

NCWIT Interview with Jeanette Symons

BIO: Jeanette Symons was the founder, Chief Executive Officer of [Industrious Kid](#), and mother of two. Prior to founding Industrious Kid, Ms. Symons co-founded [Zhone Technologies](#), a telecommunications company that builds "last mile" access solutions, where she served as the company's Chief Technology Officer and Vice President, Engineering. Prior to Zhone, Ms. Symons was Chief Technical Officer and Executive Vice President of [Ascend Communications](#), Inc, which Ms. Symons co-founded, from January 1989 until June 1999 when the company was purchased by [Lucent Technologies](#). In addition, Ms. Symons was a software engineer at [Hayes Microcomputer](#), a modem manufacturer, where she developed and managed its ISDN program. Ms. Symons holds a B.S. in Systems Engineering from the University of California at Los Angeles. We are deeply saddened by Jeanette's tragic death in a [small plane crash](#) on Friday, February 1, 2008. She was a true technology pioneer and we hope her life will continue to inspire others.

Lee Kennedy: Hi, this is Lee Kennedy, a board member for the National Center for Women and Information Technology or NCWIT. This is part of a series of interviews that we are having with fabulous entrepreneurs, women who have started IT companies in a variety of sectors and all of whom have just great stories to tell us about being entrepreneurs.

With me I have Larry Nelson from w3w3.com. Hi, Larry.

Larry Nelson: Hi. Boy, it's really great to be here today.

Lee: So tell us a little bit about w3w3.com.

Larry: Well, we are a web-based Internet radio show. We really started in '96 with full time in '98. This has been probably the most exciting series that we have had, so many neat entrepreneurs going through all different types of things. I have a feeling that Jeanette is going to have a great story today, too.

Lee: Great. And we also have with us Lucy Sanders who is the CEO for NCWIT. Hi, Lucy.

Lucy Sanders: Hello. How are you?

Lee: Great. So, why don't we go ahead and just get right to it. Today we are interviewing Jeanette Symons. Jeanette is the Co-founder and CEO of Industrious Kid. Hi, Jeanette.

Jeanette Symons: Hi. Thanks for having me today.

Lee: Sure. So, Jeanette, why don't you start off and tell us a little bit about Industrious Kid?

Jeanette: Industrious Kid was actually started to develop web sites for kids. What happened was a couple of years ago my daughter, who is seven, actually came home and said, "Mom, I want to make a MySpace profile."

Needless to say, I panicked and ended up setting up a server where they had my kids and the neighbors had their own social network in my closet, literally. We went from there to actually creating a social network for kids where they could have the same safety on the Internet that we actually provided in the closet at the time.

Lucy: Wow. I'd say that's one special kid that gets to come home and tell mom what kind of company to start next.

Jeanette: It's gone to their heads a little bit.

Lucy: That's pretty special.

Lee: And also imbee.com; that's your social networking site?

Jeanette: That's correct. The social networking site itself is imbee.com, and Industrious Kid is the name of the company.

Lee: OK. And I see imbee.com won a Web 2.0 award this year.

Jeanette: Absolutely. It's exciting. We are really making these strides and have kids interact with each other and learn to use the Internet in a positive way. We are really enjoying it. This is a company that we started because we wanted to, because it was fun and it's really been exciting all the way along.

Lee: Great.

Lucy: Well, so now maybe you all think I'm a kid and sometimes I am a kid at heart, but I went over to imbee.com, started playing around, making a baseball card, doing the things that I wanted to do. As a technologist I had to wonder about the technology that you are employing on that site. It is very sophisticated.

Jeanette: Well, thanks. It is interesting. I have been building the infrastructure for the Internet for over 20 years now and really hadn't done anything in the way of card sense since the very early days. It's fun. We actually built on open source. We built on Drupal which you can actually go to, download and have a social networking site up in a matter of days. From there we've just added more and more kid centered features to it. It's fun and it's very incremental and dynamic.

Lucy: It is a lot of fun. On that note and getting to the first question around technology, as a technologist what technologies do you see on the horizon as being particularly important?

Jeanette: I think the biggest thing that's driven us for at least for about 20 years if not longer and then I think will for at least the next 20 years if not longer - it's all about communication. It's what's changing the most and what's driving the most. We talk about the simple evolutions of the telephone and the way we are using them, but what's so amazing to me when I watch is how differently the next generation communicates than we do, even electronically.

As adults, we tend to communicate via electronic mail, via personal or group communications that are relatively structured. When I look at the next generation, they're not patient enough for email; they look at me like I'm crazy to waste my time sending them an email message they may not look at till tonight. They want a text message or an instant message. If they want to say something to a group of friends, that just post it on their profile.

So the way in which we communicate is changing over time and changing generation to generation. And that's what's really neat. I don't know where it'll be another five or 10 years from now, but it is fun to watch.

