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SPEAKERS

Matt Hunckler, Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis



Matt Hunckler 00:14

Hey there powderkeg fans? This is Powderkeg igniting startups the show for entrepreneurs, leaders and innovators building remarkable tech companies in areas decidedly outside of Silicon Valley. I'm your host, Matt Hunckler. And today, we're going to be speaking with Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis. She leads special projects at backstage capital, which is a VC firm that invests in women, people of color and lbgtq. founders, less than 10% of all venture capital goes to women, people of color and LGBTQ founders. And while other venture capitalists see this as a pipeline problem, backstage capital sees it as the biggest opportunity in investment. Today, backstage capital has invested over \$7 million dollars in more than 120 companies led by underrepresented founders, which is freaking awesome. And as soon as you join The team at backstage in 2016 as an entrepreneur in residence, and ran backstage accelerators, first cohort in Los Angeles as managing director. She's also the co founder of Bossa, which we're going to get to talk about in this episode, which is a wellness and productivity app that enables consultants to provide the highest level of service for their clients. And before breaking in the tech space, and it says you worked as an analyst for the city of Los Angeles, and the LA department of power and water. We're going to get into all of that and more on this episode. Thanks for being on the show, Anastasia. Thank you for having me. I'm super excited to have this conversation. Because I know you've recently come back to the Midwest after spending a lot of time in LA. But maybe you could take me back to before you even went out to LA and to your earliest memories of kind of breaking into tech and innovation and where you kind of caught the bug even for entrepreneurship.



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 01:56

Sure, I thought about this a lot because you take time to like read articles. And hear founder stories and it's like, oh, when I was five, I was doing XYZ and very entrepreneurial. I don't have that story, I don't think I do think over the years, I've been sort of just curious about things and how to solve problems and had the lofty goal of like, Oh, I just want to, you know, help people and solve the world of problems. That's sort of something that I observed, but I would say, let me see, maybe like two summers ago, I came back to Cincinnati to kind of like clean out my childhood room from high school. And I found a lot of like journaling that I had from like class assignments actually, like not even my personal journal. But there was something, some letter that I wrote or some prompts that we had. And I said in the note, I want to make sure to facilitate better ways to do things help people get things done easier. And then I was like, that's very strange. I wrote this probably like third or fourth grade. And then it's like, wow, that's what I've been doing. Like every step of my career or Personally, I just Yeah, I've always been like playing in sports a team player, that sort of thing, that sort of collaboration and also just helping others around me has definitely been a theme around around my life. The other thing is a lot of people don't know this about me is I also did engineering school for like two years dropped out of that which is which is great. My parents like yeah, we we knew this, but again, that was like, that was like my way of thinking I was gonna solve the world's problems through the engineering lens, but then dropped out and then just continue to college in different fields of study and had to like change schools and everything because I was at a engineering only school.



Matt Hunckler 03:41

Was that a hard decision?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 03:43

It was a hard decision. To this day, all of my closest and best friends are from that school. So I felt led there in my faith to go there. I had no way to get there. Luckily I got a scholarship somehow. was able to leverage that into some of the best relationships that I have into this to this day and actually met my co founder at that college as well. Wow. So it's full circle you know, had I not gone there, you know, work of my life have been type of thing, but I definitely see it. Like even shortly after grad or shortly after leaving the school, I saw it as like, okay, I still had to stop at that place in that journey. So



Matt Hunckler 04:23

I feel like a lot of people, when they make that initial decision to go to a school, I'm also a transfer. I transferred after my first year of engineering school at Purdue University.



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 04:34

I was down the street from you. I was at Coleman Institute of Technology. So there you go.



Matt Hunckler 04:40

Small world, small, small world. Yep, we we absolutely. Share that sort of like just because you can do it doesn't mean you can sort of approach I'm curious what for you. When I talk to a lot of people, a lot of times people are like, I can't believe you Changed paths that was such a set and like obvious path, because obviously more and more engineers are needed. Supply and demand is really on your side career wise, if you go the engineering route. How did you make the decision to leave a top 10 engineering school to decide to go to a non engineering major?



