

Kristi Saucerman

Discovering My Superpower has made All The Difference

Growing a business in today's competitive environment requires business leaders with nearly superhuman abilities, and a steadfast capacity for superpowers. Kristi Saucerman's abilities approach the superhuman with the capacity for super powers literally overflowing from one bucket to the next. Her secret? Resilience. She aspires to be bigger, better, faster, and stronger. Like many great success stories, Kristi began her journey motivated by the lessons she learned early in life.

Overflowing Buckets

"I was always the organizer of parties, of fundraisers and various events. I was the class president in high school and organized the school dances, the class parties and graduation activities. Everything you could imagine- I was the one to organize it and I thrived in that environment! It is what I do because it fills the different buckets in my life with things I really enjoy."

Kristi says her love of planning developed early in life. "I was always the person who took responsibility and ensured that everyone was taken care of," she said, attributing her successes to her passion for personal improvement working in conjunction with her response to the vulnerability and instability that were hallmarks of her early childhood.

Kristi grew up in a lower income neighborhood in Sacramento, California. Her father was a Vietnam veteran who suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Alcoholism. He left the

family home when Kristi was four years old, forcing her mother to find work that would pay the bills and put food on the table. Having only a high school diploma, her career options were limited. After several job attempts Kristi's mother secured a minimum wage position with Pacific Bell. Kristi saw how hard her mother tried to make ends meet but their struggles continued as Kristi and her brother grew, as did their need for food, clothing, shoes and going to the movies with friends. With inconsistent child support and limited income, Kristi's mother was forced to find a second job to keep from losing the family home. At the young age of eight, Kristi and her brother, age ten, became 'latch key kids'— home alone every day after

school, expected to help with household responsibilities, and rely on one another.

Living in a lower end neighborhood they experienced the harsh realities of losing friends to drugs, drive by shootings, loss of life from cancer, sexual abuse, divorce and the family dynamics that come with addiction. Whether it due to stress from the realities of life, the long list of responsibilities, or growing up in a single parent household, Kristi grew to be fiercely independent. She was always the first one to reach out, helping others with their own struggles and difficulties, living in an environment that forced her to become creative and think outside of the box.

As a youth, Kristi enjoyed taking

pictures to preserve memories and thinking of clever ways to earn extra money. In high school she came up with an idea of collecting memorable, fun pictures from classmates with friends and would assemble slideshows with music for the graduating classes, charging a nominal fee for a VHS copy of the slideshow. Interest traveled quickly through word of mouth and Kristi decided she needed to start her own small business, creating "Another Sutton Production" transferring pictures or 8mm reels of film to VHS tapes with music as a way for people to

preserve memories.

A few years later, Kristi started another small business. "Through Their Eyes" featured holiday cards with drawings from children with disabilities. The back side of the cards would state the name of the child, their age, and their disability. A combination of cards were boxed and sold for a non-profit organization. Surprisingly, this small endeavor caught the attention of a nationally syndicated radio show, Dr. Larua Schlessinger. Sales rose quickly and sold out based on the endorsement and remaining inventory



bought up by Dr. Laura herself.

Kristi is no stranger to entrepreneurialism. She found her happy place in organizing, planning and realized that she performs best under pressure, creating order amidst chaos, which is ultimately what drove her to build 'Auction Frogs'. Whether it was high school dances, weddings, festivals, concerts, golf tournaments, or fundraising galas, it was always satisfying for her to see everyone having fun, enjoying time together, laughing and loving life.

"Looking back," she said, "I recognize now that all those events were a way to fill those buckets of life that became depleted over time. They brought me happiness, somewhere I could escape and focus on good things and a place I could affect change-do something for others that also gave back to me. I found peace in controlling what I could control, something I felt proud of with a sense of accomplishment. Through this work I experienced pure joy."

Event planning and fundraising was a rewarding hobby, but never a career path Kristi intended to pursue. With intentions of working in the healthcare field, Kristi took correspondence courses while still in high school to become an x-ray technician and made her way through college. It was a profession that ultimately would be her ticket out of Sacramento. Once she finished school, she decided she wanted a fresh start so she got in the car, started driving and stopped when she got to Boise. "I absolutely loved it and decided that I wanted to stay. It just seemed like a really amazing place to live with a great inclusive feeling and college town culture."

Thanks to Boise's welcoming environment and a little luck, Kristi quickly settled in, found a job, and soon met the man she

would eventually marry. By her late-twenties, Kristi was a wife and a mother of two. After moving to Hidden Springs, a close-knit community in Northwest Boise, Kristi and her husband decided she would be a stay at home mom for their two daughters. She found her fulfillment in caring for her children and rediscovering her passion for planning. It was the perfect environment for her to thrive in.

