

NCWIT Donna Auguste

[Intro music]

Lucy Sanders: Hi, I'm Lucy Sanders. I'm the CEO for the National Center for Women in Information Technology, or NCWIT, and this interview is part of the series of interviews that we're doing with wonderful IT entrepreneurs, people who have fabulous stories to tell.

We are going to talk to them about their lives, their work, their passions, everything. We want to get inside of their brains and understand what makes them tick.

Larry Nelson is here with me today from W3W3, as we interview Donna Auguste. We are very thrilled to be here in Donna's home with this interview. She lives in a very lovely neighborhood in Denver. I think, as many of you know, she's not only a wonderful entrepreneur but also a social activist. So Donna, welcome.

Donna Auguste: Thank you, thank you very much. I'm glad to be here.

Lucy: Larry, good to see you again...

Larry Nelson: It is always a pleasure, and we are so fortunate just to be able to meet, let alone talk to and interview, some of the sharp people from all over the country. You just happen to be in our backyard.

Donna: [laughs] Yeah.

Larry: This is really super. At W3W3.com, we call ourselves the voice of the Colorado technology community, so you fit right in.

Donna: Well, thank you.

Lucy: So Donna, you have a really diverse background. You are a serial entrepreneur, having started Freshwater Software. You also have worked in large corporations as an entrepreneur, at Xerox PARC, at Apple, and even at Bell Labs. And you've also started a foundation called the Leave a Little Room Foundation, which really emphasizes giving back and global outreach.

So, you've done a little bit of everything. I'm really excited to talk to you about entrepreneurship.

I think maybe with that our first question will be: how did you first get into technology? You have an extensive technology background. And what technology do you really look at as being cool today?

Donna: I first started out interested in technology when I was a kid and the Apollo space missions were broadcast on television.

Lucy: Ah.

Donna: I was just riveted. When they would show the mission control room, I'd get close to the TV as you could get just checking out all of the details. From that point forward I knew I wanted to be involved in computers and technology and emerging science.

Lucy: Well, I think space exploration is fascinating. In fact, some people have said today that that type of grand challenge in computing could spark a whole new revolution of computer scientists and technology innovation.

Larry: Yeah, that's absolutely right. You know, one of the things that you brought up that really motivated you to look into it and then really get all revved up about it, we don't seem to have that out in society today for the young people to get to. I don't think we could call electronic games the answer to that.

Lucy: It's an excellent challenge.

Larry: That's right.

Donna: There are some cool technologies out there. You're right, they are different in terms of the degree or intensity of inspiration.

For example, renewable energy is an area I'm very interested in. That's an area where I think the coolest solutions will come with the generations who are coming behind us. They are going to be looking at the use of solar, the use of wind, and the use of hydrogen in ways that we haven't even thought of yet.

Larry: That's a fact. Now, with all this as a backdrop, what is it that ever compelled you to become an entrepreneur.

Donna: To become an entrepreneur... Well, I like inventing solutions to problems. That's something I've always been very curious about - not necessarily looking for obvious solutions, but looking for effective solutions.

And I like lateral thinking. I like to do lateral thinking puzzles. I like to do lateral thinking just when walking around visiting businesses or parks or other places. I'm always thinking about how things could be done differently. How could something be looked at in a different way?

Since I do that for fun, I thought it would be great to do that for business.

[laughter]

Larry: Isn't that a fact? Of course, over the years we've seen you on different occasions get some neat awards. I know that's always nice. It's nice for you and it's nice for your team. But what is it about entrepreneurship that really makes you tick? What's that push? Is it the other answers, or is it something else?

Donna: I would say what makes me tick is the lateral thinking. Because there's always something new to discover, a new way to think about it that may not be obvious from the start. Once that starts ticking in my brain, I usually can't shut it off.

Lucy: I wanted to follow up on that because the entrepreneurship we often think about is starting new companies, which you've done. But I also think there's entrepreneurship inside of large companies.