05:23

I don't know. I think it was a



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 05:26

just recognizing like, like you said, it wasn't my skill set. I finished the first two years with passing grades. So it wasn't like I like failed out or anything. I just knew, I think again, like trying to find a better way to do something, I knew I could still serve that purpose of helping people in a different fashion. So you have to look at yourself and say, Hey, I don't necessarily need to be in this environment or in this role in order to achieve the goal that I have. First and foremost, achieving the goal of graduating college. I think it was just a little bit of that self assessment, making that pivot, so to speak. And I will say, that's been another theme of my life is just kind of going different routes that aren't necessarily a part of one career trajectory, and then having to explain to your interviewer, you know, out of grad school, well, what are these experiences that you have that don't seem to have any sort of connection? But you know, you have to explain that they do. And explain again, like why you chose to pivot in those situations. So I think, to me, it's lent itself well, to my experience and the types of roles I've been able to have over the years because I dabbled, so to speak and like nonprofit for profit large corporations, smaller companies, did engineering school for two years. That foundation I think has still shaped me to what I've been able to do more recently. So I see it as just like a you know, culmination and picking

up Thing along the way, unlike the video game of life, so



Matt Hunckler 07:03

did you did you when you met your co founder? Was it like sparks flew and you knew you're going to start a company? Or maybe take me back to that. Can you tell me the story of how you two connected?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 07:15

Yes. So, so rose Hallman, traditionally was an all male school years ago. And by the time I enrolled, I think they were admitting women for like the past 12 to 14 years. I don't know if it was like 13 or so. Then also, they didn't have a lot of like cultural or ethnic diversity, like, you know, traditionally we think of engineering schools, maybe being white male, and then maybe being like Asian students, like we barely had Asian students. So it was this very, I guess, you know, how would you know, homogeneous in that sense, and so what the school did, now they had different programs, I'm in affinity groups that would do like their senior weekend. So senior high school or who are trying to do their college search that sort of thing. They would be hosted by these different organizations. And so I randomly got this postcard in the mail that could attend the National Society of Black Engineers rose home and chapter senior weekend. So that weekend was I wouldn't say a bunch but like maybe like 20 kids from across the nation who were, you know, prospective applicants, you know, coming to experience rose Holman as a prospective black student. That's where I met a lot of my closest friends. A lot of us who ended up enrolling attended that senior weekend. And I will say it was definitely great. It was almost like immediate family because you have the current students you know, trying to welcome you in. And then a new students as well as like, okay, looking around like these could be my potential classmates next year. It was such a great feeling. And then once the school year started, all those folks like To this day, I call them my brothers and sisters like it's the fraternity you know, so to speak. But I, yeah, I didn't have to join a sorority or anything to have that familial feeling on campus and definitely have clicked. I don't want to shout out his name because he has his own, like professional story. But we have been joined at the hip ever since probably closer than a lot of the other folks that I've met there. And yeah, I've stayed in touch. You know, I introduced him to his now wife, like we're very integrated on the family front together, and working together.



Matt Hunckler 09:30

That's great. That's really great. And sounds like this. This company that you're working on

is sort of right now in the nights and weekends, sort of phase of startup.



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 09:41

Yes. So both my co founder and I have been working full time the entire time. We've been building this trend actually transition between different companies, each of our own professional tracks here. He has a product management background and so I have the more business see, you know, analyst, budget finance background. And so yeah, we've been doing all that we can do. Again, I think both of us have come from backgrounds where we have to adjust, not just in our careers and education, new settings like he had moved out to LA from Indianapolis a few years ago as well. So we just have this innate ability of like, okay, we're gonna keep solving this problem we don't care about like, how it has to happen if we have to pivot, figuring out that solution. So that's what we've been doing tinkering around the last few years. But I would say this year is definitely the year of like, full on, not traction, but like, indicators of, you know, the product that we're going to hopefully be releasing top next year. So awesome.



Matt Hunckler 10:47

Well, I want to ask you more questions about that. But first, can you maybe take me back to the decision to move from the Midwest out to LA because that's a that's a big jump three hour difference in times It's not a short flight. That's a big move. Did you? Did you know it from the start like this was the right move for you or did you have some hesitation about that career change?



11:12

Sure. So I



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 11:16

I guess a few layers there. So growing up I've lived in several places and no stranger to living or being away from like my parents or family for a long amount of time. And then wiling undergrad, I did like two semesters abroad so to speak. So one was in DC, not abroad, but was for my political science major. And then I also spent the last quarter of my undergrad in Mexico and studied there and people always ask the same questions again, why did you go to Mexico? Why did you go to DC? I always love to travel. I love being away. I do get homesick but I'm not used. I'm, I am used to stepping out and going to new places. So I do think like, especially That Midwest mentality of like, Oh, it's home,