"At the time, I had a 3-year-old and a 5-year-old, and with all the kids in the neighborhood, I started planning all kinds of fun things like tea parties, zoo trips and playdates. The more events I planned, the more opportunities found me. Soon I was planning all the events for our community like concerts, harvest festivals, holiday parades, and neighborhood casino nights."

As her girls were growing, Kristi started getting more involved in the local Charter School. "I was writing grant proposals and brick and mortar fundraising campaigns for the school and quickly found my groove. My buckets were being filled with the outpouring of gratitude and appreciation from so many. I was surrounded by people who wanted to get involved and support their community. It was the perfect way for me to be able to give back, to do some good while taking on the fun projects I enjoyed creating that most people didn't want to raise their hand and volunteer for."

Trifecta

Like most nonprofit organizations, many of the school's revenue came from live and silent auctions. The fundamental challenge to these types of fundraisers is that not every supporter is able to attend in person, nor do they have the means to bid on an item.

Kristi describes the challenge: "A committee works for months to plan for the event between solicitation and item acqui-

sition, selling tickets and sponsorships, promotions, planning the event line-up, decorations and set up. Once items are secured, auction items are set out, doors open, then event gets underway!

"The reality is that once people show up – only half the room is actual bidders, or "wallets," considering most are couples. On top of that, about 25% of those attending won't bid or participate in the pledging, making our "wallet" pool from which to raise the money needed to meet the goal even more sparse. The challenge is further acerbated by time- there needs to be enough time set aside for people to mingle and bid on items allowing the initial bid and

to be outbid."

Time and time again after these events, Kristi was left thinking "there's got to be a better way." If she could create a way to take the bidding online for a longer time frame than allowed at the event itself, offer bidding to a larger audience, give recognition to the businesses donating the items, then more money could be raised for the same amount of work.

It was the early 2000's, and there were few options for an online auction.

"Online auctions weren't all that popular at the time," Kristi recalled. "The available options were expensive and not conducive to what I needed for our school and I thought that the only way to get what I wanted was to just build it myself."

And she did just that.

Still working as a volunteer and motivated by her idea, Kristi hired a programmer to create the

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online auction platform she envisioned to allow the fundraising committee to expand the traditional silent auction. The platform created a broader visibility for the auction, increasing demand and raising more money. More bidders engaged in bidding, and the analytics collected and reported to donors about clicks provided measurable results for their donation. Using her tool, the school tripled the amount raised from the year before!

Not only was the site a more accessible platform for bidders to participate in over and above traditional bid sheets, but it also prompted local businesses to donate more in return for online advertising. Everyone benefited from the ripple effect: more neighbors could attend and support their community; more businesses could engage and broaden their reach in the city, and the school raised more money. The Fundraising Trifecta.

It worked, and Auction Frogs was born.

Bigger, Better, Faster, Stronger

Success spread quickly. Within months, charter schools from other districts and other nonprofit organizations were calling Kristi for help with their fundraising events. She realized that her passion and hobby had blossomed into a business opportunity.

Kristi took each new event as an opportunity to learn more. She learned about bidding behaviors and fundraising practices. She automated features, streamlined processes and her client list continued to grow. Each new client and every new event became a chance to refine and make her program bigger, better, faster, and stronger. Every new insight helped her build a vision of the type of program that she wanted to create while meeting the client's needs. And so, Auction Frogs went from an

online auction to a web-based end-to-end event management platform. Kristi built a website that could sell tickets, sponsorships, assign people to tables, check them in with bid number assignments, and itemize sales in live and silent auctions, and process payments. It was a slow build, adding new capabilities as she added events and proved concepts.

Kristi met with venture capitalists and other prospective funders who were immediately interested in the concept she presented. Investors saw an opportunity to finance a vast operation with quick growth and rapid scale with large returns. Competitors offered mergers and acquisitions simply because of the attraction of the industry and the unlimited revenue verticals for growth potential.

Kristi tried to imagine her role in the company with these developments and growth trajectories but because her primary responsibility was to her young school-aged children at this point, there would be no way to accomplish this in the limited time she had to dedicate to this massive potential while giving up the majority stake in the company. Kristi's fierce independence and desire to remain in control steered her towards self-funding, steady growth, and following the passion she had for this project, inherently knowing the business would grow- without funding from investors.

As Kristi managed more fundraising events, she identified new challenges that Auction Frogs could solve. Online auctions were a good way to augment existing silent and live auctions, but gala auctions continued to utilize silent auction bid sheets to accept bids.

"I thought, if I could build an electronic piece of paper to automate the tedious process of clerking and itemizing sales, then bidding could be extended beyond the room simultaneously and bid closing could be automated," she said. "This was back in the time before smartphones were smart and electronic reading devices were all the rage."

Kristi bought an inventory of tablets and with help of friends and created 'Lilly Pads.' Using the devices to electronically accept bids and employing

some creative processes to alter the capability of the device, her team built an automated way to accept bids in place of a piece of paper. Her epiphany and concept were contagious among the fundraising community. The more efficient the fundraising practices became, the more money they raised, enhancing the experience for all involved.

