

EPISODE 6: Dr. Tina Davis Interviews Jessica Hubley

TINA:

Today I wish to welcome Jessica Hubley, who's the CEO and co-founder of AnnieCannons, which was established in 2014. Welcome, Jessica.

JESSICA:

Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

TINA:

Tell me a bit about AnnieCannons.

JESSICA:

So we are a 501c3 and American nonprofit corporation. We train survivors of human trafficking and gender based violence to be software engineers. We run a development shop where they work and we help them build technologies that they ideate. So in some cases, help them become entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurs working to solve the problems that they themselves survived.

TINA:

And how did you come about?

JESSICA:

It wasn't the kind of empathetic moment that a lot of nonprofit founders site was really the combination of a couple of careers myself and my co-founder, Laura Hackney. So Laura trained in Political Science and International Policy, and did a Master's degree focused on bride trafficking from Southeast Asia and to China before re-entering the program on human rights at Stanford. I by contrast trained as a lawyer and worked with, first at big firms, and then opened my own firm serving software companies and software consultancies, doing IP transactional work, external General Counsel type work and privacy and security compliance work. So



in my legal practice, I happened to have quite a bit more free time than I had when I was working at firms (big surprise). I was writing books in the meantime and had written two novels and ultimately got an agent to write a narrative nonfiction piece about the real stories of survivors of human trafficking and the way that technologies that we have at our fingertips in the Bay Area every day could be applied, you know, rather cheaply and easily to solve the problems that they were experiencing. And the idea was that it would be a sort of call to investment or that kind of technology adaptation, I guess. As a part of the research for that book I joined Laura's research trip into Myanmar along with a mutual professor of ours my law school professor in international human rights at the Masters level, and we conducted a number of interviews with survivors during that time partly for my book, and we found or rather I should say I found I think Laura was more aware, having spent a lot more time in the trafficking space before that, it was actually the most industrious, vulnerable people that seemed to be ensnared in trafficking, not the most gullible ones, which is what I think most people believe. So we were hearing stories from men and women generally, age probably seven to 35, who had been ensnared by what I'll describe as some very sophisticated scheme of an organized criminal unit to defraud them. That was because they were actively looking for work. So we noticed that the rate that they were receiving as an advance on a sort of false promise of a job was the equivalent of 15 US dollars, which they consider to be about six months salary at the level of poverty that they were experiencing. So people who are most actively going out and looking for work are the ones being caught up simultaneously. You know, Laura's research had continuously identified that in a shelter ecosystem. And it's worth noting that a very, very tiny percentage of the survivors out there ever make their way to a shelter or end up in a shelter through rescue or exit or any other method. And an even smaller percentage of those survivors who actually in any kind of shelter, are getting any kind of job training at all. But the ones who were getting some kind of job training tended to be getting something like jewelry making or sewing or cooking, which are highly gendered skills that even if you're excellent at them, it's quite difficult to make a living without also having business skills, business networks, capital to get started and things like that. We really felt quite strongly in these conversations and with anti trafficking leaders around the world that the movement was making a pretty critical mistake and that when survivors were involved in advocacy or solution conferences, discussions, they were being called up on stage to tell their very traumatizing personal story to a roomful of strangers and then sort of asked sit down while the powerful people came up with a solution. And that seemed like quite the wrong way to go about it. We live in a world where human centered design is becoming quite prominent and is the call of the day and yet this hugely critical, massive global problem, we were doing quite the opposite.