you know, down home like say with your family. You don't go too far maybe move like two hours away, Max. But that was not the story for me. I am sort of like first generation, maybe like half of a generation. So my mom is African American, her family's like from Virginia. But my dad is literally African American. He's from the west coast of Africa, a country called Liberia. So with that international influence in my house all the time, it's nothing for me to like, Oh, yeah, sure. I could go live somewhere else for several years. Also, my parents, my dad's job at the time took us to Cairo, Egypt during my middle school years, and so again, I've seen my parents do it. So sort of having that representation of living somewhere else and still being connected to your family that's back home. You know, that is a possibility for me. So when I applied for grad school in to go out and I guess in 2012, I had several options to on the west coast, one at the University of Kentucky, or my dad wanted me to go right down, right down the street, way cheaper program, actually only a year and a half for that program versus two for some of the others I enrolled in. But there wasn't a good alignment or synergy there. And so I was basically between two West Coast schools that moved me out to move me out to LA. I also was engaged at the time. My husband is a musician. And so all the just aligned la happened. And yeah, I'd never would have envisioned myself living on the west coast of the United States. Yeah, wow. I had not even Oh, my dream is to go to LA No.



Matt Hunckler 13:55

It seems like that. That mindset of I can live anywhere but still be connected to family is very empowering and having that. You know, you mentioned sort of your first generation immigrant sort of mentality. I grew up around that a lot because I grew up in West Lafayette, where most of my friends were from outside of the country. Well, what they were born in America, but their parents were from outside of the country. And I'm curious for you, you feel like there some other if there were one or two other qualities that have served you well in your career, just kind of having that background, you know, maybe not even only just from the fact that your first generation but also having an experience of living in Cairo and traveling a little bit outside of the country.



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 14:44

Yeah, I think so. First that, like, I can go anywhere and sort of be connected home. I would credit that to my mother. She faced a lot of criticism and just other people's apprehension placed on her, like when we had to move to Cairo again, the people who are talking to her had never left since today. I was like, Oh my God, your husband's taking you over there, like even people in our family were like, why would you go all over there? You and your kids should just stay here, then let him go. And then you know, so we can still be close to you. And she's like, no, my husband's going. Also like, opportunity of a lifetime. I'm just not

not going to go and my company, you know, his company is paying for everything and schooling for the kids, that sort of thing. So yeah, it would be completely insane if you did ignore that. But what she always instilled in, you know, in our family is, I'm never stuck anywhere. You can always have that. almost kind of like failing forward type of mantra as well. Like you always have that assurance to kind of like, step out, step out on faith, take the chance, get the experience, take the opportunity. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out. If you're homesick or if it doesn't go as planned, you can always come back home, no matter what you're doing, and no matter what the job, no matter where, you know, on the planet, that's always an option. And so it's almost like a mental safety net, so to speak. Sorry, safety net, that you can just try anything and then retrieve your tree home if you if you need to do so. But I will say that living overseas and again, just sort of having that international household has served me extremely well. I feel like I can blend in to any sort of situation, meet someone where they are, have a genuine conversation with them just because I'm really interested in getting to know the person. You have to do that when you're living overseas, you know, in a middle school that's more diverse and probably most places in the planet because it's situated one in the Middle East. And so you have folks of all face they're all ethnicities, all levels of socioeconomic class depending on their parents work. So you just have to get to know the person beyond all the other exterior stuff that comes with them. I would say also that having that experience overseas, I had more of a culture shock moving back to the US than I did the other way. And I think it's because we, especially here in the States, like we don't have that, let me just get to know the person like let me get to know them, who I'm working with my colleagues and things like that. So but I will say even within the United States and just different rooms and situations I'm in be like local government or like a corporate fundraiser, like I can have those conversations with people because I've had them all my life with, you know, just being in different demographic settings and things like that. My mom was actually joking to me, like last night, I think, and we were singing some song on the radio, she's like, Isn't it cool? You can sing like like old school songs versus like an old rock and roll song and all that cuz she even gave me that eclectic appreciation of music. So it's just always like this theme that I can use and, and tap into no matter what I'm doing in my life.



Matt Hunckler 18:10

That's really cool. I would imagine that helped you plug in out in LA when you kind of landed on the west coast. Can you tell me a little bit about how you navigated that experience?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 18:20

I actually was kind of I credit this to some of my friends from Rose hulman actually, so I was in grad school bubble for two years out there, okay, which was nice, I think to help me get acquainted with the area had something like to do, quote, unquote, fill up my time and then my husband was doing his career in launching that. So I think if I was also launching my full on just full time career, I may have been a bit more lost. I think it was great to have the grounding of school and a program to go through, you know, to kind of keep me regimented. And then we can have that like Yeah, just kind of just that feeling of home or feeling a sense of like, planned out purpose, you can say, the first couple of years that we were out there. But while I, I think mid program, my co founder moved out to LA from Indianapolis another year after that, another friend after that after that, so I had this nice group of people who I already knew who were again my like brothers and sisters from undergrad who I just had this home away from home. So it was really easy for me to adapt to LA and I tell everyone like it had they not moved out. I probably would have been back in Cincinnati or some other city way earlier. So it was really nice to have that and to experience la with the people who are actually from the Midwest. You know, I went to school with and get into the scene there but I will say, obviously, like LA is super eclectic and has a lot going on. I love a culture that it offered just a different type of vibe, the big city vibe, which I could, you know, I experienced before, but I hadn't lived in for a long period of time. So it was really cool just to get the lay of the land there. And then again, you know, I swear I started my tech career, and so found that community as well. So just over time, you sort of find your own. But I think initially, having the school experience was extremely helpful.