In addition to optimizing the donor and user experience, she integrated a consulting approach with clients. Her company offered evaluation of past events, and logistical management of current events, offering new ways to streamline processes thus optimizing volunteer hours and revenue earned. This allowed Kristi and her team the ability to identify inefficiencies of current operations and recommend new approaches to maximize fundraising. By 2010, Kristi grew Auction Frogs into a "Software as a Service" long before the technology sector coined the SaaS acronym.

'Oh Yes I Can'

Kristi is proud of her vision and success but is the first to admit that it was not an easy road.

"I have had to overcome a lot of the adversity," she said, recalling meeting business people at networking events who would presume that she was there as her husband's guest. "Some people were incredibly presumptuous; it was a challenge. There was a bias that, especially in the tech industry, a stay at home mom couldn't possibly build a successful business on her own or without investors and that you can't make money as a lifestyle business. —those biases make it more difficult to be taken seriously."

Kristi says she has also experienced betrayal in the entrepreneurial journey, having experienced situations with potential partners, employees and people she once

considered friends looking out for her best interest.

"It hasn't been all roses, and rainbows along the way. I've experienced my share of heart-ache and pain with trying to do the right thing and trust people I thought would be good to align myself with."

Kristi said she misjudged some and was misguided by others along the way as well. "Fortunately, I grew up as a fighter and learned to never give up. The lessons I've learned may have knocked me down and kicked me when I was struggling, but I ALWAYS got up- stronger and tougher because of it. More importantly, I was reminded that no matter how old you are, there will always be bad people you meet along the way. I just had to learn to be better at identifying who they are."

Kristi encountered prospective partners and people that discounted her nonprofit client base. They said things like, 'Oh, that's cute, but I don't think it will work with nonprofits. People will assume that because you work with nonprofit organizations, foundations and schools that there isn't any money to be made.' The reality, though, is that Auction Frogs was creating impressive value for a high need and severely underserved market.

Like other adversity she's encountered, Kristi has used all the skepticism to her advantage. It was fuel for her fire, prompting her to think critically about the future of Auction Frogs. With guidance from trusted mentors and other business leaders in the community, Kristi has focused on diversifying Auction Frog's client base and the revenue sources.

"We provide event management tools, host online auctions, and mobile bidding," she explained. "That said, we've expanded into other industries that can benefit from that same technology but are not dependent on growth in the

rest of our client base. We now work with minor league sports teams, we support high school sports teams with peer to peer giving, and we manage events ranging from game worn specialty jersey auctions, galas to golf tournaments. Our advantage is that we are incredibly nimble with a product offering to help with more than just auctions which allow our client base to grow independently and are not dependent on other areas of the business to succeed."

Kristi has also diversified the revenue streams. Auction Frogs is first and foremost a technology company, but she has integrated consulting services as well as credit card processing capabilities outside of the fundraising environment, consignment products for additional revenue as well as event staffing for event fundraisers. The coordinated products and services create a variety of revenue streams which continually positions Auction Frogs for growth.

At first glance, Auction Frogs may look an awful lot like other technology startups with sustainable and profitable business models, but Kristi is the first to admit that her journey was different than many of her peers.

"It is a unique story, not just unique for my industry, but a different route than most women business owners take," she said. "There are so many stories about entrepreneurs who create businesses with angel investors or venture capitalists, partners and an incredible hockey stick growth trajectory with success measured by dollars or number of employees. My path was different. My business started because of a passion that became my hobby with the life-work balancing act as a stay at home mom. This passion built a business measured by dollars earned for other people."

For Kristi, it is a remarkable story to tell. Auction Frogs is proof that non-traditional paths can lead to success too. Kristi hopes that Auction Frog's story of passion-meets-hobby-meets-good idea that launches a successful business will help inspire others who might be considering a less-traveled road.

When asked how she did it, Kristi is the first to admit "I'm still learning. Success isn't a destination; it's a journey with

lessons to be learned along the way." In meeting resistance or competition, she explains, "I always take the high road and stay true to who I am with honesty, authenticity and integrity. Granted, there's been a lot of tough days and tears, but surrounding myself with people who believed in me and encouraged me along the way is the reason I am able to overcome that adversity and persevere with the 'oh yes I can' mentality."

When asked what her superpower is? Kristi says "Mine is Grit. Determination. Courage. Agility. I believe it's important that everyone find THEIR own superpower. Everyone has one." When asked what lesson she could pass along, she says, "Create a vision that is your own version of 'bigger, better, faster, stronger' and embrace the personal courage to pursue your dreams. Get it done by keeping the buckets of life overflowing from one to the other and leverage your ability to anticipate change and adapt to sustain your competitive advantage."

Determination trumps doubt any day of the week, and Kristi has no intention of slowing down anytime soon.