We were keeping the people who lived through the problem out of the solution, and that that seemed wrong. So Laura and I really wanted to create the conditions where the people who'd experienced the problem could actually solve it. And it happens to be what I'll call sort of the heyday of the coding boot camp in San Francisco, where we're based at the time, the idea was you would pay 20 to \$30,000 in tuition, find a place to live for six months and pay for that too. And then you could quickly learn to code and go get a high paying job at a tech company. And we thought given that programming is something that you learn with very little formal education in anything else, there's not really a prerequisite to learning it that it's something that you can do on your own time on a flexible schedule. Perhaps if you have children around that it's something that there are ways to make money doing it either alone or or in a team of people pending on your personal preferences, it seemed like it might be really well suited to survivors actually, and the needs that they had as they were recovering from trauma. We sort of saw the connection, we spent the next year and a half, working out a strategy for how we could execute on actually delivering that kind of training to survivors. As a result of my legal practice, I was well aware of the fact that if you could code and people knew that you could build websites and apps that the business came to you - that you could make 250 in some cases, even \$400 an hour building mobile apps without really ever being able to sell much less run a business. In fact, many of my clients were asking me questions like, "Hey, what's an accountant? Why do I need one?" So I had been almost running their businesses as their lawyer. And it seemed as though if we could teach survivors to do this and let people know that they were doing it well that the business would come and that that would solve the problem of survivors being required to monetize the skills that we taught them by succeeding in a traditional tech company, which there's no shortage of research and commentary to suggest that those companies are in general not terribly friendly to women, much less women of color, and much less women with arrest records for prostitution or some other kind of complex marginalization. So we realized during that year strategic planning that we would have to run a business as well. That's the genesis of how we created a rather complex strategy to do something that nobody really thought to do before. But that we felt like was really a key to unlocking a lot of change in this movement on much larger scale.

TINA:

I'll come back to that. Thanks for the insights into how you started. It's a very interesting approach that you have. I want to ask about the name. Is there a story to the name AnnieCannons?

JESSICA:

There is. We didn't want a name that was about either freedom or slavery. In other words, we didn't want a name that was focused on the past of what had happened. We wanted a name that was about what was possible in the future. And we came upon the story of Annie Jump Cannon, who is female mathematician astronomer who lived in the early 20th century and she worked in a lab at the Harvard observatory with a number of other female mathematicians and astronomers, who were thought of as sort of secretaries of the stars, what they were doing in general was taking spectroscopy. So the spectral emission patterns of stars onto glass plates, and they still have a number of these glass plates at Harvard. But Annie was looking at these plates over and over every day and realized that the emission pattern she was seeing really fell into 12 categories, and she gave them the name. And then another woman in the lab looked at her 12 categories and said, this is actually about chemical composition, what we're seeing as a result of the chemical composition of the star, and I think the life cycle, wrote that into a thesis and was initially told by the supervising professor at Harvard, you're crazy. Go be a housewife, stars are made of the same things the human body is, and this is all worthless travel. But several years later realized that she was completely right. And from that point, that thesis became the core astronomy textbook for the next 40 years, essentially. And this lab also produced a number of other incredibly critical discoveries in the early 20th century, including spectral shift, which led to the Big Bang Theory. So this really represented to us, hey, this is a group of women who were unknown, oppressed, but who nonetheless invented all of these completely transformational things for human civilization. And that's what we want to emulate. And that's how we ended up with the name AnnieCannons.

TINA:

So you mentioned a little bit about your philosophy, and of course, your background. What's your business model?

JESSICA:

We sell apps and websites, so complex, full stack applications, and you know, simpler straightforward kind of marketing websites and many things in between, couple of the most common software stacks in the market right now. We as AnnieCannons go out and source that work, do all the business development, all the legal work, all of the accounting work. When we receive fees from clients, we pay our graduates of our program either as subcontractors or as employees to work

on those technology products and they receive the bulk of the client fees for the work that they do so that they can begin to secure economic power to lift themselves up. And to lift their families up as well. We also apply minority percentage of that work back into our training programs, we actually use those revenues to help fund more training for more survivors to grow under our own power over time. We additionally help acquire charitable funding for the software technology products that they ideate that have anti trafficking and anti abuse outcomes. So we are in the early stages of building out large scale platforms that solve problems with the anti-trafficking continuum of care, for example, the aftercare ecosystem, with the judicial system, in some cases and for classrooms where abuse of children might manifest or be visible to a teacher in a way that an intervention is possible without the kind of clunky methodology of government. Our business is a mixture of both at earned revenue from working with small businesses, nonprofits, social enterprises, other tech companies and startups where we serve as the whole engineering department and we're paid fees that are earned related business revenue that the supports o our mission and 501c3 funded revenue for Technology Development itself that's come from kind of internal collaborative projects that we develop.

TINA:

How do you recruit?