Matt Hunckler 20:25

Yeah, it sounds like you plugged right into a new network, but then were able to pull from old networks that had some nodes out in LA. But then you also sounds like you also kind of like navigated into over time into that startup and tech space out there. How did you know that tech was kind of the the route you wanted to go?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 20:48

Again, looking back, I don't think I had like a light switch moment that I knew I was working on different ideas like that with my co founder actually had two co founders at the time. knew that, again, my day job was not the most exciting thing that I wanted to be doing. Something else I wanted to just try and explore, get to know better get to know the people of it a little bit better. So I would say it was back in 2015. Right, actually, right after I finished graduate school. That I was like, okay, there's a tech thing. There's ideas that I'm working on, like, what are the resources out there? Who are their people? You know, what's

the community? Like? I think it was just, again, the timing series of events. There was, I think, folks know, usually about general assembly like a tech education, schools that are, I think, across the world now. So they had a hub in Santa Monica at the time in LA, but they were just launching a downtown Los Angeles campus. And so I was more familiar with the downtown, east side of town for for LA, then the West Coast or the West. by the beach. Because I went to USC for grad school I lived in that area had worked downtown. So I hadn't seen as much happening tech wise in that area yet. So I was really excited when General Assembly was opening a campus. So my co founder and friends and I went to an event there, met the actual city manager who is launching the downtown General Assembly campus and became great friends with her just offered to volunteer to be a part of the community. Let her know what we were working on. And yeah, ever since then, it's been great. I've had now also like parlayed into my first tech job, that same city manager of downtown LA Mickey Reynolds. She and several other folks in the ecosystem who had like started a co working spaces and legal tech firm and a marketing collective firm and that sort of thing. All these folks that come together to create what is now called grid. 110 and they were a downtown based, almost accelerator type, nonprofit, actually, that helps provide office space for tech founders in downtown LA. And they needed a first time like program fellow to do the programming every week and of the community events. And I was able to within that same year 2015, like, work with them as the first program fellow for that. And so that was like my first official job in tech, the article on engineering stuff, but like startup tech,



Matt Hunckler 23:36

so yeah, it was nice in such an interesting time to be in that tech ecosystem in LA. You know, we've had Karen Norman on the podcast previously from upfront ventures and mini Ingersoll has been on the podcast sharing about kind of just the explosion in technology in LA and of course, it's been silicon beach for a long time using air quotes for those who are just listening right? I don't generally like prescribe, or subscribe to the whole like silicon Blanc format. But you know, the the media calls it silicon beach. And it's cool. It's cool to hear about just like how much that's exploded over the last three to five years. And it sounds like you were right in the middle of all that.



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 24:20

Seriously, I was I had no idea. At the time, it felt like, oh, there's a lot happening. But now it's like, oh, there's definitely a lot happening from 2015 to this year, night and day, complete night and day. And actually, like you were saying, like silicon beach quote is really the name that's given to the Santa Monica, the Venice, Playa Vista, beach front communities of La that that's the tech hub. You know, there's major offices over there.

Google, all sorts of folks. But there are so many, first of all, LA is huge. So there has to be like all these niche communities based on the news. neighborhoods that span LA. So like Pasadena, Glendale, where I was living for a long time had its own tech community as well. Then I was mentioning downtown LA slash East LA. Then there's, I think, another area of South Bay, I haven't gotten as involved, but that's towards like the Long Beach area. And so all of these communities are sort of having their own culture and explosion over this time period from like, 2015 maybe earlier, but that's just when I got started. But yeah, downtown. It was almost like a ghost town, or like anything happening besides General Assembly. I think there are some other organizations that had been there early on, called Indy desk was like a co working spot that had opened. But those were like the top names of downtown tech at the time, and now they're cool, so many others. So yeah,



Matt Hunckler 25:54

well, and you actually, brief aside what we can edit this part out, but I I think Anastasia Your hair is brushing up against the microphone a little bit. So if you just started happening, so I caught it. I think I caught it early. But I wanted to call it out because i think that i think it'll sound better. And you still look great.



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 26:17

Appreciate it.



