the. You love being in here. You're born to be in here. That's all that matters. And so, as long as your heart's on fire for what you're doing, I feel like that skill set can be learned.

Speaker A

00:22:37

I think that's a wonderful lesson, uh, for all of us. Ayesha, it's been an absolute delight talking to you today. I am so excited about what you're doing. Sweet July. I hope there are more books coming, more restaurants coming, and we'll all be breathing for you.

Speaker B

00:22:53

We have more playgrounds coming. I do know that.

Speaker A

00:22:56

All right. Thank you so much.