JESSICA:

We partner with local organizations that provide housing and case management most often and and in some cases legal services. We ask those partners to let us know if there are survivors that are in their care, who seem like they're sharp, seem like they are actively looking for their next step. In other words represent a certain amount of grit and determination. And we asked them to just introduce us. Once we are introduced, we tell the survivor a little bit who we are and what we do and ask if they would consider filling out an application form for us. Application is quite simple. It's just demographics. It's not the basis of admission to our program. The more important step in our process is an aptitude screening. So we've developed a privilege and agnostic mechanism for assessing problem solving ability, logical aptitude, and processing speed, as well as things like focus and the current status of trauma symptoms and we also have a reading comprehension screen as we teach the class in English right now, much of the material that helps you learn coding online is in English. So try to make sure that people can easily access that material at this at this stage in our development. Those exercises

collectively give us a pretty clear picture of whether someone's likely to succeed as a programmer if the right conditions are in place. And that's a big if. It's not that we assume anybody could sit down and watch a webinar for eight hours a day and learn some people can but not everyone can. Not everyone who's not a survivor can be a programmer. So we're really looking for the kinds of minds that suit this work very well. But having said that, actually, we're of the opinion that it's more likely to find that kind of mind among a survivor population than it is in the general population because of the amount of problem solving ability and grit it actually takes to be alive as a human trafficking survivor to to beat the UN seven year life expectancy rating. We've been proven out a little bit and the rate at which we're able to admit people from our screenings and the success rates we're having in the classroom.

TINA:

How have you designed your workplace to best suit survivors?

JESSICA:

There are several key pieces. The first is that we have childcare on site. So the kids are in the office with us and in a separate piece of the office, there's security that those kids are available and they're welcome here. That means that we can kind of aggregate the cost of childcare without putting that burden on any one individual person and then basically increasing the amount she has to earn to just get to the same level as a young single man. We also provide nutrition so food in the classroom as well as in the office when people are working. We have a majority minority environment, meaning that the majority of people that are in our office at any given time are people of color, and almost all our women - cisgender women as well as non binary individuals. So there's not a an imposter syndrome at play in our office. If you walk into the most tech companies in Silicon Valley, you'll find mostly white men, some Asian men, some Indian men, but very few women, and almost no women of color. So if you're a woman of color going into that environment, you have to immediately navigate, feeling like an outsider. Whereas in our environment, you are an insider. And we also build through the very earliest orientation face to the classroom and earned trust relationship. And what I mean by that is that we introduce ourselves to survivors and say, there's no reason that you should trust us, there's no reason that you should believe that anybody is trustworthy, given what you've been through. But we intend to earn your trust. And we ask that you try to earn ours as well. And we through our interactions, through genuine exhibition of the fact that we care about what happens to them, and we

want them to do well and believe that they can help to see their confidence flourish. We create an environment where they feel that they are allowed to ask questions where they are allowed to be imperfect and make mistakes and that's frankly something that most don't realize when they start they have a very high kind of perfectionist standard because they've been coached to believe from everything in the world that they're sort of always wrong but always apologizing. specific example is it starting the classroom we have a sorry jar, so if somebody apologizes for something they didn't do wrong or apologizes for not knowing something they never been taught, we have a little token that they put into the jar as a kind of physical demonstration of the fact of saying, that's not actually something you need to do. We don't have any appearance requirements. There's no dress code at the office. If all you have is pajamas and sweat pants, that's what you wear. And that's completely fine. We don't expect anybody to spend a lot of time looking any certain way to present for us in the office. In fact, we take the burden as a staff, for the people who do the outside facing sales work and things like that, of dealing with those kinds of requirements so that our graduates and our workers don't have to put any burdens on themselves other than just getting the work done. We try to sort of map that to what a more privileged male might have in the workplace to where he's showing up with messy hair and a T shirt and flip flops and a hoodie and nobody, nobody minds. We want to set that same standard for women so we let them be comfortable. We have pets in the office to provide bit of levity. We have meetings where we actively solicit the feedback of every single person in the organization ranging from the newest student to the most senior staff, that is when I say actively solicit it's not any questions anybody. It's excuse me using a fake name like, Claire, do you have a question? anything you're wondering about. So really giving people active license to speak. The last one I'll mention and this is an important one is that we don't publicize our graduate's trauma, so we don't use their faces or their likenesses as a way to fundraise. We don't use their stories as a way to grab people's heartstrings and donate money, we consider that to be theirs to give. So if you've seen a an image or a quote, with a name by it of any graduate of our program, it's because they were already publicly a survivor on the internet, before they met us. And then they separately agreed that they wanted to do that. So that's something that we find to be completely critical to maintaining the trust of the graduates that we have. And it's something that frankly, we don't see other anti trafficking NGOs doing I'm in a way that really destroys their ability to have long term healthy relationships with survivors.