Matt Hunckler 26:18

Yeah, exactly. That's



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 26:20

why it's getting long. Sorry.



Matt Hunckler 26:22

Oh, you're totally fine. You're totally fine. There was a moment where I thought I was gonna grow out my hair, but then I was like, You know what, I'm just gonna, just gonna keep it short. Yeah, people know me as the short hair and I don't want to be getting in my way, which, you know, Indiana basketball guy, so that's Oh, yeah. Well, I wanted to ask you about your mentor that you mentioned. I think Mickey, you said was her name. Yes.

who worked with the city. You know, one of the things just working in tech breaking into tech, growing a career in tech. One of the things that sometimes can be a little bit mysterious to people is how to identify a mentor. and develop a relationship with a mentor. And and maybe that's not how you necessarily approached it. But in retrospect, are there some things that you did to help identify and find that right person for you? And then what were some of the bigger lessons that you learn from her along the way?



27:18

Yes. So Mickey is



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 27:21

phenomenal. And again at the time, I mean, backtrack there. At the time, I did not know really, who I was meeting, just was like, Oh, she's opening the General Assembly downtown location. That's a cool job. You know, that's a leadership position. someone that you know, more senior than I am and doing the things right. Later that year, I came to find out, like if you wanted to get into tech, and downtown LA tech, like Mickey was the person to meet. I had no idea that was, again, I was meeting royalty tech royalty. She's gonna kill me for saying that. Can I love embarrassing her? Um, but yeah, again, like I mentioned, it was getting involved with her and on a genuine level. I think that's one thing that we try to make that mentorship, this like lofty thing and I gave a talk on this not too long ago actually. And I was like, it's just another person you have and also I think before you connect with another person knowing who you are and who you know, what your goals are, helps you to identify the opportunity if you know you come across the path of that person. Yeah, so I think it's just knowing who you are, what your goals are. being genuine about all of those things, and then just, I think taking the slow game with things so with Mickey met her said I was basically available to like volunteer help her open her space. Just be in community. With her and everything that she was doing, I wasn't asking her from the beginning to be my mentor, so to speak. Right? So there's that. And then once I did figure out who she was, it's just like, okay, but I already have this connection with her that's my own. And not something like anyone else told me. And then I don't think I ever I don't think I've ever blatantly asked her to be my mentor. But I would ask her, like, Hey, I'm working on something, do you mind checking this out? Or I'm applying for a job like, do you know about this company? Or do you have any recommendations for me? Or, you know, here's my resume. This is what I'm looking for. I'm new to this. And so I think just being open about like questions that you have being direct with questions that you have, I think a lot of people say hey, I want a few minutes of your time. Okay, for what like for coffee I think is fine. You know, you can ask people for coffee but like have a plan of what you want to discuss. ahead of time, that goes beyond men mentoring. This goes for

appreciating and respecting people's time. But yeah, I think just being deliberate in what you're doing, people are attracted to that too. Absolutely not just looking to the other person to sort of like fill this void or gap for you, but like, okay, mentors are not like, this is what I'm working on. This is how I'm showing up as myself in different spaces and in my work, and then over time, people will gravitate towards you, that will be a part of your journey. And I think a big thing, just to tap into some things that I do with founders that backstage like, especially during the accelerator, they're just finding your tribe usually was explaining that to them, like as they're finding investors who you know, don't get it, especially from underrepresented founders, and the markets that they're pursuing. I would say that goes for everything. So whether it's, you know, finding new friends and in a new city you move to or you know, which co workers and my friends with a new job, or finding that mentor or finding that investor, it's just I think you have to start it all starts with you. You have to be your authentic self so that other people can who you know align with you or similar to you or just like you for you, like you have to be yourself in order for that to happen. And so I think that really, really played out in the relationship I have with Mickey, I would say over time, and I did not know this before, we are very similar. Extreme introverts get embarrassed easily. I think we both like a good whiskey. So these are things I found out again, over time of that genuine relationship and it just, it really did work out. I've asked her as well, formally to be like an advisor for our startup bosa and that was probably the only like weight and ask I've made of her and she could, you know, say yes or no and she has



Matt Hunckler 32:01

That's very cool. I appreciate you sharing a little bit of the behind the scenes of how that's evolved and how that's kind of benefited your career as well. And just getting more plugged into the community. How did the backstage opportunity come about?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 32:17

