

19 Stories: from fear to Hope

by Chelsea Pegues

Have you ever played that party game where someone asks who your fantasy dinner guests would be? Or, if you could have a conversation with any historical figure, living or dead, who you would choose? It's always food for thought, and rarely do the answers come easily to anyone. Notice, too, how many of the amazing people we choose are always individuals with profound life experiences and incredible stories? Listening to *19 Stories: from fear to Hope*, hosted by the multi-talented Cheryl Holling, is an experience like having a seat at one of these magical dinner tables, with guests you didn't know you needed to meet.

Cheryl has a wealth of experience across myriad forms of media production, which started well before the digital era; although her ageless physical beauty and immediately calming-yet-magnetic energy is indicative of someone whose passion never waned over the years. She loves what she does, and her effort is very clear. "I graduated high school [and I] immediately went to junior college, and I was [in a] work-study program at the time. I found out about their public radio station, [and I] heard about a job over there. I started out in the office, then I got what was called a 'Board-Up' position, which meant you ran the reel-to-reel tapes, the live broadcast... you ran the morning news (or evening). I ran somebody else's show as a Board-Up, and then I got my own music slot. It was public radio (you got paid a stipend), but it was great training and great exposure. And from there is how I got my radio and record promotion gig, which is a whole other aspect to what I did with radio."



In 2023, it's hard to imagine a time when you had to work your way into the broadcasting industry, or else be really, really, lucky- or a "nepo-baby", as the kids say. Now, thanks to Cheryl and other women who are pioneers of what would eventually become podcasting, we have a much easier time getting our ideas out into the world. "There's a great line in 'Hello Dolly': 'If you wanna be in show business, you gotta learn to be ambidextrous.' I've done everything under the sun...Everything from, you know, doing, filing in a warehouse in downtown Los Angeles to working on award shows and everything in between." She continued, "In fact, I work a part-time corporate job right now. And who I am in that position isn't so out of my tribe, if you will. My element...how I shine. I am very much a servant, and I don't have a problem with that. But my voice does not have an outlet there." Which brings us to how, exactly, *19 Stories* was born.

“I had been sitting on a concept as I was getting closer to the age of 55. I was thinking of a podcast I wanted to do based on a show. My dad passed at the age of 92, but [until six months before he passed], he still had his cable TV show called *Alive After 65* where he interviewed people in all creative endeavors...all the way from 65 to, I think the eldest person he had was 104. She was a yoga teacher, and she was, ‘If you don’t exercise, you don’t eat.’ I’m like, ‘Well, that’s why you got to be 104, right?’” She chuckled.

Clearly, the impact of hearing some fantastic stories from captivating, *real* people had a lasting impact on Cheryl. “...Anything to do with entertainment tends to be very youth-oriented. In L.A. it’s almost like if you’re post-in-vitro, you’re too old. So, I knew people who were really thriving at 55 and older, but, because that’s not what the press and the culture gave attention to, I wanted to give a voice to that much in the way my dad did. But because I came from a radio background, I really wanted to do audio. I think it was April or May of 2020, and we were in the grips of COVID. I remember hearing from some friends of mine who were losing their livelihoods and were really afraid of, ‘What is this time gonna mean?’ So, I thought somehow, I’ve gotta do an audio journal of this time. And so, I thought, *19 Stories* based on COVID-19 [experiences], because I wanted to move from the paralyzing fear so many people were feeling and get into a time of hope. What did these people do? What were their tools? What was their faith, if you will, that helped them get [get through it]? Those are the kinds of things that we would talk about.”

While Cheryl can emphatically state “All of my episodes are my babies”, she names Jen Keefe (episode 1) and Fernando Piers (Episode 58)



as two standouts. Jen, “...an award-winning voiceover talent specializing in e-learning, explainer videos, and corporate narrations” is also a mental health advocate whom Cheryl praises as the “woman who [lovingly] pushed me off the ledge to start my podcast”. Meanwhile, Fernando “is a self-taught engineer...he went to school but dropped out and now is here working in the United States after pitching himself, you know, like basically selling his skillsets. And he works for one of the top [audio speaker] manufacturers...he’s developed his own interface for podcasters and voiceover.”

In the future, Cheryl hopes to marry her two greatest loves: podcasting and voiceover work. On a social media platform called Clubhouse (an app where you can host and join audio conversations), she and her cohorts are quite active, and she hopes to utilize this tool to make her creative vision a reality. “I was against doing another social media thing. I was like, I don’t want one more thing to think of. But now it’s turned into a really nice outlet. We just celebrated our second anniversary [of this ‘room’] which is an idea I had to bridge the gap between podcasters and voice artists. My

grand scheme, if someone said, you can monetize your podcast, but you can also be involved in other podcasts, I would love to have that as my umbrella - a network for podcasters and voice actors [to connect and share] much in the way that *Women Who Podcast* [magazine] does.”

When it comes to her work on *19 Stories*, Cheryl is a huge proponent of doing copious amounts of research on upcoming (and potential) guests. For her, there’s nothing worse than feeling as though she’s asking the same questions someone has been given a million times before. She likes to dig for the true pearls, the unique aspects of a guest’s personality and dimensions of their story perhaps they haven’t pondered yet.



You can also use resources such as LinkedIn and social media, of course. She suggests listening to other interviews your guest has done and figuring out when they seemed to be enjoying themselves most; this way, you’ll be able to take it even further when you’re talking to them. As far as necessary equipment is concerned, Cheryl reiterated that sound is really the most important thing for a new podcaster to focus on.

You can have the most expensive mic, but if your room isn’t treated to absorb and muffle errant noise, it will pick up everything. You want your listeners to feel that they’re getting a high-quality experience, and eliminating sounds makes all the difference. Yet her most important piece of advice is simple: HAVE FUN. “[Even] if it’s serious content, have fun with it. Because, if you can give some levity to serious conversations without making fun of what that content is, people [will feel more at ease] receiving that information. Be clear [about] your reason. Don’t do a podcast because it’s the hip thing to do...your ‘pod fade’ will happen really fast. Do it because you want an outlet. To share what you want to share because that’s what [gets you through].”

Cheryl smiles broadly when asked what she gets out of this experience. “I will say I’ve met some of my dearest friends in podcasting. It is a fantastic community of women who are really willing to go out of their way to help one another. If you’re stuck, ask somebody. If you need help, ask somebody. There are great resources out there. There are great women. And that gives me hope as well because when you can create a platform where people can network and connect like this, not only is it so necessary, but man - isn’t that a beautiful thing?”



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