Looking back, say, at your experience at Apple, what can you say about differences between entrepreneurship in a large company or outside of a large company?

Donna: They're very similar. The problem solving techniques are very similar. In fact, the entrepreneurship is almost a day-to-day kind of experience.

I'll give you an example from the Freshwater days, which was a small company environment. The particular problem that we were looking at one point was something that could come up in a lot of different situations.

We were moving into a new building, and the move date was fast approaching. Talking with the local telephone company, the T1 line we would need in order to run the business was not going to be turned on in time. They had promised us that day, we had set up our move, but it wasn't going to happen.

Lucy: Those darn people with those T1 lines.

Larry: Yeah, right.

[laughter]

Donna: And we were running an Internet business. We had to have a T1 line or we weren't going to be in business.

Lucy: Nope, you sure weren't.

Donna: So, we were stuck. It happened that across the parking lot from our new building was another building. In that building was a small business that was going to be shutting down. Unfortunately they were going out of business. I walked over and I talked with the person who was closing up shop over there. I said, "Do you all have a T1?"

He said, "Yeah, we do, but we're going to be turning it off in a couple days."

I said, "OK, hang on a second!"

[laughter]

Larry: So, he got you a deal.

Donna: Right. I said, "How about if we hook up to your T1 and then we'll pay the bill until our T1 comes on."

He said, "Well, we're across the parking lot. How are you going to do that?"

I said, "Well, you have a ceiling and we have a ceiling." We actually ended up wiring through their ceiling and through their roof, and with the permission of our landlord, across the parking lot. We dropped it down into our roof and our ceiling. We hooked ourselves up to their T1, and that's what we ran on until ours came through.

Lucy: So, it's that same kind of problem solving. You have to really scrap and look for solutions to all kinds of issues.

Donna: That's right.

Lucy: Along those lines, we were interested in understanding who influenced you or supported you on this career path. Most people have role models, or at least either people they know or people they don't know who they admire from afar that really influenced them. Perhaps you could share some of that for us.

Donna: The strongest influence in my life, as you've heard me say at awards ceremonies and other events, is God. When I receive an award or any recognition, I always try and make it a point to have people understand that this is for the glory and honor of God. Everything I do is only for the glory and honor of God, and only through the grace of God.

So, the credit is not mine and the influence is not my own. It's the influence of God, my family, my church community - all of those shaped me from my earliest days and continue to shape me all the time now.

Larry: I want to congratulate you. Now, with all the different things that you've been through, some of them very exciting like the T1 line that you were talking about, what is one of the greatest challenges that you've faced as an entrepreneur?

Donna: I'd say the single greatest challenge has been learning to trust my intuition, especially when the stakes are high. During the years when I was growing up, I learned to pay attention to my intuition and to factor my intuition in my decision making process along with other sources.

Learning to trust my intuition when the stakes were really high was much harder. When my business was on the line, my payroll was on the line, and my customers were on the line, I was more inclined to just grab onto other people's advice instead of listening to my own heart.

I'll give you an example, and this is one that got a little heated. In Freshwater's earliest days, my board of directors advised me - and these were investors in my business, so I needed to listen to these folks - to really focus on building brand.

I wasn't nearly as interested in building brand as I was in building a revenue. I was thinking that we needed customers and we needed money coming through the door.

They were saying, "No, we've cultivated many, many, many businesses in the past. What you need is to get your brand in position and to get yourself established as a leader in your space."

Well, I didn't do that because it didn't feel right. It seemed to me that although the priorities for Internet companies at the time were not emphasizing revenue, I thought our priorities should emphasize revenue.

So, we decided that we had better get busy generating revenue and getting some customers in the door. And it's a good thing we did that, because a little while later the rules changed. Fortunately, we were profitable by then.

Larry: Very good.

Lucy: Wow, listening to your intuition is an important thing. Do not get away from that. I think that's great advice for sure.

Larry: Yes.