Yes, that's a fun one. So the joke is that everyone I backstage, joined the team, basically off of social media, which is 100%. True. There have been no job descriptions or job openings posted. And again, being yourself kind of helped people gravitate towards the mission of backstage through Arlen Hamilton, our managing partner. Yeah, and you attract a certain type of folks from that. So I think I'm the only one that hasn't joined via Twitter. I was through Instagram dm and LinkedIn. So I heard about this black woman who was like the first woman to start an angel or first black Woman started angellist syndicate. And I was like, Who is this person? Like, this is so awesome. I got to read more about them. And I came across a few articles and an early interviews that Arlen had done, I would say,

maybe early 2016, late 2015 was when I started hearing about her. And then I reached out, I think, Summer 2016 and did the thing of like, hey, I'd love to meet you, you know, being community with you, you know, she's based in LA, was based in LA at the time, and it worked out and that, at that point, she was way more accessible, I would say. So again, timing, and just having that opportunity and going forward again, being more of a shy person was like, I don't know, you know, to meet with this person. But as I say, shoot your shot. And I did. And we met up. And yeah, had a great conversation. And and again, I was already doing some things that she found interesting. So I had already served my time at grid 110 as opposed Fellow. I think later that I think that by the time I met her, I was about to apply to like an idea program for my startup and like an early incubation type of thing. And she knew of the program I was applying to talk to her about, like my current career path and things like that and stuff that she was working on and where I could plug in. So that's how the first meeting had gone. But I was just starting, like my full time career at the city of LA. And it didn't make sense to kind of jump in to backstage at that moment for me. And so that's when she, you know, agreed that I can do an entrepreneur and residents type of agreement, and I guess, the fall of 2016. So that's how I was in involved with backstage not working. I'm just going



Matt Hunckler 34:49

and what does that mean, in terms of how you engaged with backstage and that that whole community?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 34:56

Yes. So I think my first thing that I did was like help organize a local meetup for some underrepresented founders in LA, I think that October time. So got to meet a lot of folks there. We had a few other ers at the time. So I was able to meet them in person have a good time, just sort of put some faces to names that I'd heard of in the community that I you know, hadn't gotten to meet them before. And so it was like a good kicking off point. But then after that, I was more available to the current portfolio of backstage at the time to just provide them resources or if anyone was coming to LA, anything needed, needed an introduction, that sort of thing. I was sort of like the LA person. Yeah, I have to, like, go where to go to. And there was another la er as well Kelly. She's fantastic and has gone on to do some amazing things. I think her last name is Newman now Kelly Newman check her up. And so yeah, so the two of us were like more of the the the library Presence. And then there was another lie er, Brian, Brian landers, who is the current CEO of backstage. So we were all in all in the game early on there. And yeah, just I would guess more. So like, being a part of the culture of backstage at the time, I think it was, either that following year, or maybe the year after we went to South by Southwest, you know, attended a

gathering of the founders who were able to make it out. Just being a part of the culture being a part of the support system. I think that's a big deal. Especially for early stage, underrepresented founders, just like needing the intro needing the you know, redirection needing the resources, you need to have someone in your corner so it was just a part of a lot of that early on.



Matt Hunckler 36:48

Absolutely. Good. You talked about the culture at backstage. Can you describe that culture for me a little bit what what makes the backstage culture so unique?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 36:58

Yeah, I actually had another call about This like a few days ago, and I hadn't even,



37:03

like,



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 37:06

thought about it too broad, you know, in depth. And I was trying to put the words to it. So I would say it's definitely like a culture of collaboration. a culture of like Ireland is huge on like transparency internally self care, that sort of thing. But back to being yourself and finding your tribe and how we haven't like posted a job opening. Somehow we have just collected all the great people of the startup world, from diverse backgrounds, socio economic education, ethnicity, sexual orientation, all of those things. Like I don't understand how you could have had a more diverse team. I wouldn't say without intentionality, because backstage as is who it is, is intentional about welcoming those who are different So that part is sort of baked in to everything that we do. And I have a hard time I guess explaining to other people. So I get a lot of calls all the time. Well, how do you build this community? And how do you do all these things? And it's, I think so genuine and a part of the company that it's hard to replicate. I think that's the big What do you call it? The big differentiator about backstage and I think the big mystery about backstage Well, how did you find out it's just, it happens, but it happened because this is who we are. We're not trying to fake diversity. We're not trying to fake inclusion. And it happens, I would say, I've had a few founders actually asked me like is backstage everything that it seems to be like outwardly and I would say hundred percent? Yes. There are definitely like our zoom calls with the team just like, you know, picking the faces. What you can see

outwardly as far as ethnicity is like, this is crazy to have some of the best minds I get to work with and In the representation and ethnicities and the, the gender, I guess gender balance as well, like if the mix is what I want to say, I can't replicate that or find that anywhere else. And I've worked with worked with and lived in some pretty diverse areas. And so it's just like, yeah, it's really, really, genuinely inclusive. You know, you can genuinely be heard, if you have a question or an idea or, you know, you need to go to someone, I've made some really, really great connections with folks at backstage, I would probably have the rest of my life.