Lucy: That's really interesting when you think about it, because it's just a cross-generational difference in the way people are communicating.

Larry: That's right. One of the things that we're also curious about - we have a number of young people that are listening to the shows, sometimes their parents tell them about it, because it's so interesting hearing how people like you, an entrepreneur, does what you do. But we kind of wanted to know: why did you become an entrepreneur, and what is it about entrepreneurship that makes you tick?

Jeanette: Well, I think the why is because, a long time ago, when I was relatively young, I thought I could do it better. I didn't want to work for someone else. I thought I could do it better. My ideas were better. I could do something better. I think, after a lot of hard work and a lot of years as an entrepreneur, I realize

that it's not that easy to do a better job. I really learned how hard it is to do better than average. But it's really fun trying.

What do I really love, and why do I keep doing it - this is my third company, and I doubt it's my last - is because there's no greater feeling than creating something from nothing. And that's the products you create. It's watching the people grow. It's creating value within the company. You're really, as an entrepreneur, making something from nothing in so many different ways, and I think that's what makes it really exciting.

Lucy: So, Jeanette, that kind of brings us to the next question. When you think about getting into technology and the career path you took, who influenced you, or who were your role models or mentors?

Jeanette: I think I got started in technology, really, because I got offered a job writing software that paid \$1,000 a month, which was more than I could get with anything else as a student. I had no idea how to do it. I didn't try to get into technology. It was just a lot of money for me at the time.

Lucy: That's great.

Jeanette: It wasn't a big plan. I always loved math. I always loved science. I had no idea about computers and technology at that point in time. So I really got into it then.

And I think it's no different than the excitement of starting a company. As an engineer, it's that sense of creating. It's that sense that you made something that you can put your name on that you can be proud of. And it really is one project at a time - one company, one project, one thing at a time - where you really get to create something. And I think that's what really hooked me, once I got started.

Lucy: Were there any role models or mentors along the way?

Jeanette: I think one of the most frustrating things, for me, is that I kept looking for a role model and looking for a mentor and looking for someone, especially as I started to become more successful, and I really struggled with it. I was younger than many of the other people starting companies at the time. There were very few women involved in starting companies at the time and having had been successful at it. And I really spent a long time being really frustrated that there weren't people that I thought I could go and emulate.

It took me, actually, quite a while to kind of accept that, "Hey, it doesn't matter. You're not going to copy anybody. Get on with life and do what's fun." But it took me a long time to accept that I had to do what I wanted to do and not worry about copying somebody or emulating somebody.

Lucy: I think that's a great answer. And I want to also kind of link it back to something you said a minute ago around that it's often very hard to do something better, to have that great entrepreneurial idea and push it across the finish line, and along the way, there are challenges to overcome. And so we'd really like to know the toughest thing that you've ever done in your career, and why it was so hard.

Jeanette: I think, unfortunately, that's the easiest answer...The hardest thing to ever do in building a company, in any way, is to lay people off. As with grown companies, even really successful companies, there's a time you've got to lay people off because of the business cycle or whatever. And no matter what the circumstances is, that, I think, is one of the hardest things to do.

The second hardest thing: while I started three companies, one of them, I'd say, I walked away from before I was done. The company still was in a growing and struggling phase, and I felt it was time to move on and walk away from the company. And I think that was probably, emotionally, one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Larry: I must say, that's probably one of the most common mistakes that many founding people do is they keep on long after they should have left. That's really a strength on your part.

Jeanette: Well, thank you. It didn't feel like it at the time.

Larry: I bet not.

Lucy: That is a hard judgment, though. When is it time to leave?

Larry: Mmhmm. It is.

Jeanette: Exactly. And we always want to be the one. It's so tempting, especially when you start something, to feel like you need to be the one to finish it, that you need to almost be the hero that makes it successful. Accepting that you're not is just so tough. It's one of those very lonely decisions.

Larry: I think you're wonderful. I'm proud you. Now, speaking of that type of thing, if you were, right now, sitting down with a young potential entrepreneur, what kind of advice would you give them about entrepreneurship?

Jeanette: I think the real answer - and it's easy to say, it's harder to do. And that is that you've really got to follow what you believe. You can learn from others. You can listen to others. You're going to get a lot of advice, a lot of suggestions, people telling you to do things, how you're doing them, telling you to do differently. But at the end of the day, you've got to do exactly what you believe in. And you won't succeed in creating something great and something that you're really proud of unless you stick to what you know are your core values.

And there are so many people that want to push you in different directions, want to change the company, change the product, and change the financing. You've got to really stick with what you know and you believe.

Lucy: That's really good advice.

Larry: Yeah.

Lucy: Sort of along that note, earlier in the interview, you said that you thought you could do things better and you liked creating and building things. So, when you think about getting through all the tough times, what personal characteristics do you think have given you the advantages as an entrepreneur?