TINA:

What has the survivors invented?

JESSICA:

We have a whole suite of products that we refer to as Survive Tech. Survive Tech for us is any application or technology that is intended to help someone survive or prevent abuse and exploitation. They range from very, very large platforms to very, very simple and early stage ideas, and I'm absolutely happy to talk through a few of them. The probably the biggest as a platform that we call Referral. The problem that our students sort of brought up again and again, class after class, was that in order to seek services, once they had gotten away from an exploiter, they were given a long list of phone numbers that they personally had to call and every one of those phone calls, if they ever got anybody on the phone with sometimes they get an answering service that said, somebody answers this phone Tuesday between two and 3pm. But if they managed to get a person on the phone, they've been told their horrible, traumatizing personal story to that person only to hear at the end of the call, "Sorry, you don't qualify either because you're too old or too young or you don't have kids. You do have kids or whatever". And then they make another phone call and they retell their traumatized and they would tell it so many times in the day that they say they sound dead at the end, they don't even sound credible. We think that that's a kind of classic problem that software can help solve a lot of their challenges around it around privacy, security, confidentiality, but since that was my previous career, we have had great fortune in dealing closely with the identity community and some really talented security folks to to actually work that out. So what we're building with Referral is a survivor centered application that's recoverable across devices that is shield-able from an exploiter that still has access to your phone using a mechanism I won't describe just to keep it keep it safe, and allows them to record their narrative story or type it once to put in their demographic details once and then to say please, I would like to seek housing. And if they say they seek housing, the system will check whether any providers that provide housing on system have criteria that they meet, and if they do and only if they do then the providers asking Do you have capacity, if the provider says they have capacity then survivor can actually be connected their their details are sent without a phone call being made. So that survivor only becomes involved that there is actually a match. The reality is there are very few beds, but people who need them there perhaps 1000 people for every bed that someone could access. So this will not solve the problem of getting everyone who wants housing, housing, but at least it will solve the problem of people wasting their time and magnifying their trauma by making these kind of phone calls. And that's that's really the only beginning because the truth is once we get clear data about what services people are seeking, and what the capacity for those services is and the volume at which

they seek those services, as well as who's referred to what kind of agency for which services, we can provide the funding community with very, very clear data about where investment is needed most. That's one of the long term goals of the project.

TINA:

So you talk about how to best deal with survivors allow survivors to, I guess move on in their lives beyond their past experience. And you seem very progressive in the way that you've set up your business around that in terms of sharing stories. How did you see this in the future? What do you think is needed more of in order to be able to allow survivors to carry on with their lives beyond that story that was set in a specific moment of time in their life, that was a situation more than anything else.

JESSICA:

I think they need jobs. I think they need a safe place to be while they get a job, and then they need a job that supports them. I think that we almost overcomplicate the issue in that there's much trauma in the world. In fact, there's a lot of trauma that just applies to someone who's grown up in poverty. But for some reason, if someone has survived human trafficking in particular, they're they're sort of conceptualized as broken and damaged or damsel in distress. And the reality is human trafficking is not certainly not the only way that people are sexually assaulted. Certainly not the only way that people experience trauma. It's perhaps a way that that we may find people having complex trauma and multiple marginalizations. That doesn't mean that there's not millions there. I'm talking about the global estimates of the number of people enslaved every year ranging from about 20, 21 million to about 48 million. If you apply, it's just plain statistics, there are oodles of studies that demonstrate that IQ is distributed intelligence talent is distributed very evenly across any human population, a bell curve, and survivors like any other population of highly intelligent people on them, they generally have been exploited because of something that was true when they were born, the circumstances of their birth, who they were born to where they were born, etc. It's not anything about their intellect. And the fact that they've experienced trauma doesn't mean that they don't have intellect, it may mean that they have trauma symptoms, and those trauma symptoms are treatable a number of ways. The unfortunate reality is that that treatment is expensive and scarce and so I think one of the things Things that we need to happen is that the availability of trauma treatment has to be expanded as we made affordable and accessible to survivors.