Matt Hunckler 39:37

Well, what are some of the benefits of having that diversity of thought and that sort of inclusive feel, even though you're maybe dispersed around the country and world at this point, right?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 39:48

Yes, I would say the benefit is definitely having so readily being able to hear a different perspective. Sometimes, companies, no matter this sighs no matter who's on the team, you know, can often suffer like the groupthink. That can happen. But I do think everyone on the team has such varied lived experiences and late professional experiences were all able to pull from, oh, when I was working at TechStars, or when I was working at grid 110, or I worked at Verizon, or, you know, the Midwest culture is like this versus the Bay Area. Like, every conversation every you know, means like, has this play out in various scenarios, we can talk through those scenarios, because we have actual representation of folks on the team who have lived that who have done programs in those areas and that sort of thing. I think that's a huge benefit. Same thing, you know, with our colleagues that are in London. You know, when we were doing accelerator specifically, it's like, okay, we want to do XYZ here in the States. How does that pan out? Or how would that be perceived in London in their ecosystem? So that was really, really huge. And it's not like, Oh, I need to go find someone like, no, they're on your team, you know, you can talk to them.



Matt Hunckler 41:07

That's cool. I love getting those perspectives, because it's a very unique perspective. And another unique perspective that you've had is, you know, having run the first cohort of the accelerator at backstage. I know you've saw probably thousands of applications, from lots of different entrepreneurs, you've continued to, I'm sure follow some of those entrepreneurs, as well as maybe even others that didn't get accepted into the program.

What would you say is one of the bigger determinants of success or failure for a startup or an entrepreneur



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 41:46

in general? That's a huge question. I'm actually gonna draw from my boss, Christy co backstage, Christy Pitts. We love it. We call her creepy.



Matt Hunckler 42:02

Like it.



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 42:04

So I think she was doing an interview not too long ago. And she said, the biggest reason a startup fails is the either the founders either just give up or they run out of money, but usually it's more so the willpower versus just the running out of the resources, because sometimes you can still make it work. So I think it's just willpower of what you want to see happen in the world, like what you want to bring forth and contribute. If people say it all the time, like, if you're only in it for the money, chances are like, the smallest things will deter you, along your journey to do anything, not just be a startup founder. So I definitely think that rings true. Again, as well, I would say, just thinking about it from like the accelerator lens and application process and I think this is another cliché one, but it is It really makes a difference is just the coachability. If you're again, you have people who are willing to talk to you, mentors, advisors, investors, not saying they're going to be right all the time. But if you have sort of this, you know, unofficial board membership, who's invested in you, via their time, talent or money, and you're not taking the time to hear from them and their perspectives, like free learning, that's not going to go well. But on the flip side, you have to have that discernment as a founder to cut you know, trust what you're building, you know, you know, your customers best sort of thing and how that operates. So it's just it's a fine balance, I think of being able to take in information and filter through that information. Like it probably make, make or break. The founder experience the journey in that success.



Matt Hunckler 43:57

That's good advice for any founder. And you've been working on your own startup for a while now, which means you're probably in it for the right reasons. Meaning anyone that's been working on a project or a product for more than a year in the early stages means

that they're probably have some level of passion behind what you're building. Can you maybe give us the elevator pitch on what Bossa is?

A

Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 44:22

Yes. So Bossa is now a chrome google chrome extension, that aggregates your tasks and actually helps you do them. And so we've gotten there via a long, winding road. But the whole route of Bossa in general, is helping people be productive while being well. And wellness is a huge thing for us. And so that's been the thread of the entire, I guess, pivoting journey, creating fossa. And, you know, just like I mentioned before, like we've had to take in sort of this advice from people of how to build the product, why you're building the product, who you're building the product for talking to customers. And I will say early on, we got a lot of feedback, especially from like the silicon beach folks who, like, oh, if you haven't quit your job yet to do this, you're not passionate about it, you're not willing to do what it takes to make this work and live off ramen and hot dogs like, again, as first two first gen founders like we don't have the resources to do that. We also have family, you know, we had spouses and significant others to take care of. And, you know, it's a two income household, so to speak, so you don't have the, I guess, freedom and luxury and privilege to have to make that kind of decision. Like I'm still working on being able to do that. But all that said is yes, we are still committed to what we've been building over the past few years. And I think, again, about the listening aspect is like we've done a few iterations of our product in different forms. So that's why I said, Now it's a Google Chrome extension. We were working on different standalone apps before and, you know, doing the not so automated, but like the manual version of things and doing that, while we're working at our other jobs, you know, the past few years. And you know, you get to a point like, Okay, great, like, I have a handful of users, testers, will you all pay for this later? Like, no, I think I can find a solution elsewhere. It's like, Okay, great. I still want to work on this problem. I still want to find, you know, a different way to tweak it and, you know, have it be approachable and marketable. Someone actually wants to use it and buy it. So what's that look like? So we've definitely done like, a lot of experimentation over the years. And I think that's what's helped me the most where I work with early stage founders in particular, especially like product strategy, how you're rolling that out? Like, what are you asking your customers how are you engaging? with them. So I've done a lot of that ourselves and learn, I wouldn't say learn the hard way. I guess we learned it very intimately of, you know, being so close to actually making something and not just working at a company and like a not as a founder, and bringing that experience to like, accelerator, for example.