Lucy: And speaking of advice, one of the things that we really hope to do with this series is influence people to think about entrepreneurial careers. If you were sitting here with a young person, what kind of advice would you give them about entrepreneurship?

Donna: I would suggest three things. There are three things that I keep in mind, so I would share those with others to keep in mind. The short version of those three is first passion, second is self-discipline, and the third is tenacity. I'll tell you what I mean by each of those.

In terms of passion, it's important for each of us to know the source of our passion. It's important to know the source of our strength, the source of our intuition, the source of our values and our faith. And to be able to turn to that source, especially when we need direction and we need to make tough decisions, because self-discipline comes in.

Do the homework. You have to do the homework. You have to do preparation. You have to sit down and figure out and study and examine the areas that require analysis, so that you could make an informed decision when you need to.

And the third, in terms of tenacity, is be persistent. If the door you need to get through is closed and locked, scout around until you find an open window. Just figure out a way to keep moving forward. And sometimes two solutions merge in the most unlikely of ways.

Lucy: Well, Larry and I hear this theme of persistence a lot..

Larry: All the time.

Lucy: A lot. And sometimes it's persistence. Other people put words like relentlessness on the table.

Donna: I find that there's a very thin line between being persistent and being a pest. It's OK. Sometimes you have to drift back and forth across that line.

Lucy: Well, I certainly find now as a nonprofit CEO, that frequent reminders really pay off with people. It works pretty well.

Larry: One of the things that you had mentioned (your little checklist of three: passion, self-discipline--doing the homework, tenacity or persistence) and I think one of our past presidents, Calvin Coolidge said, "Persistence is omnipotent." So, I think that there's a little bit of power there. But what would be your three characteristics that made you a successful entrepreneur?

Donna: I would say those three. I'm passionate myself. And if I'm going to do it, I'm going to all out. And because the source of my strength is my relationship with God, I tend to that relationship. It's very important, I give it a lot of priority. I give it my time. I give it my attention. Prayer is very important to me, and taking the time for prayer is something that rates high on my list. It comes before many other things that can fill up a day. Prayer is where I start. So, that passion is a big part of me.

Self-discipline is part of it. As you know, I'm a musician. I'm a church musician, and I play bass guitar primarily. Practicing my bass guitar, practicing fundamentals, practicing the new and cool and fun songs, it's all fun. It's all enjoyable. And all of that is necessary to lay the groundwork before you go and play an instrument, for example, for the congregation.

In terms of tenacity, all of my performance reviews and all those big companies you've listed that I've worked at, year after year after year, my performance reviews, my manager would always say, "very tenacious." I don't know if that's good, or if that's bad. But she's very tenacious.

Lucy: I think that's good.

Larry: Yeah, I do too. And I've talked to some other business leaders around the area who know you. And they use words like that, "she's tenacious." Yeah.

Lucy: I think that's wonderful.

Larry: In fact, I think, Lucy, I think you said, "She was relentless." Maybe not.

Lucy: No, no. Not me. [laughs] Not me. Although I am curious to understand more about your foundation, the Leave a Little Room Foundation, because I know that's where a lot of your passion is right now. So can you give us a little bit about what your foundation does?

Donna: Absolutely. I'd be happy to. The Leave a Little Room Foundation is based on a very simple premise, that it's a good idea for people to come together and share the different ways in which we've been blessed. One person might have one talent. Another person might have a different talent. Another might have a resource. And if we come together and share our blessings and leave room for God to do what God can do in the midst of all that, then amazing things happen as a result.

So, the concrete ways in Leave a Little Room, we do work in Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda. We do different kinds of projects in those countries in East Africa. We've built schools. We've helped to staff and supply hospital clinics. We've put up solar electricity systems,

solar powered vaccine refrigerators.

In Mexico, we've also tried... It's a little closer to home, where we build houses for people who were living in shacks. And their families, who are doing their best, in terms of working and surviving, but the housing they have available is made of tarp and plywood and, maybe, car parts. And so we go in and over the course of a few days, we build them a new house from the ground up. And it's a wonderful transforming experience each time you do it.

