

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs: Interview with Author Kristin Meekhof

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Our service group (Kristin Meekhof is pictured front row, first on left)

Kristin Meekhof is the author of ***A Widow's Guide to Healing***, who after meeting microcredit clients in New York, is donating \$1 per book sold to alleviate poverty through Whole Planet Foundation. Here's why.

Q: What inspired you to start writing and start supporting Whole Planet Foundation?

Before my book was published, I flew to Kenya and visited a slum called Kibera. Families there live without running water, electricity or safe access to medical care and schools. Their one room homes are tiny and the walls are mud. I met several widows living here, earning less than a dollar a day, supporting their families with very little material resources. And I had the joy of getting to know one widow living here with her three young children, including an infant. And over several days I learned from her and other widows how they benefited from a microfinance project. It was then and there that I

decided upon my return to the United States of America, I would attempt to learn about other microentrepreneur projects. While shopping at Whole Foods Market, I discovered the Whole Planet Foundation cookbook, "Liberation Soup". I purchased it, and read the stories of several female microentrepreneurs the Foundation helped. I sent a "cold email" to someone at Whole Planet Foundation telling them I wanted to learn more about Whole Planet Foundation outreach. And several months later, I met Whole Planet Foundation and part of their team in Harlem. In Harlem, the Foundation introduced me to other microentrepreneurs, and we also gathered with other corporate supporters to share meals and complete a service project. I continue to be impressed by the impact Whole Planet Foundation has on a global level, and I am delighted to give back.

Q: How did you progress from your origin story to where you are now?

I'm likely one of the few people you'll read about who doesn't know the exact date they were born. I was born in approximately February, 1974 and do not know anything about my birth story. I was adopted from Seoul, Korea and arrived in Chicago in June of 1974 to my parents. At the time, my father, in his mid- twenties, was in remission from cancer. Tragically, in 1979, about two weeks shy of my fifth birthday, my father died at age 30 from cancer. This loss left a significant imprint on my life.

Decades later, unfortunately, around Labor Day weekend in 2007 my husband was misdiagnosed with bronchitis. I was 33 at the time, and weeks later we found out he had advanced adrenal cancer. He died in November that year. Although I had a master's degree in social work and was a psychology major (undergraduate degree), I struggled to understand how I would thrive after my loss. Over a three-year time frame, I read everything I could about grief and loss, from medical journals about broken heart syndrome to popular magazine articles about people who survived a loss to biographies, and autobiographies. The content didn't have to be specific to that of a widow. I was curious how people thrived and found purpose in their grief. I noticed a paucity in the research when it came to women. Their stories weren't amplified, so I decided in 2010 that I would interview as many women as possible, and put their stories together in a book. I know that narratives can change the trajectory in which one experiences loss, both personal and / or professional. And my intent was to make others feel less isolated by connecting with someone's story of resilience. I traveled the world to gather these stories, and hoped that my book, "A Widow's Guide to Healing", would one day help others discover healing, purpose and hope in the throes of sadness. I also desired to create a brand with my name that empowers one whenever they feel alone, scared, and defeated by life. It is a privilege to be able to do this with words, in my writing, speaking, and life coaching.

Q: Tell us how it felt when you experienced a setback, and how you overcame it?

I've experienced several setbacks. When it came to getting a literary agent to take me on as a first-time author, it was a challenge, and I was scared. I knew I spent countless hours gathering stories from women, and they were counting on me, in an informal way, to get published. And then getting blurbs for my book wasn't easy either. However, I never stopped believing in the message of my book- healing and thriving after loss is possible. So without any formal media training, I reached out on my own, to obtain blurbs and support for my book from Katie Couric, Maria Shriver, and Dr. Deepak Chopra, who is now my mentor and dear friend. I remain in contact with them, and what I'm most impressed by is their both their tenderness and willingness to support those in need from caregivers to cancer patients to entire communities. Another setback occurred when I was running the NYC Marathon. I hit the "runner's wall" and simply stopped alongside the street. I was both mentally and physically exhausted. And yet, I knew the mental strength meant more at that moment than my physical strength. I remembered what my friend, a seven-continent marathoner, Michael Silvio (he also attended the Whole Planet Foundation Harlem service project) said about relying on the cheering of strangers to carry me on when I got tired. So, I made it a point to really listen to the cheers, and their applause and joyful words helped to carry me across the finish line in under five hours. We all have various finish lines, literally and figuratively, we wish to cross, and there will be setbacks along the way. Sometimes we have to lean into the kindness of strangers en route and other times it is the company of our friends and family.

Q: What makes each day an opportunity to make a difference for yourself and microentrepreneurs around the globe?

I love to create and accept opportunities for growth and contribute to the empowerment of women from diverse backgrounds. I'm grateful beyond measure to be able to practice generosity. Each day I try to carve out a sweet spot to nurture these kinds of relationships.

Q: What's the most impactful part of a program/project/product you developed?

My book is probably the most impactful because it contains the stories of amazing and brave women from diverse backgrounds who triumphed after loss and trauma. A chapter in my book focuses on solo parenting, and my remarkable mother did this while teaching full-time. This section seems to touch the hearts of women. My book is also the foundation of my other work that embodies healing, resilience, empowerment, and tenderness. I've been told my coaching brings people to the next level of growth and fosters resilience, so that's an important aspect of my career.

Q: What's your 5-year dream?

As a person with a multi-hyphenate career I have several dreams. I will keep on sharing, writing, coaching, speaking, evolving, growing, and of course, reading. And to be in the company of those people who value both inner and other growth is everything. There are some people I've admired from a distance and they're a part of the Whole Planet Foundation community. I met some of these supporters at the Harlem gathering - the bright people of Chobani, Unilever, Papyrus, Pepsi beverage company, Whole Foods Market, and it would be an honor and dream to create a collaboration with them. I'd also love to do book signings at Whole Foods Market in various cities, starting with the store in Harlem. As a mental health professional, I'd like to continue writing and speaking about the importance of mental health awareness, and how to cope with anxiety and depression related to trauma. And for caregivers and those who suffered losses, both personally and professionally, I'll keep on offering wellness tips. Personally, I'd like to run another marathon for a charity. I'd also love to return to Kenya to give back in a meaningful way to the women and children who live in Kibera. And I'm eager to discover entrepreneurs, businesses, and authors who are new to me, and have meaningful conversations with them, in person, whenever possible.

Q: What's your advice to aspiring entrepreneurs who want to embed a cause in their business strategy?

Look at what the organization is actually doing and find a creative way to embed some of their actions into your strategy. Also, look for an alignment, so the process of integration is a bit easier. It should be a lovely cause who you're eager to help, but take your time getting to know them. Make sure their fuel is generosity, and they're truly mending the broken places. Remember, you can't help everyone, but you can do something which is better than being inactive.

Learn more at wholeplanetfoundation.org

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