Matt Hunckler 47:22

You talked earlier about failing forward and learning that from your mom. Is there one moment with bossa, where you felt like you had a particularly big fail forward moment, or, or even just an aha, that was sort of a breakthrough for you on the product?



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 47:38

Yes, I would say earlier this year. And so my co founder built has been building all of the versions of the app, in house and on his own, even though he's not like a full on like software engineer. So that's been fun and part of the journey and part of the time. And so what we are working on earlier was being able to to automatically capture notes via using natural language processing audio, like from your phone, and having that be an app that would send you an email, after the conversation of the tasks or action items that were mentioned, so alleviate alleviating the pain point of having to be distracted from your conversations, usually your one on one like consultant conversations. And you don't want to be distracted in like having to write down everything your clients saying that sort of thing. So we built all that out that was like a emerging market, so to speak, as far as like engineering documentation of like NLP and capturing it with audio and everything. And so he finally released an app that did that. Pretty, you know, low five, but, you know, not many bugs or anything, and he released that earlier this year, maybe around spring, had folks tested give us feedback, and we've been getting their feedback the whole time. But then still found some like sticking points on like privacy issues like I'm working with clients and well, I get the notes, but it's not really helpful, like, how can I parse this out? So we started talking to more people landing more on the independent consultant side. But the real aha moment with interviewing them and doing this new survey was they want to take their notes, they already have a system to take the notes, they don't necessarily want us to capture it via audio for them, because they have systems in place. They have ways that they engage with their, their clients. That's their own task management for some people. So it's like, okay, we actually have to like ditch the whole app that we built with actual, like, genuine user input. It wasn't a bad app, and we could probably still use parts of it moving forward. But for the initial rollout of what we want our products to be, it's like, okay, we're actually finding that most people are in Google Docs, taking their notes, or even having handwritten notes by hand there. And it's way easier. We've already done the hard part. As far as like



50:06

building an app



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 50:08

from scratch, that was pretty powerful and could be used in the future. But the aha moment was like, I'm gonna meet my customers where they are and where they were wasn't anywhere crazy. It was like, we can actually tackle this.



Matt Hunckler 50:22

Yeah, that's great. It's It's hard. It's hard to learn that lesson as a founder. And I feel like I've really learned that one several times. Over the years, and I appreciate you giving us kind of a sort of backstage, no pun intended. Look at building a start up from the ground up, and at the same time giving us a backstage pass to backstage and your own journey to for those that want to check out bossa and give feedback. Where can they go or how can they get ahold of you



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 50:55

can get ahold of me on social media. I'm at SOS. o n t on Instagram and Twitter or you can find me at Anastasia Tara pay LS on LinkedIn. But if you want to check out Bossa I'm redoing the website. The old website is up, but still somewhat applicable. It's Bossa dot life. That's Bo s a.li f e.



Matt Hunckler 51:26

Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Anastasia for sharing your story and taking a little bit of time today. Hope hopefully we can have you back on the show here sometime soon. Well love



Anastasia Tarpeh-Ellis 51:34

to be back. This was fine. I feel like we ran out of time.



Matt Hunckler 51:38

There's always more time but I think there's a good episode one of our journey with you. And I just want to say that's it for today's show. Thanks so much for listening. huge thank you to Anastasia for coming on the show. Be sure to check her out and both will link up everything in the show notes at Powder Keg Comm. Make sure you check out backstage capital at backstage capital.com And again for links to social profiles to other people,

companies and resources mentioned this episode, head on over to powder keg calm and check out the show notes and to be among the first to hear the stories about entrepreneurs, investors and other tech leaders in areas outside of Silicon Valley. Make sure you subscribe to us on iTunes at Powder Keg comm slash iTunes. If you left a review, I would be your biggest fan ever. Until then we'll catch you next time on Powder Keg igniting startups.