Lucy: And did I read that you were also doing some work along the Gulf coast, post-Katrina?

Donna: Yes, we have. And we will continue doing that work there as folks there rebuild. We've been down to Pasqualla, Mississippi as well as to the New Orleans area to help folks scrape out their housing, scrape out rotting wood, floors, walls, and put in brand new components in their house.

Lucy: I'm sure that the people are most appreciative of it. I mean, having been from Louisiana myself, we've taken some students down there to do some work in the Ninth Ward ourselves. And this is kind of a transition for our next question, although it sounds like you're very busy person...

Larry: Boy, is that a fact.

Lucy: We are curious to know how such successful people really do balance their work and their personal lives. Do you have any advice on that?

Donna: Well, a couple of things that comes to mind. One is because I'm a technologist on the one hand and a musician on the other, those two activities in my life, which I invest a lot of time in, balance each other in a lot of ways. A left-brain, right-brain kind of balance.

But also working diligently and attentively head-down on technology is very different than practicing music as a part of a band and a choir and being out with our community at church, administering to people through gospel music. Those two balance each other.

And then the other aspect for me is prayer. Prayer calms me, and recharges me, and pulls me away from the busy activities of day-to-day life. To take a walk and view and think about what's important.

Larry: You know, Donna, you've done so much and these are nowhere near even your most important highlights, but from Apple to Freshwater Technologies, A Month Ago Labs...

Lucy: A Month Ago Labs?

Larry: Yeah...and all the other important things. And here you've got this wonderful foundation, Leave a Little Room. You've done so much, and I know you're going to be doing more work here. But what's next for Donna Auguste?

Donna: Well, next is everyday and each day that follows. Whatever the Lord puts before me, that's what I do. And one of the cool things about it is God doesn't have any limitations in terms

of interesting and exciting things going on in the world. So, what I've called to do from one time to the other can be new and different in each case.

The challenge for me is when I'm getting involved in something where there is an area that's unfamiliar to me then that self-discipline comes back in. I sit down and I do my studying and I do my research. I do my homework so that I can understand enough to ask lots of questions, listen to people, and learn from others.

And then move ahead and get it done. Figure out how to get it done.

Larry: Fantastic.

Lucy: So, you may start another technology company. [laughs]

Larry: Let's start that rumor. We're good. I'll sign up.

Lucy: I'll sign up, too.

Donna: Actually, there is a very specific project that I'm working on, and it brings together a number of different facets of projects I'm involved in. And it is called Skills 24/7 dot com. It is an Internet video-oriented type of project. And the idea is that within this environment of Skills 24/7, anyone that is looking to learn in a certain topic area, or a certain subject matter can visit this website and look for video clips that teach on that topic.

Larry: Oh, wow!

Donna: And the video clips are between five and 15-minutes in length. And they cover a very specific area of each topic. And when you put them all together in a broad sweep, they'll cover a wide range in each topic.

Lucy: Fascinating.

Donna: There is another company.

Larry: I knew it.

Lucy: I knew it. I could tell.

Larry: There's no doubt about it.

Lucy: Well, thank you very much. I know all the listeners really appreciate hearing this interview, and we should probably remind people where it's going to be hosted. You can find it at the NCWIT website at www.ncwit.org, also at w3w3.com. And can you give people the URL for the Leave a Little Room Foundation in case they want to hear more?

Donna: Absolutely. It's www.leavealittleroom.org.

Lucy: Well, thank you. This was wonderful. We enjoyed coming to Denver to see you. Thank you, very much.

Larry: That's right. By the way, we should also include Skills 24/7 dot com.

Lucy: Absolutely.

Larry: That's lovely. Alright, and by the way, you listeners out there, would you pass this interview along to others that you think would learn from it, and benefit in some fashion? And they can tune in and listen 24/7 and download it as a podcast.

Lucy: Thank you.

Larry: All right.

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