Jeanette: I think one of the most important things to really get to success is that you've got to have a willingness to fail. You've got to accept that, you know what? Everything you do isn't going to be perfect. You're going to make mistakes. You've got to be able to say, "Oops, I made a mistake" and move forward. You've got to be willing to let little things fail, big things fail, and all sorts of things, in the big picture, to get to success.

If you're not willing to take the risk that you're willing to fall through on, you're not going to ever get the big win. So you've got to really be willing to kind of accept that this time might not be it, but there will be a time that will be.

Lucy: And do you have examples that happened in your career when there was failure that happened and you guys learned a ton, maybe one of those moments; that was a big turning point in the company?

Jeanette: Now, there's so many that it's hard to pick one out. But I think one of the things that we've done a couple of times is we've built the product, we've stood behind it, we've been proud of it, and then realized that, oops, it's not the way people want it. And being willing to do that, and then stop and say, "You know what? We're going to do the right thing going forward." We've lost investors in those decisions a couple of times. They used to say they've regretted it each time...

Lucy: I love that.

Larry: Yeah.

Jeanette: I mean, I remember, 20 years ago, when we changed our company from being a digital telephony company to deciding to build infrastructure for this weird thing called the Internet, we fought tooth and nail. Nobody, none of our investors wanted to back it. They thought it was silly. How would this Internet thing work? There was so much more revenue if you stuck to traditional things. We lost supporters along the way. We're pleased to say those supporters are eating their words. The Internet grew.

We had to take a big risk - that now, of course, seems obvious, in hindsight, but at the time, didn't--to say, "We're going to drop what we're doing. We'll see the growth. We're going to take a risk and build something new and different."

Larry: Yeah. I'm sitting here kind of groaning because, internally, Pat and I, we had a terrestrial radio show, "Business Talk, " and I made, in 1996, the prediction that the Internet was a fad and would go away soon. So I wish I had known you.

Jeanette: You were right. You just have to wait about another 100 years. You have to be patient, Larry.

Larry: Yeah.

Lucy: Your timing was wrong.

Larry: Yeah, timing...

Lee: You're still right.

Lucy: Yeah, you're still right.

Larry: Now, you're a mother of two. You fly in your own Lear jet, from time to time, to conferences and so on. And then, of course, the other thing is that, between your children, your family, and your growing business, how do you bring about kind of the balance to all of this?

Jeanette: The answer to that is kids take care of it for me.

Larry: Whoa!

Jeanette: I was told before I had kids that I was not at all good at balance and I was workaholic that didn't do enough different things. I don't think that's true, but my friends all think it's true.

It's just so great and so much fun to do things with my kids, that they keep me home on the weekends. They keep me doing things and being outside and being active. So for me, my kids are my solution, and it's just a lot of fun.

Lucy: Well, we've got a nice little airport here by Boulder. You could come see us.

Jeanette: I could. I do have that advantage. People go, "Oh, so you just love to fly." And I've got to say, I do. It's one of the most just relaxing things there are. But what it really is - and people make fun of me - is if you go into my airplane, it looks a lot more like a minivan, stacked with stickers and snacks and books and activities and such in the back.

The beauty of flying a plane is that it gives me and my family incredible freedom. So I can be in any city in the country in a meeting on Friday morning and home playing with my kids Friday night.

Lucy: It's an important thing to balance.

Larry: You got it. Wow.

Jeanette: We got it. So everybody needs a plane.

Lucy: I believe that you're our first pilot that we have interviewed.

Well, you have started three companies. You've said that you doubt this one is your last. So, why don't you tell us what you see in the future? What's next for you? Give us some top-secret stuff.

Jeanette: Oh, gosh. You know what? I don't know. I will tell you that, for a very long time, I worried so much about, "OK, now that I'm successful, what am I supposed to do?" Almost like there has to be a road map: "Build successful company, go do blank." And I worried so much that I was doing the right thing next. It's amazing how stressful that became.

There has to be an answer. Where do I find the answer? And I finally got it licked. I do what I enjoy. I love building the company I'm building. I love where I'm at today. I have no idea what's next. I have no idea whether we'll be building this company for another five years, another 10 years, another 20 years. I don't know what's next. But I know it'll be interesting, it'll be fun, and if not, then it won't last long and we'll move on.

Lucy: That's a great answer.

Larry: Yeah, I'll say. Hat's off to Imbee and Lear jets.

Lucy: Well, thank you very much, Jeanette. We really appreciated talking to you.

Lee: Thanks so much.

Jeanette: Thank you.

Larry: Thank you. This was great. And by the way, you listeners out there, make sure you pass this interview along, because they can listen to it 24/7, download it as a podcast, and what else could we ask?

Lucy: Well, we should remind everybody what site to go to for the podcast. You can get them at w3w3.com or at ncwit.org.

Larry: There you go. Thanks, Jeanette.

Lucy: Thank you, Jeanette.

Jeanette: Thank you.