But once it is, there's a need to be housed once you're displaced from your home, your family and removed from an exploited circumstance. And that housing can't be one night. If we took any person in the world out of their life and dropped them in a different country and gave them one night of a hotel room and then said, Okay, go ahead and make a life for yourself now, of course, they couldn't do it. So being realistic about how we actually provide aftercare services, and realistic about the fact that if someone was exploited, it's usually because they were vulnerable, because they didn't receive training, education growing up and that they that needs to now be corrected. So I see what we do as a correcting factor, although it's it's hard to correct something like this, what's usually a lifetime of systemic inequities and oppression. And I think that if we are to truly reintegrate survivors then you stop looking at them as something that is different. They are exactly the same it's just that they've had many fewer opportunities and and the opportunities have to be actively applied to them.

TINA:

Where would you like to see AnnieCannons in three years time?

JESSICA:

Our vision has always been to be a global enterprise to take our training from the most one of the most expensive places in the world to continuously more and more affordable, vulnerable places where the dollars that people earn from working for us go further and further and make them more and more economically powerful, hopefully give them political power. Let them start businesses that apply to their local community and change business practices from the from the roots up. The next few years for us are about starting to open a new training centers, in partnership with NGOs that are already working with survivors in other cities, either in the US or in Europe. But eventually moving those trainings into the more developing countries. We have shelters that reach out to us weekly from all over the world that that are asking when we can get to them. And it's a matter of resources if somebody wanted to fund us training in South Africa next year, we, we could technically do that. But to grow smartly, we want to make sure we can take the resources that we have and stretch them as far as possible. So we will move gradually outward from the United States to have training centers all over the world that to keep the business development and business operations functions and expensive markets like San Francisco, New York, Europe, where with the currency input is still are expensive, so that those dollars to extend further into the developing world.

TINA:

We hear a lot about how tech plays a negative role in trafficking. How do you think we can utilize tech for good as you have in a bigger scale, much bigger scale than we see today?

JESSICA:

I think it's about an asymmetry of access. A trafficker has every incentive to learn and they have the economic power to pay people to help them learn or help them execute on technology solutions that help them exploit people. I believe that software has immense power to make many many things in the world more efficient and cheaper but unfortunate it also can make exploitation more efficient and cheaper after you make that initial investment, figuring out how to use it that way. And the reality is law enforcement hasn't had anything close to the same access and resources to acquire technology because law enforcement doesn't make profit. And in the same way it can be a vulnerable people has no access to learning about how to use technology to further their end. So what we've seen is a kind of disproportionate growth and explosive growth, quite frankly, in colloquially say the bad guys using technology without any real ability to advance by either the NGO community or or survivors themselves. So that's obviously something that we're trying to work on. And I think the thing that's going to change it as an active investment, somebody with resources will have to actively invest in creating and developing technologies that fight abuse and exploitation for that to catch up. I think it's a very simple matter of dollars.

TINA:

Just got one final question before we finish our conversation. How can I use your services or buy some of your services?

JESSICA:

We're happy to work with businesses, large and small, clients who are public companies, clients who are brand new startups, you can work with us either as a pure developer, a pure programmer to execute on designs, all the way to starting with your idea and consulting with you on how to make that idea into a software product on a particular budget, work with us to, to design it, to build it, to launch it, to analyze how it's running, and then grow it so we can continue serving as the

entire engineering department for a company because we're growing as well. The number of developers that we're training ourselves, so our ideal is for clients to visit our website, anniecannons.com, and just let us know what they need, what they are working on what your timeline is, and we will always do a free consultation to help understand whether we can meet those needs and whether they we have the resources that can but generally as long as any kind of client or enterprise, whether it be you know, an individual consultant that wants to build a very, very affordable marketing website for themselves or a big company that wants to outsource a major mobile app development. We're happy to help with that. And every one of those projects help someone at a different stage in their career development, earn income and support their families.

TINA:

Thank you so much, Jessica. It's been very exciting to hear about the work that you do at AnnieCannons and I wish you all the best luck for the future. Thank you so much.

JESSICA:

Thank you.